

*“If you want to see the light you should bring it
into the darkness”*

Ştefana POP-CURSEU¹ in dialogue with Çağlar YİĞİTOĞULLARI



Çağlar Yiğitoğulları was born in Ankara, Turkey, in 1977. He graduated in Theatre – Acting from the Bilkent University in Ankara, the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts. After graduation, during 2001-2003, he lived in Australia and studied contemporary dance. Returning to Turkey in 2003, he started working for the Istanbul City Theatre, as an actor with a permanent contract. In parallel with his work at the Istanbul City Theatre, he began producing his own performances, bold

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pieces exploring the limits of corporeality, and presenting them in the country, as well as abroad. Diss (2008) and Luovstory (2009) are two of his most celebrated works. In 2017, disheartened by the limited freedom of expression in Turkey, he moved to Germany, where he currently lives and creates. Çağlar Yiğitoğulları has been awarded several important prizes, including the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) 'Actor of The Year' in 2010. He has worked with influential theatres across Europe, such as Abattoir Fermé in Belgium, Attis Theatre in Greece, Münchner Kammerspiele and Maxim Gorki Theatre in Germany.

Ștefana Pop-Curseu: *You are at your second production at the National Theatre in Cluj, and, as you said, the Servants of Beauty, inspired by the Hindu text Bhagavad Gita, does in a way continue The Quest, that was inspired by The Conference of the Birds by Farid ud-Din Attar². How come? Can you explain what you meant?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: In the beginning I had not thought about this, but when you are busy with an issue, the situation brings you another kind of dimensions and perspectives. We were so much in this idea of finding our own leaders in ourselves, when rehearsing for *The Quest*... Actually, this is a very Shamanic and Sufi understanding of the way of living and finding your own leader. In Islam Sufism it is called "Ana'l-Haqq", meaning "I am the God", "I am the God of myself". In Shamanism it is said that you are the Shaman of your life and of yourself. So, this was one of the constant things I was telling the performers. And then, I started questioning in my mind "So now, what is the responsibility of the leader?" We found that we are the individuals, the leaders of our lives but this is not an easy thing, this issue comes with responsibility and from today's perspective, all the politicians are using this in a really horrible manner, with all these constant wars. So, I wanted to continue with the same group of people, seeing them as the leaders of their society, where they have to be confronted with the difficulties of their position.

² See Ramona Tripa, „The Biggest Challenge is the Heaviness of Existence as a Human Being Living in and Feeling Responsible for Today's World. Interview with Artist Performer Çağlar Yiğitoğulları”, *Studia UBB Dramatica*, LXVIII, 1/2023: 199-205.

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Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *Making choices?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Yes, the constant possibility of choice, this is one of the issues in the performance too: the responsibility of choice as an artist, as an individual. So, this was the first motivation for me to continue in this way.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *And so, you chose as a starting point this antique Hindu text, very well known in Indian culture, Bhagavad Gita being one of the fundamental texts from the Mahabharata. Why did you make this choice?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: As a maker, am not interested in the details of the performances that I am doing, but only in the plot, in the story. For both projects, *The Quest* and *The Servants of Beauty*, I am a hundred per cent the author. In the previous one there was not a single word from the original poem, I wrote everything, and this time, there are seven sets of questions, six from the *Mahabharata* and in Arjuna's first monologue, we have three sentences from *Bhagavad Gita*. I wrote the rest. As an author, I don't want to know much about the details, the dialogues of the initial story, I like to have my own space to fill, where I can express myself, with my own experience and my own words. That's how I fantasise, I write something and then go into the details as a maker, a director, a performer or whatever it is. For me, this story is quite similar to that of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when Raskolnikov kills the woman, and then, still, we keep arguing if he had the right to kill her or not. So here it is the same situation with Arjuna: he had to go to war, but ethically it was not a good thing to do, and still, it is very controversial, ethically, philosophically, but on the other side it has a beautiful dimension. Every Indian person knows that it is a text written by human hands, but they worship it. It's that important, I wanted to dive in these dimensions, it's one of the holiest books, and it's incredible. So first I wrote the text, I started reading, searching, listening to lectures, and I found very critical things about the text, actually. So, the very first day I came here to start rehearsing, I talked about the main perspectives, about seeing things. Because most of the time we see things as we are, not for what they are. Then I told them other stories from the *Bhagavad Gita*. One of the worst names of the nazi regime, one of

the vilest figures, Heinrich Himmler, who organized the concentration camps and who was the leader of Auschwitz, carried all his life in his pocket a special edition of *Bhagavad Gita*. And you know – this is where I want to get with this, that from his perspective, it can be read: “Do your duty!” For millions of people, it’s a spiritual text, but it is so easy to see things from this terrible perspective as well.



Fig. 1: Mihnea Blidariu as the narrator in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: In all the Holy books human kind ever produced, you have very profound philosophical and poetical writings, that function all in similar ways, no matter what religion they give foundations to. They offer you concepts, key phrases to think of, but they leave you the choice to understand or not, to do or not to do what is written...

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Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: I am coming from a Muslim country, and without being religious, you can see from my work that I am so much rooted in the philosophy of Islam and Sufism. It's because I come from this geography. For me, it is the most divine knowledge of humanity. But for others, it is different. As I told you about “Ana'l-Haqq”, (I am the God): under this law, people killed in the most brutal way. This is how they understood it, that if they had God in them, they were the new Gods. In that sense, I just took the story line, because I wanted to argue about the ethics of this choice, so this was the very first motivation for choosing *Bhagavad Gita*, not knowing if Arjuna was right or not to go to war. I did not want to show the ending... but after I got the feedback from Mr. Mihai Măniuțiu – because he's my master, you know, I do not question it a lot if it comes from him – and also from Anca Măniuțiu, I took it as a new encouragement, as a new perspective of seeing things, and I changed the ending.



Fig. 2: The Army/Arjuna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *So, in the performance, you show this path, how Arjuna gets to understand what choices he has, what he is supposed to do, through a dialogue between him and the God Krishna. You integrated here into the scenography, the presence of 5 bicycles, in a line, with dynamos, energy producing bikes, and the pedalling sound gives us the feeling of an army preparing to go to war. Is this the feeling you wanted the spectators to experience, what is the reason behind the presence of these black bikes?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Yes, you know my universe, I like bringing obstacles, performative elements which keep the performers present in the moment, so that they do not have space to go in their own universes, problems or issues. A constant physical obstacle, different from *The Quest*, because there, they were solo, they had obstacles during their solo parts, but here it is the other way round, during the whole performance they have this physical constraint: pedalling. And I did not know what kind of bikes we would have, how it was going to work, technically, but my dream was to produce real electricity, and play with the intensity of the light, depending on the speed of pedalling. For us, in these circumstances, it did not really work like this, because the intensity did not change the way I wanted it to, when the pedalling was very fast or slower, it was mainly the sound that changed. So, this brought another challenge which I turned into an advantage in my understanding. I kept the sound continuously, but in a slow manner at some points, not to hear them too much, and intense at some other points, and I worked on the design of the lights according to the pedalling. Sometimes I have all the five being used, sometimes just two, or one, or three. But yes, they are the army, as individuals, as Arjuna, but also his army, swinging on their horses, waiting for the moment they would attack. It's in between. And this position is not comfortable, but quite painful: they have to move, they have to change, to put on the helmet, and there are so many other things that are not visible, I hope: they play with the gloves and the sunglasses, it's a hidden choreography. And then the text comes into play... You know, my language is not easy to learn. In English there are five pages, in the translation there are seven, but there was a struggle to learn it and deliver it in the best manner, as a chorus and as individuals. So, this is the concept concerning the bikes.

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Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *They give a special feeling, because they bring this ancient text in our contemporary world in an unusual way, with these warriors forming a line on their bikes.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: It is an alignment effect. For the performers and for the audience, there is always another reference, another image, another sound from the spoken words.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *And the sound of the pedalling is very strong, announcing that something bad is coming, the preparation for this war, and then one by one, they get off the bikes and come in front, becoming Krishna. But their getting on and off the bikes brings us this idea of Arjuna being there, present in each of them, he's the leader and he has to convince them, but he and they are hesitating. Arjuna is in each of them with his wisdom but also with his doubts.*



Fig. 3: Diana Licu as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: There is a hidden message: first the storyteller comes, he leaves the costume and then the other comes, presents Krishna and leaves the costume for the next performer. All this is saying that it is so easy to be the God, the wise man, it's just the costume, the outfit, the animal skin you put on, it is just about decision. But this is one thing. On the other side, I call myself a game-maker and they are the game-players. I just develop the concept of a game: these are the rules, these are the characters which have to be restored, kept, told, and you have the obstacles, the bicycles, and this is the game. Whenever the costume is free, somebody has to come in front and continue the game. So, I told them just to play the game truthfully.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: A game with a mystery at the end, because we do not know what is going to happen to Arjuna... Is he for you more than a character from the Mahabharata?

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: From another hidden level, this is the subtext: Arjuna is the artist. During this process of becoming wiser with the information received from Krishna, Arjuna is getting a better artist. He's an artist who wants to know more and, in my universe, artists are leaders of society, this is the why it should function, I believe. And Krishna tells Arjuna that as a leader, he should learn from the Artists, who spend their entire lives learning how to pronounce words in the best manner, with care, with a lot of intention. It is not easy. You see, declaring war is not just going into a Parliament or talking to your colleagues and deciding in 5 minutes for the whole society. It needs time and intention, just like how we do it. All our lifelong we try to create our images, words in the best manner so as to be understood, to clarify what we want to say. So, the hidden part is about the artist...

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: And your conclusion is thus that artists should be listened to, but they are actually not. Society does not pay enough attention to what they have to say. They are not always believed.

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: For me as a director or a theatre maker, and for the performers, for you as an artistic team director, for us, whenever the performance starts, this is the time when we exist, when we present something from our

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artistic view. It's the time when the artists are heard and seen, this is when we are given the chance to speak. For me, this is also a big responsibility, and a chance to deliver my message, to say my words, if I want to say something. You may choose not to say anything but may just like entertain the universe. It's also another kind of decision, another kind of policy making, it's a political choice. Not to say anything can be even more political than the way I present my work.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: Your work is political in a good sense. It gives the freedom of choice. Nowadays this political dimension is misunderstood. Being political does not mean just to deliver a certain ideological message, an already given solution to the audience, telling them how things should be, what they should fight for, how they should think, without giving a freedom of interpretation, without giving them space to agree or disagree with the proposal.



foto: Nicu Cherciu © TNC

Fig. 4: Anca Hanu as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: At the very beginning of this performance the storyteller says something: “Krishna tells to Arjuna not what to decide but how to decide” So, for me, this is the mission of art actually, we shouldn’t show what to dream but how to dream, or this is the definition of my theatre. But for the first time, I couldn’t stop myself and wanted to say in the end what to dream, in the very first version of my ending, but I was mistaken in the way I wanted to do it, it was too direct, too lame, with a wrong coloration... I also learned my lesson and changed it. I did not take the feedback I got as a critique or as a censorship but as a mastership, it is welcome if it can bring the production a better level. Because, you know, I am mostly working alone, writing alone, producing alone, I know that in a way, I am turning to my own small universe. I need to encounter, come together with other worlds, other creators. And this is why I changed the ending...

Ştefana Pop-Curseu: It is important to see the reactions of the audience, they can guide you. But tell me, do you feel more comfortable working on your own, solo, or is it because your life history brought you to this, and you took advantage of it?

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Working solo has never been a choice, but an obligation. I just wanted to continue... First when I started producing my work twenty years ago, I literally couldn’t find anyone standing next to me. So that’s why I had to learn everything on my own, and I don’t say I am a hard worker, but I constantly work. I mean, people are telling me that I am working hard, but, the other way round, I think they are lazy... I am doing what I like to do. When the theatre was closed during the pandemics, I was taking the stages, working from morning to late hours on my own. And when the theatre season was closed, or all the studios were occupied with productions, I went in carpark places, I kept working, thinking, I never stopped. Because, if I can’t find a real meaning, motivation for my work, then, I lose the motivation of my life, so that’s why I wanted to know more, and give myself a motivation to continue working in these city theatres in Germany where I could earn my life and support my work. So that’s how it continues and now I have full freedom, full responsibility too, and you know, I spend 70% of my time with bureaucratic things, I have to apply to different funds to

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receive money, and even after presenting my work, for months I have to write reports: how I used money etc. But I appreciate it in a way, because I am not cleaning the streets, I do the job that I like to do, even if it could have been easier... But working as a maker, in Cluj, with this team, is everything to me. It is not similar to any other thing that I am doing. I also do this in Germany, but it is completely different, a different atmosphere. Literally, I could spend the rest of my life just working in this studio with this team and keep searching and producing, it is so precious. Of course I cannot do this, because I have a family, but there I am...



Fig. 5: *Mis/Using the Body as the Object*, performance presented at the Faculty of Theatre and Film, UBB Cluj-Napoca.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *It is great to work with people who want to work with you, who are in, who love to explore the direction you propose, to follow and readjust themselves to what is being proposed, this is wonderful!*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: I had a line in *The Quest*, that was said by Radu Dogaru: “keep knocking, what you seek is seeking you”. And in our rehearsal process, we keep knocking, we keep searching, and it should be always like this, till the very last moment.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *In all the great mythical and philosophical texts you have this beautiful idea. In the Bible too, where it is said that you should knock if you want somebody to open... these lines are the legacy of human wisdom... Now, because you have been talking about spaces, urban spaces that you used for your training, tell me what is the importance of space in your performances? You have been working in open air spaces, but also closed, indoor spaces...which do you prefer?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: I don't think my universe would work in an outdoor space actually, but I love indoor and empty spaces. Even if there is a kind of concept for a setting in *The Servants of Beauty*, there is still an empty space. And it is filled with the actors... There is something relatively hidden too. I worked with Jan Fabre and he calls his actors, actresses, dancers “servants of beauty”, so from the very first level I declare that what I do is an actors' theatre, not a director's theatre, so they are the servants of beauty in their lives too, they are sacrificing their existence to create something beautiful. So that's why the space is left for the performers to fill. It is not an easy thing to do, it is a big challenge for them, but they are doing it in a really beautiful manner.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *This helps the spectator's imagination too. You are very close to what Peter Brook meant with his empty space theory or to what the symbolists were proposing when emphasizing the importance of leaving free space for the audience to imagine in their own way the universe which the actor is opening for them.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: This is a beautiful thing that you mentioned: the fantasy. Before coming here this year, but after *The Quest*, I made a project for a state theatre in the city of Lübeck, where in the meantime I moved to, and where I live now. And during the project, I was thinking: “Why are things not working the way I want them to?” It was because of the lack of fantasy. In the dramaturgy they are so intellectual, but they cannot fantasize. For example, imagine only the last scene of *The Quest*: Sânziana is spinning and she is spreading flour on the ground, and then suddenly it creates some images, and Anca comes, and she “discovers” that something is written there, and she starts reading the message from the flour... which is a beautiful fantasy. And I didn’t have any difficulty in making them believe that this was happening, and they were all there and all found this so beautiful. And it is not incredible. That’s also why I love myths epics. For us, in our geography, they are real stories, but there are gaps in them, which gives us the chance to fill them. And then, we can fantasize. This is the exact principle of what we are doing on stage. We leave gaps on purpose, they are not hundred per cent clear, starting from the stage concept.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: We have so many beautiful and complex myths and traditional literature in Romanian culture and I could notice that students who are interested in this cultural area of connections, for example, between the ancient Pagan world and the Christian perspective, between the rural world and the contemporary urban one, between mythology and our every-day life, are much more open, they understand life and the artistic experience differently, there is another dimension contributing to their understanding of the world.

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Yes, most of the people are not aware of what is hidden under all this. When you say “Pagan”, yes, this is the way art was created, so why tend to forget? When really primitive people, let’s say, not from an intellectual point of view, but timewise primitive, primary, took the animal skin and put it on... well, this is the principle of what we are doing in our *Bhagavad Gita*. The Krishna costume is the “animal skin”. You come, you take it, you turn into another being and you tell a story, and exactly like primary people, who did not think about a curtain, nor have the idea about the fourth wall, nor

have the support of the light and all this, we don't need all this. Nor even the support of the make-up which actually they used. We used it in *The Quest*, but not this time. Yes, it is very pagan... It's not easy, but at the same time, you cannot change all these habits, attitudes, preferences, that we have been collecting during a lifetime, in four-five weeks of work. But I see how much the actors changed actually since we started our collaboration...



Fig. 6-7: Sânziana Tarța and Radu Dogaru as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: And they love to work with you. I have to say that Sânziana did also a very beautiful job with the creation of Krishna's costume, this golden mantle with peacock feathers, so royal, and the bird's presence that sends us to the Indian cultural geography...

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Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: In fact, something incredible has happened. In my proposal to you, when I mentioned that I wanted to use this text, I had in mind to combine it with Zoroastrian rituals. But there was something that I did not think of, there was no intellectual connection between the two directions, although a wonderful coincidence makes that it had been always there, and I realised it only later on. From my mother side we are Yesidi, Pre-Zoroastrian, and, ten years ago there was a huge massacre from Islam side³. But I started reading more about Zoroastrians, because of the oppression of Islam (you know that this is the geography: Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Iraq), the Zoroastrians were forced to leave this geography and most of them took refuge to India. And nowadays, India is the geography where Zoroastrian populations are concentrated. So, it's incredibly connected. It's a Hindu story, but in a way, it's expressed with influences of Zoroastrian rituals.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: If you have the good feeling, you go in the right direction, without really knowing it...

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Yes, and this is quite a shamanic thing, you know, Shaman say: “Seeing eyes are blind, one should see with the eyes of the heart”.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: Before concluding, I would like to ask you something about one aspect that you were talking about when presenting your work to the students at the Faculty of Theatre and Film. You insisted on the artistic importance of “mis-using” the body and objects on stage. And this sent me directly to the avant-garde movements and their aesthetics. But you combine in your work, two very different approaches with the antique, mythological, ritualic background on the one side, and the contemporary, urban, experimental, avantgarde hints and compositional lines on the other side. Is this also a trigger for imagination? Can you explain how this “mis-using” works for you?

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: It is very visible starting with *The Quest*, from the very first video when I am shaking my head: it's an example of mis-using my body, it's a simple human movement, but when you do it as fast it creates a

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidi_genocide

lot of images and new stories. Taking Mihai Nițu's episode from *The Quest*, where he is just running: he's doing it at the maximum and you know, if I were directing Gogol's *Diary of a madman*, it could have been at least one hour performance and this would be the crescendo level which I would like to reach with the actor. But in a few minutes, with very few obstacles, Mihai comes up to this level. I always ask them to start from zero, from *tabula rasa*: don't use any facial expression, use your vocals very naturally, and coming from this level, very neutral, to this other very intense level is extremely sharp, and the audience experiences this huge transition within very few minutes. But this happens only when using the body in an unexpected way. It means also to give yourself the freedom to make mistakes, to hurt yourself, to seem ugly, stupid, not always seeing yourself from outside where you always give poses to the audience. There is the freedom, I believe, the challenge, and this is where the beauty starts. So that's why I first try to encourage them to break their habits, the images that they have in their minds. "Mis-using" means also searching the possibilities of the body and of the objects...

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *As you do in the performance you showed us, when walking and moving on glasses. It creates a different relationship to the space, to the ground, to your own body and its gravity, affecting your image and pushing a "refresh" button regarding our place and assumed condition in the environment we live in.*

Çağlar Yığıtoğulları: Without pronouncing any words, you are telling a story about limits. You are constrained, limited, and you go on: emotional limits, physical limits, country borders, state borders, fears, everything!

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *You stir up the spectators' imagination, and different associations surface, freeing the imagination and changing the point of view, the perspective of our "reality". When you look at the streets from the asphalt, as you did in your project in München, it is not the same as watching them when walking naturally. The same when you watch from above, be it from the top of a tree or of a skyscraper. From time to time at least, we should all change our perspectives. And theatre can do this, placing the audience on other level, in other dimensions.*

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Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: At least, in this sense, it brings us together, and this is one of the most precious things, we come together, we trust each other, we like each other, and starting from the group of people, the producer and then the audience, in my understanding, this is the best way of creating a new community, a good community. And if we spread it and enlarge it, we wouldn't have any wars, any fears...



Fig. 8: Sânziana Tarța as Arjuna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj, 2024

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Let's be optimistic...*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Let's keep producing, creating...

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Which is possible if we search the light even when the world is getting darker, or when, as you do, in The Servants of Beauty, work in the dark, in order to see the light better.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: This is what I say in our performance: "If you want to see the light you should bring it into the darkness".

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Thank you very much, Çağlar, we are waiting for the next project and last part of your trilogy at the National Theatre in Cluj.*