

A Dialogue about Romanian Theatre and Directing from an International Perspective

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Dana Rufolo is the executive director of the Theatre Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl), Luxembourg. She is the editor in chief of the well-known theatre magazine *Plays International & Europe* since January 2016; it is owned by TRIE and operates out of Constance, Germany.

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She graduated from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) with a B.A. in English and American Literature. Her Masters (on Adolphe Appia) and Doctorate (on Edward Albee) are from the University of Wisconsin at Madison; she also specialized in Art Therapy and in Drama Therapy. She ran a professional practice as an art therapist in Luxembourg in English and French for several years. In that context, she presented and published on several lectures and workshops, including a drama workshop in Georgia for Azerbaijani, Georgians, and Albanians involved in peace and reconciliation that incorporated concepts of psychodrama in it, and gave training in her methodology at the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Stadtschlaining, Austria. Her most notable publication to date in the field of Art Therapy advances her theory of Aesthetic Empathy (“Aesthetic Empathy and Salutogenesis through Beauty” in *Gestalten-Gesunden, Zur Salutogenese in den Künstlerischen Therapien*, ed. Heinfried Duncker & Ruth Hampe & Monika Wigger (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2018)

Her credits as author include the two-act play *Hurt, Dignified*, produced in a professional context for the European Capital of Culture 2007 in Luxembourg and numerous street theatre events that she wrote and directed for Amnesty International Luxembourg and African Women’s Association under the production wing of TRIE called *TRIE Justice* (try justice). She also authored essays poems and short stories.

Anca Măniuțiu PhD is professor at the Theatre Department of the Faculty of Theatre and Film at Babes-Bolyai University Cluj. Her main research field as well as her teaching activity focus on the innovative theatre theories and stage practices of the XXth century European directors, on the contemporary tendencies that emerge in nowadays performative practices and on the mutual influences between theatre and cinema, since the beginning of cinematography. She published 14 volumes of translations from French, English and Spanish authors, numerous critical essays and four volumes dedicated to the Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode, a complex comparative research implying Bakhtin’s categories of the carnivalesque, Artaud’s „Theatre of Cruelty”, Meyerhold’s „scenic grotesque” and „Theatrical Theatre”, as well as the plays and manifestoes of the Futurist and Dadaist artists.

In 2006, Anca Măniuțiu was invited as a visiting professor at the Institut d’Etudes Théâtrales, Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle (France), and in 2008 she was granted a Senior Fulbright post-doctoral fellowship for lecturing and research at the University of South Carolina, Columbia (USA). In 2016, she received Lifetime Achievement Award from UNITER.

Anca Măniuțiu: Welcome, Dana, I'm glad to be here with you. I'd like to tell to our audience some words about you and your activity in the field of theatre. Presently, Dana Rufolo is the executive director of the Theatre Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl), based in Luxembourg. She is the editor in chief of the well-known theatre magazine *Plays International & Europe* since January 2016; it is owned by TRIE and operates out of Constance, Germany. Dana was born in New York, grew up in southern California, and is living now in Germany at Konstanz. She graduated from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) with a B.A. in English and American Literature. Her Masters (on Adolphe Appia) and Doctorate (on Edward Albee) are from the University of Wisconsin at Madison; Dana also specialized in Art Therapy and in Drama Therapy so I think it would be very interesting to put her questions about this specialty which is not very common with us. She ran a professional practice as an art therapist in Luxembourg in English and French for several years. Her most notable publication to date in the field of Art Therapy advances her theory of Aesthetic Empathy. The article is entitled "Aesthetic Empathy and Salutogenesis through Beauty" (in *Gestalten-Gesunden, Zur Salutogenese in den Künstlerischen Therapien*, ed. Heinfried Duncker & Ruth Hampe & Monika Wigger, Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2018). Her credits as author include the two-act play *Hurt, Dignified*, produced in a professional context for the European Capital of Culture 2007 in Luxembourg and numerous street theatre events that she wrote and directed for Amnesty International Luxembourg and African Women's Association under the production wing of TRIE called *TRIE Justice* (try justice). She also authored essays poems and short stories. I've just realized that for those who want to learn more about Dana's biography, there are leaflets available at our staff. Now I'd like to tell you how Dana and I we got in touch.

It was thanks to Robert Cohen, who is professor of drama at University of California at Irvine and also Professor Honoris Causa of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj. Many of you know him, he is a very good friend of our Faculty, the Faculty of Theatre and Film. It happened that I read a couple of years ago some articles written by Robert Cohen about the Romanian theatre. He came to Romania for the first time in 2006 and – I'm not afraid to

use a very powerful word – he was amazed and thrilled by what he saw on Romanian stages. He came back and during almost 6 years he saw performances at the International Theatre Festival in Sibiu, at the National Theatre Festival in Bucharest and wrote reviews for the magazine *Plays International*. I gathered his reviews in a book, because it seemed important to me to have an outside look at what theatre practice is in Romania. I asked Robert the permission to entitle the book *A Director's Theatre. The Romanian Theatre from an American Perspective*, because this was one of the main issue Robert was tackling in his book. He noticed the fact that in Romania the director's vision was very important, both for the audience and the theatre practitioners. This practice has generated a special kind of theater "a director's theatre", that is quite far of what he was used to see in the US. Cohen writes in one point that in the States when he goes to see a play, he never knows and he never asks who has directed it; he asks about the playwright, about the actors, but he learns from the booklet who the director was, just a few minutes before the play begins. This is a great cultural difference between theater in USA and Romania.

Dana, what was the idea when starting publishing this theatre magazine, Plays International & Europe, where many Cohen's reviews about the Romanian theatre where published by you?

Dana Rufolo: It's a pleasure to be here, Anca. First, I should say that the magazine exists since 1985 and I was the theatre critic covering Luxemburg, Paris and Vienna, starting with 2003. But Peter Roberts, the founding editor of the magazine, had his own vision. Robert Cohen wrote for the magazine when it was under Peter's control, and it was called "Plays International" – that's the confusion. When I took it over in 2006, I was able to keep the same ISSN number, so it's the same magazine, but I added *and Europe*, because, even if I am born in America, I represent Luxemburg to you, I don't represent America to you. I was over 30 years living in Europe, so longer than I spend in the States. I understood that there is a difference between European theater and American theater. So when Robert Cohen wrote for the original founding editor, who asked me to take over the magazine when he reached the ripe age of 82 and was told by his doctor "It's either the magazine or your life." I could

take it over because I have the Theater Research Institute of Europe, which has the statutory right to purchase a magazine. I was more than happy, I've been waiting to take it over and to twist it in the new direction of *What is European theater*. And the project I am working on right now for universities and events like, possibly, the Biennale, is in fact what I call *The New European Critic*. What I have noticed is that Robert was looking, as you say, from a very American perspective. And in fact, Romanian theater, for the two days I've been watching every single play here, falls into the so-called *Regietheater* tradition – to use a German term. You call it a director's theatre, but the term for that is the German word *Regietheater*. *Director's theatre*: it isn't an official term, but we will use it today. Robert comes from a tradition, as did I, since my studies were done in America, of valuing the playwright and valuing the words of the play; they are for us something sacrosanct – by us meaning in this case the Americans. And the European *Regietheater* can go to great extremes in allowing the director complete control over everything about the play: the era in which it was written, the national identity which it tried to capture and the language. And *Regietheater* has gone so far in some of the main European capitals, and I include Switzerland in that, as to totally disrespect all those aspects. Actually what Robert Cohen was praising, something I've noticed myself, is that you are a director's theater, but it is not the director's theater which is so extreme that it disrespects the text.

A.M.: Yes, it is a long debate about the relation between the dramatic text and the way the director is approaching it. It is one of the main issues of modern theatre practice, that emerged once modern directing was born. The debate is over 100 years old in Europe. Let's remember the great Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold. He was accused of disrespect of the classics, while staging his masterpiece *Inspector General* by Gogol, but his directorial vision was actually revolutionary. We know today that the text, be it literary or dramatic, does not have a unique, absolute meaning, it has several meanings, depending on a variety of social, historical, cultural factors and contexts. Umberto Eco speaks about the *opera aperta*, about the fact that each work of art might engender a different understanding and interpretation, according to the historical moment when it is judged, the subjectivity or the cultural background of the person who is judging. The 20th century was named the century of directing, and the director was seen either as a dictator

or as a magician. Starting with modern directing, theatre became in fact the realm where the director is reigning, of course if his artistic approach is legitimized by a vision which is authentic and creative. Even if the vision might seem disrespectful regarding a certain text, if it brings a new perspective of understanding, some new meanings, this means that it is capable to enrich a canonic work of art. But this is another discussion.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, since the emergence of the historical avant-gardes, with their disrespect concerning the established values in art and culture, I don't think we can speak anymore of a total respect regarding the text of a play. The problem is that we should not fall into arbitrariness, into gratuitousness. I mean the big question is *how the director uses the extreme freedom* he has gained during the 20th century. Robert Cohen, in the beginning of his speech at the Professor Honoris Causa ceremony – that I have included in the present volume – is quoting Randy Gener, who wrote in a cover story for *American Theater*, America's major magazine on the country's professional theatre: "In the field of directing it is not Romania, but America that needs to catch up." 'Mr. Gener, says Robert, knows what he is talking about, he is the magazine's senior editor. And shortly after this essay appeared, the equally distinguished American theater journal, *Theater*, published by the Yale Drama School, devoted an entire issue to Romanian theater.' Robert's opinion about the concept of *Regietheater* doesn't seem to demonize it, it's a good concept.

D.R.: Yes, of course and I have several things to say about that. First of all we are talking about somebody else. So Robert came into the tradition of *Regietheater* via Munich for 2 days and then he came to Romania. We are talking about somebody else; we are talking about 2009, we are talking about someone who came from the tradition of American realism, and the lower budget American theatre productions, because there is no national support for the theatre, something that Europeans are used to. So he came from a different tradition and he was very pleasantly surprised, and he said basically "Romania is better, they do it better".

What we will talk about today is how you Romanians fit in with *Regietheater* and I will be using my own eyes, I cannot speak for others. Of course, Robert introduced us because he loves your theater, and for good reason. What he didn't know is that *Regietheater* has been progressing on the

continent in the western part of Europe and we'll have to distinguish between say Meyerhold or Stanislavsky or any of those methods – those are methods of production which are applied onto a text: you have physical theatre interpretations, you have psychological interpretations. So you are getting an overlay of the director interpretation or vision of the play which can be legitimized.

Now, in a recent issue of *Plays international and Europe*, we are talking about 2017-2018, a very interesting debate happened about a young director born in Basel, but Australian, working in Switzerland and all over Europe – Simon Stone who did what was called *Ibsen Huis*, a Dutch title, that was done for Ivo van Hove's Toneelgroepamsterdam in 2017. It means *Ibsen House* and then he did *Hotel Strindberg* in 2018, in Basel and elsewhere in Europe. And he went too far, in the eyes of one of the magazine's critics, one of my favorite critics, she said he goes too far. And which since our focus here is on the Romanian Theater, you don't do, and which Robert Cohen never felt you did. He was amazed by your set designs, the attempt to elaborate minor scenes and to reflect the meaning of the play even in small scenes in the design environment. Costume design, like what we saw yesterday in *Master Manole*², Lucian Broscăţean's costumes yesterday support the philosophy of the play and not really the philosophy of the director.

The critic for our magazine I am talking about, Natalia Isaeva in Paris, I asked her to see Simon Stone's version at Théâtre de l'Odéon of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, because he has done his usual technique of using famous playwright names and improvising with his actors and putting them in a house on stage, which in all his productions has transparent plexiglass all over it and it revolves, so the audience gets to see *Three Sisters* in an extremely modern setting. Natalia is Russian, she was in fact the dramaturg for Anatoly Vassiliev who directed *La Musica Deuxième* by Marguerite Duras at the Comédie Française in 2016, and is living in Paris. And she understands the original Russian and I know that she knew every word from the original

² Dana Rofolo is referring to the play *Meşterul Manole (Master Manole)* by Lucian Blaga, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Scenario after Lucian Blaga: Andrei Măjeri. Director: Andrei Măjeri. Set and video designer: Mihai Păcurar. Costume designer: Lucian Broscăţean.

play, and she wrote a scathing condemnation of Simon Stone because not a single line of the play was in the original words of Chekhov.

So we are not talking about a new view of the play by using a physical theatre interpretation or a psychological theatre interpretation, we are talking about invading the space of the dramatist, the author. And that's something you haven't done in your theatre work. I asked you about that in a private conversation because I was a bit concerned about the Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*. Robert Cohen said that if the Romanian production of that play had been seen by the Beckett estate it would have been closed because Beckett does not allow radical transformations of even the scenography of his plays. The tree was growing above and into the sky, and that's something that wouldn't be allowed. Even if it enriches the scenography. I do actually understand that there is a *Modelbuch*³ idea, a rigid playwright's theatre approach. It is a sort of fixed three dimensional vision, auditory visual and linguistic which the playwright has embraced, and is trying to force it, as if the play is a film. You can argue that that's not right. And the Romanian's *Purcărete* interpretation was very valid and disrespected this three dimensional *Modelbuch* version of *Waiting for Godot*, in order to extract something new and relevant out of it.

And then of course what was very interesting, is the same *Three Sisters* was produced in Germany, in Berlin, by Simon Stone, and our Berlin theatre critic Hans-Jürgen Bartsch who is a Berliner from birth and is no longer young and is extremely knowledgeable about Berlin theatre, he loved the *Three Sisters*. So I had Natalia, and her review saying it was a McDonald's version of Chekhov, an Ikea/McDonald version. And I had Hans-Jürgen from Berlin saying it was a wonderful performance capturing the true spirit of the play. And I want you to remember, said Hans-Jürgen, that furthermore Simon Stone is not to be accused of any misconduct because Stone had said it was a "nach Chekhov", a take-off or following of Chekhov and declared that it wasn't authentic Chekhov and that excused him from the fact that he didn't use any original words. Now what's the difference here? We see what

³ *Modelbuch* is a German term proposed by Bertold Brecht meaning Modelbook. Brecht documented some of his productions to help theatre-makers understand how they were made and what they were trying to achieve. Brecht was trying to spread his way of making theatre, but not dictating how it was to be done, as some have accused him to do. (Note Anca Măniuțiu)

the difference is: in one play we have a native speaker, somebody who grew up loving Chekhov, the way you grew up loving Blaga, who feels it was a sacrilege because not a single word of the author was present in the play. Improvisation around the themes of the play had been used, and mainly that's what was there. We have a non-Russian speaker saying it was fantastic because all he has ever seen was adaptations, translations. What a non-speaker will do is they will draw out the essence, the mood of the play, depression, joy, fear, future looking, expression, whatever. They will draw on that and they are not worried about the language. So *Regietheater* becomes even more complicated, when we are talking about the incredible intra-cultural, inter-European cultural aspects of it.

A.M.: I agree. We have here with us a guest from Italy, director Roberto Bacci, who staged *Waiting for Godot* with women, and he was sued by the Beckett estate, there was a trial because of this. But he was declared winner. The judges decided that it was not a sacrilege. *But now let's come back to the theatre you saw in Cluj. How many shows have you seen?*

D.R.: Every single one so far. I haven't made the talks in the mornings, but I've made every play. And I have very strong feelings. I am here because I represent the European vision. I understand the American one, I come from that tradition, but I represent the European vision. I felt every single play fantastically, I especially enjoyed the Reactor play. I had more trouble understanding the *Portraits of Decadents* in *Gallants of the Old Court*⁴ because this has something to do with your culture. Again, we are talking about how do we make theater move outside its country of origin.

Now, I am not a Romanian, I have really no antecedent with Romanian culture, you are asking me how I feel. Remember I am speaking from the European perspective. I could say if I were Romanian, "Look, for me all the plays were fantastic", and it would be true. But you don't want me to say

⁴ The play Dana Rufolo is referring to is *Craii de Curtea-Veche (The Gallants of the Old Court)* by Mateiu Caragiale, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Adaptation of the novel and dramatic script: Răzvan Mureșan. Director: Răzvan Mureșan. Set designer: Andreea Săndulescu. Costume designer: Ilona Lőrincz.

that. You want me to look from the outside and... You are basically asking me, Anca, how well do this plays export? I thought about this. In every single play, I felt what I call *contagious fear*, an undermining and unexamined contagious fear. Which is so real that both the actors and the director, they are not challenging it. You know consciousness, human consciousness, our own consciousness – which is why psychotherapy is such an exciting trip to take if you have a very good psychotherapist, whether or not you have any supposed issues or conform to any issue conformed to any conventional ideas about being normal or abnormal – consciousness enlarges and what we are not conscious about is our unconsciousness. So I felt this fear, and it started in the performance *M.I.S.A. Părut*⁵. I loved *M.I.S.A. Părut* it was very, very close to us, the staging was simple, the costumes were simple, but it was on top of us. It was a small space, and the reality of Anna's misery was both private reality and a collective reality. I understood she was speaking about groups. But what I immediately noticed as a non-Romanian was that her mother – or the authority figure, which I must say I noticed over and over again seems to be the mother – had not (that's my impression) had not ever dialogued with her own daughter. And my impression in the M.I.S.A.'s play – *M.I.S.A. Understanding* – is that the daughter wasn't even in an Ashram where there was a problem. I had the impression that there were many Ashrams where there were no problems. But the mother has received an infection of fear through the television, and she had gone off in her own little hysterical and insane thought direction, and gone back into really ancient values like whether or not her daughter was a virgin, which by the way the daughter was never asked about. She was examined but she was never asked. The daughter was never asked, "Are you a part of the people who are working with this particular individual?" It was a growing fear of everything, to the point of the mother declaring that her daughter was insane – which none of her words or actions or any of the actors' words or actions ever portrayed – that allowed me to see that here is somehow a lingering collective fear living in Romania, which makes it the most different from going to see a play in Germany, or going to see a play in England especially.

⁵ Play by Alexa Băcanu, staged at Reactor de Creație și Experiment, Cluj. Director: Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu. Set designer: Anda Pop.

A.M.: But how different this fear is if we speak about the two other performances you have seen here?



D.R.: I found that what I call contagious fear repeated in milder versions again and again but that's not the end of the story because that would be only the negative kind of thing. I understood that Romanian Theatre right now is in the process of healing itself. It's showing the healing process for something I can't understand. I know fear too. It's not that people in the west don't live lives where they are never afraid; after all where does the #metoo come from? We all have known fear, but this was, I felt somehow, a very Romanian response. And then I thought about the word oppressed. Because what I felt is that this fear came to level the playing field, so we don't say, "Oh, this terrible mother and this victimized Anna, daughter". To level the playing field you have to say what's happening to both – to all of them in this play. And what was happening to all of them was a miasma of oppression that didn't have a clear source. So oppression was hanging down on all of the characters all of the time. Anna's oppressor had a face – it was her mother, but the oppression that was on the mother was also oppression. So it was a hierarchy.

And then having seen the other plays I have come to some conclusions, should I tell you? I am not criticizing here, all is very real here, you have absolute brilliant actors, and the intensity of yesterday's performance (*Master Manole*) was aching, achingly intense. I am sure I wasn't the only one in the audience that wanted a different ending. I don't know the myth. I thought she (Mira) was going to break out of the wall, I wanted nothing more than for her to break out of the wall and be free again. And alive. And of course it wasn't to be that way. I want to clearly distinguish between the effect of the play and this level of oppression. And then I thought about how was oppression being dealt with? Let's go to Bertolt Brecht and his *Verfremdungseffekt*. Germany has had to deal with the consequences of oppression more perhaps clearly than any other nation and they have been perhaps the best treated as a result of having had the most extreme situation, life being very unfair. And what he does is to separate the different units, the forms of oppression, and this keeps us protected as viewers. We are able to analyze where the sources of oppression are coming from.

Well, let's talk about Augusto Boal who came from the Favelas himself, in Brazil, and dealt with oppression by saying. 'Ok, let's let the people, let's let the non-actors act, let's let the anonymous of Brazil talk back to the dominating, to people who are oppressing, repressing and dominating, and show their reality', so we get more into the form of Street Theatre. And I found that Romania has a third way, and I saw it in *The Clowns*⁶. If you want my opinion the most easily exportable play that I've seen in the last two days is in fact *The Clowns*. In fact that author lives in France now, so it's a little bit like I am talking about Eugène Ionesco who has become a world figure. But why? What I am saying here? What is happening is that at the end of *The Clowns* you have a fusion between the three clowns who entered despite that opening scene... in fact I would like to ask the director, I mean the author: did you write the opening scene as frightening as it was staged?

⁶ Dana Rufolo is referring to *Angajare de clovn (Old Clown wanted)* by Matei Vișniec, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Director and designer: Sorin Misirianțu.

The Author (Matei Vişniec): Unfortunately, I came yesterday evening, and I didn't see the play. It was the last play I wrote while I was still living in Romania. I wrote it in '86 and I left Romania in '87. I moved to Paris because I couldn't work in Romania any more.

D.R.: I see. Well, you have your own Romanian Jacob Levy Moreno, who moved to Vienna and started working there in around 1921, and who developed Psychodrama. And it seems to me that that's the third way that Romania is reaching for, and that *The Clowns* a bit embodies that. What does your Jacob Moreno say when he does Psychodrama? He used it in the context of psychiatric patients where he worked, places like St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington DC. But towards the end of his life he applied it to healthy individuals, and people like me who have studied psychodrama go further in applying it as art therapists to developing the potential of healthy individuals. What Moreno said is that the most horrible thing in the world is to be alone. And in fact D.W. Winnicott as well, a psychologist-philosopher; he said we are never alone. A child is born with a mother; a mother and child is the first couple. We are never alone.

And *The Clowns* is the most beautiful play of the ones I've seen, despite the intensity of the others, because in the end we have three clowns. And they have come to identify with each other, they are not alone. The first one enters into an extremely *anxiogène*, anxiety-provoking, environment, so anxiety-provoking that when I saw it he (the first clown) started coughing – because I think that's in the script, because he says there is smoke in the room, but people in the audience started coughing too. And I am very allergic, and I always cough, and I didn't cough which means that there was nothing wrong with that smoke, it was just a psychological – again – contagion of fear that happened in the very beginning. And the amazing progress that that play made, your play, an honest to god Romanian play, not French in any way, went from this hugely anxious solitary lost old individual to a collectivity. So he was being mirrored by two others, and they were each mirroring each other, and you have this group.

So I think that what I feel is that Romanian theatre is finding a third way. It is not necessarily Brechtian: let's get rid of the oppression through analysis; it's not necessarily Boalian: let's get rid of the oppression by staging

M.I.S.A. type plays over and over again in back street Street Theatre type plays, but it's theatre that is beginning to explore the psychological foundation of the oppression and the oppressive effects of oppression. And that's why somebody said in the end of the last discussion (about *Master Manole*), somebody said: I didn't like the way the end happened. And the director said, from what I've understood from the translation, 'Yeah, it didn't seem to quite work.' I'll tell you why, because first of all it makes me think of *The Master Builder* by Ibsen – another image – because what happened is Manole goes into himself. He is dealing with the psychological world at the end of yesterday's production⁷. So he throws himself off of the tower because the psychological confusion inside of him is so great and it's so torturing that death is the only solution he can find. So we don't need the king, and we don't need all these other things. He is in his own universe in the end.

And that's why, at the end of that hour of discussion about whether or not the ending worked, the only thing people who had been in the audience challenged was the ending. And I think that is where Romanian theater is going right now. I haven't of course seen *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*⁸ yet. I've only seen the Romanian plays up to today, so I haven't actually seen how the Romanian theatre is taking in outside influence and transforming it.

⁷ *Master Manole* by Lucian Blaga.

⁸ *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière, staged at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj. Director: Mihai Măniuțiu. Set designer: Adrian Damian. Costume designer: Luiza Enescu. Choreographer: Andrea Gavrilu.