

Theatre for Young Audience. A Romanian Cultural Landscape

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Abstract: Offering an overview of the Romanian theatre for children and teenagers, the present paper is mapping the existing public or private institutions and theatre companies that function in Romania. The main points of interest presented and discussed are: the question of the audience (age, social milieu, the means this young audience comes or is brought to the theatre, the marketing strategies elaborated by the companies); the theatre men and women (stage directors, set designers, puppeteers and playwrights or dramaturges) specialized in performances for youngsters, as well as the tendency of well-known artists to try their hand in this specific direction; the important number of festivals and theatrical encounters that appeared after the communist period and in the last years, revealing an increasing interest for this kind of theatre, coming from the professional artistic field as well as from the young and adult Romanian audience.

Keywords: theatre for teenagers, theatre for children, Romanian theatre, festivals for young audience

Seventeen state companies, according to the National Institute of Statistic, dedicated to young audience all over the country plus a few private companies (mainly in Bucharest) foster a solid institutional structure working for the next generations. In the years to come, will the new generations go or not to see theatre performances – will this still be a spiritual need? This is one of the bets that this type of theatre is proposing. The educational dimension is one of most importance when we speak about theatre for youngsters. And it is well known that it helps them: first – to become future adults; second – to encourage them to discover the fabulous world of imagery; third – to offer a few possible answers regarding the

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complicated part of this stage of life, because many times being a teenager is not the simplest part of our lives, as I'm sure we all remember it; fourth – to develop their curiosity. And the list still remains open.

Most of the Romanian state companies are named „theatre for children and young people”, practically indicating the fact that this artists are creating for a wide range of spectators. They have to offer an appealing repertory for children from kindergarten to elementary school, middle school and high school, providing a varied offer, if they really expect to have this demographic segment interested in coming to the theatre. And they do, as the number of spectators proves to be one of the most relevant items when it comes to success. Concerning the repertory, for the youngest, the most attractive proposals are still fairy tales: the Grimm Brothers or Charles Perrault's stories, but also the Romanian classics, the ones written by Ion Creangă, Ioan Slavici, Petre Ispirescu etc. All adapted for theatre and staged by specialised directors. Amongst this category some of the most popular figures are Cristian Pepino (Bucharest), Constantin Brehnescu (Iassy), Gavril Cadariu, Oana Leahu (Tg. Mureș), Radu Dinulescu (Arad), Gavril Pinte (Bucharest). These shows are using different ways of expression, from puppetry to acting, musical, dance, new media etc. Still very popular, puppets (string puppets, glove puppets, Bibabo, Bunraku, animated objects etc.) remain the children's favourite theatrical encounters. There are also set designers specialized in performances for youngsters such as Eustatiu Gregorian (Craiova), Eugenia Tărășcu-Jianu (Constanța), Daniela Drăgulescu (Bucharest), Gavril Sireteanu (Tg Mureș), Sandu Marian (Cluj-Napoca), etc. working with various companies. To these we can add a number of well known set designers coming from the important Romanian Theatres for adults such as Adrian Damian, Alina Herescu, Irina Moscu and others, who are willing to try their hand in this other direction. Lately, some of the top stage directors are branching out and working for children and youth too: amongst them Silviu Purcărete² (Teatrul Țăndărică Bucharest), Alexandru Dabija (Gong Theatre Sibiu), Radu Alexandru Nica (Lucașfărul Theatre in Iași).

Regarding the importance of new writing and desire to work on contemporary plays, some of the theatres for young people are very open, even if the audiences are usually more easily tempted by classics and not prone to taking risks on something with a more modern topic. Even so, there is a general interest to support the writers to develop, distribute and promote their work in theatrical circles. Some of these theatres are organizing special

² For more informations see Oltița Cîntec, *Silviu Purcărete. Privirea care înfățișează* (București: Cheiron, 2011)

contests (Bucharest Ion Creangă Theatre), workshops and guidance during the composition of a new dramatic text (Bucharest ImPuls Festival) or assuming this aesthetic mission and staging mostly contemporary drama (Sibiu Gong Theatre).



Fig. 1: Set design created by Carmen and Gheorghe Rasovszky, for the performance *Cinderella*, stage direction Silviu Purcărete, Teatrul Țăndărică Bucharest, 1990.

We all know that, when it comes to children, it's usually the parents and the teachers who are deciding what they are going to see and it is very, very important how, alongside the theatres, they are overseeing this. „Family and childhood experiences of live performances not only induct young people into theatre, but influence continuing attendance.”³

Theatre can provide quality theatrical experiences for young audiences, building future engaged theatre-goers. That is the reason why Romanian Children and Young People Theatres develop creative strategies to attract a large number of viewers. In a top of the most actives theatres we can find Luceafărul Theatre in Iași (76.400 spectators in 2017), Țăndărică Theatre in Bucharest, Colibri Theatre in Craiova, Gong Theatre in Sibiu, Gulliver Theatre

³ Michael Anderson, Josephine Fleming, “The TheaterSpace Project, Its Partners and Its Purposes”, *Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education*, no12: John O’Toole, Ricci-Jane Adams, Michael Anderson, Bruce Burton, Robyn Ewing editors, *Young Audiences, Theatre and the Cultural Conversation* (2014, Springer) 9.

in Galați, Puck Theatre in Cluj-Napoca. Each of these institutions do also organize International Theatre Festivals every year (The International Theatre Festival for Young Audience in Iași, 10th edition in 2017, a festival labeled by the European Theatre Association in Brussels as a „remarkable festival”⁴), ImPuls Festival in Bucharest (13th edition in 2017), Puppets Occupy Street in Craiova (3rd edition in 2017), Gong New Theatre Festival (3rd edition in 2017), Gulliver Festival in Galați (25th edition in 2017), Puck International Festival in Cluj-Napoca (16th edition in 2017). Financed by the Local or County Councils, these companies have their own venues (usually one or two), a stable number of actors, technicians, preparing 3 to 5 or 6 new productions per season. This strong network also include programs and projects for the minorities living in Romania, and some of these institutions have a special working departments and teams: for example in Hungarian, at Ariel Theatre in Târgu Mureș and Puck Theatre in Cluj, and in German at Gong Theatre in Sibiu.

One of the longest running directors is Constantin Brehnescu. He has worked for Luceafărul Theatre in Iași since 1953, and he is still active. One of the latest productions he imagined was *Playing Shakespeare*, a collage from Shakespeare’s most important plays mixed in a scenario imagined like a theatre lesson, interacting with young audience. Another very important artist is Cristian Pepino, who is constantly collaborating with Tândărică Theatre in Bucharest. He is also a teacher at the Bucharest National University of Arts and one of his aesthetical targets is to imagine shows with puppets for adults. Amongst his 120 creations, many of them realized together with his wife, the regretted set designer Cristina Pepino, some of them such as *Faust* and *A Midsummer Night Dream*, are addressed to adults, and point out the truth that Philippe Genty highlighted so well:

Theatre is an artificial space, an artificiality that is interesting to play with. In this context, inertness becomes extremely important and contributes to the revealing of life. Material and object stripped of their common use, the puppet or the mannequin facing the actors will exacerbate the paradoxes of life and of the inanimate.⁵

⁴ The label was decided by an international jury lead by Sir Jonathan Mills, ex-director of Edinburgh International Theatre Festival.

⁵ Philippe Genty, *Paysages intérieurs* (Arles: Actes Sud, 2013), 131 (« Le théâtre est un lieu artificiel, une artificialité avec laquelle il est intéressant de jouer. Dans ce contexte, l’inertie prend toute son importance et participe à révéler la vie. La matière et l’objet détournés de leurs fonction première, le pantin ou le mannequin confrontés aux comédiens vont exacerber les paradoxes du vivant et de l’inanimé »).



Fig. 2: Scene from *A Midsummer Night Dream*, performance 16+, created by Cristian Pepino, Țândărică Theatre in Bucharest, 2017

When it comes to the tickets price, the fact that all these companies are financed by the state is of a great importance. Theatre tickets are very affordable related to the average income and cost of life. All tickets are subsidized so anyone can come to watch a show.

The well-developed state companies network is completed by a few private companies, all of them trying to impose their unique styles. *AnimArt* Cluj-Napoca is led by Dana Bontidean and it focuses on small puppet-shows for children. *Hopa-Trop* is another interesting independent company for children, directed by Beatrice Iordan with Ana-Maria Cucuta, at the Bucharest Romanian Peasant Museum Club, focusing on traditional stories or new plays. All of their shows are using shadows, some of them are nonverbal, all of them with live music at specific Romanian ancient instruments. Beatrice Iordan together with her husband, Florin Iordan, and her brother in law, Dinu Petrescu, are also playing in the *Trei parale* group, singing old Romanian folk music.

Theatre for teenagers

Teenagers are not just a part of the general audience and theatres cannot see them as such. Teenagers are a varied range of people facing many issues on the path from childhood to young adults. Of course, it is not right to consider teenagers just a source of multiple existential problems like

friendship, communication with others, relationship with parents, discovering sexuality etc. Younger audiences engage with theatre if they consider it a space that stimulates their imagination, emotions and intellect. Sharing this experience with others, this time not parents or teachers, but friends with similar preferences and expectations, is the foundation to build a critical, active engagement with performing arts. When we talk about teenagers we have to think of diverse forms, styles and genres of entertainment. In this strong national state network that I have already mentioned, there are a few important stage directors drawn to this kind of theatre: Bobi Pricop for instance, Horia Suru, Alexandru Mazagreanu, Vlad Cristache and Ștefan Lupu are some of the significant presences in this theatrical area of interest.

In general, the classic repertory is a safe category and it keeps its central place. This attracts the conservative part of audience. But the repertory must evolve in new directions in order to attract new categories of spectators, and artists must take significant steps toward attendance. Interaction between young people and creators is a main way to approach new categories. Youngsters need to feel welcome if not included in what they watch. That is why discussions before creating a show or after presenting it are of great importance. Of course, there is no pattern, only a few general directions that every director or company must develop in a personal way. Discussion sessions, pre and/or post-show talks provided by the team emphasize the truth that practitioners have to be very close to their audience. Romanian artists are responsive to the needs and real expectations of teenagers and they try to do their best to increase their presence in the theatre halls.

Strategies to communicate more directly with young people were trialed at the Educational Theatre Centre REPLIKA, in Bucharest. REPLIKA Centre opened its doors in February 2015 and was "born from a need to create an interlinking artistic platform, aiming at bringing together professional artists, communities and other groups with not enough representation", as Mihaela Michailov mentioned at my request for this paper. The Centre aims at theatrical projects with social relevance, educational film projections, participating in art, workshops, debates, conferences, post-show talks, meetings with professors and theatrical scholars, educating the younger audiences. They believe in „an emotionally involved theatre, in which artists and the audience educate each other in the spirit of empathy and solidarity.” They choose and develop themes previously less explored, such as school violence, children left behind by parents gone to work abroad, children’s rights, competitiveness and the high level of pressure forced on teenagers, animal rights, discrimination, Sex Ed – which are brought into the spotlight. And they are doing this in „educational

shows focusing on directly engaging children and teenagers, as a form of discovery and collective action, in order to transform communities and reform the social classes”.



Fig. 1: Space and set design using the silent disco system, by Bobi Pricop in the performance *The Green Cat*, Luceafărul Theater in Iași

Seven artists are currently looking after the Educational Theatre Centre REPLIKA – Radu Apostol – stage director, Mihaela Michailov – playwright, Mihaela Rădescu – actress, Viorel Cojanu – actor, Silvana Negrutio – actress, Gabi Albu – architect and Elena S. Găgeanu – video artist, all of them doing everything that is needed for this theatre company that has already constructed „a creative community formed by professional artists and groups without sufficient representation.”, as Michailov pointed out. All the productions are offered as a gift, given freely to all social categories, because „Art must not be a luxury, but a necessity. Educational art is a common good.” In 2017, REPLIKA Centre has worked on four productions financed as independent projects by AFCN (National Cultural Found Administration) and ArCub (Bucharest Art Center). Last year REPLIKA Centre made two co-productions with The Small Theatre in Bucharest (Teatrul Mic): the performance *Family with no sugar* and the educational program *Text Book Theatre* which sees dramatic readings of books included in the Bacalaureate exam in high schools.

REPLIKA Centre is no doubt the most active independent company for teenagers.

New directions are also provided by young and talented stage-directors such as Bobi Pricop, who staged *The Green Cat*, by Elise Wilk⁶, at the Luceafărul Theater in Iași, using the silent disco system for the first time in a Romanian theatre show. In a special relationship with the young audience – in which he sees himself, as he himself was not long ago the high school student who would attend festivals in English with the touring company – Bobi Pricop's priority was to address in the best possible manner this special audience.

Conceived in a "chamber" format, the production brings actors and spectators together in the same space – a club – that is reconstructed on stage, "The Periphery" emphasizing through shapes and lines the mapped contours of a town. The "texture" of the space is dense, it absorbs in its construction all those who are inside, compressing text, music, image, lighting in 1300 square feet space. The structure of the set-design underlines the link between a certain place and a specific kind of behavior, melting together the world of games, of imagination, and the world of the auditorium, the world of everyday life. This space becomes a pod in which the spectators and the actors "travel" theatrically through the lives of six teenagers who crash at great speed against reality. It is the place that shapes their relationships, all breathe as one in the series of tragic events at the end of which you find out, in an almost Hamletian way, that the essence of the world is that before you die, you must live! The urban tragedy of Dani, Bianca, Boogie, Robert, Roxana and Flori is rendered in detail in an interior space, an acting space that is simultaneously permeated by ingenuity, bitterness, lyricism, craving for love, unhappiness, feelings that bring together a transient community, abstracted from the greater world outside the walls of the set.⁷ Or as Bobi Pricop describes it:

The Green Cat is a play that speaks about imaginary worlds, about adolescence, love and loneliness. The characters created by Elise Wilk almost never interact. They address the public directly, telling their own version of the same event. The challenge we present to the young public is to climb on the stage with the actors, in a club, at a silent disco party, where they will find the story of six teenagers and of an evening that will change their lives.⁸

⁶ 2015, the show brought Bobi Pricop his first nomination to the UNITER Award for Best Director.

⁷ For more details, see *Carte cu Pisica verde / Book with The Green Cat* (Oltita Cintec coord), Iasi: Timpul, 2016

⁸ Ibid, 125

In Romania there are some festivals designed especially for teenagers. One of them is Teen Fest organized by Excelsior Theatre in Bucharest. This company had the biggest budget in Romania in 2017: 24.600 Lei/ 5 million Euros, money that came from the Bucharest Local County. Last year's edition had in the official program companies from Romania, Italy, France and Poland and also workshops for teenagers (video editing, 3D modeling, participatory theatre etc.).



Fig. 2: Front cover of the Book with the Green Cat

One must highlight the valuable role of those working directly with young people. An other example is Ideo Ideis, a national festival for young audiences (from 2006). On the Festival website the initial statement is mentioned: "We wanted and still want, a type of theatre and an education very close to us all, that was ours." Every year, in Alexandria, teenagers and artists from all over Romania are sharing experiences, putting together projects, attending workshops, meeting actors, playwrights, choreographers etc.

In 2017, at the FestIn pe Bulevard Theatre Festival, created by the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest, the International Association of Theatre Critics Romania (IATC.Ro) organized a debate with the topic "Theatre for Teenagers, an expanding niche". We had a long and interesting range of opinions, starting from the truth that this age is synonym with shyness, non-conformism, intense emotions, and sometimes restless biological changes. How can theatre help

teenagers? A lot, and in an efficient manner if creators put themselves in the adolescents' shoes. Collaborative projects are the most important ones because they are forged on a basis that matters to the youngsters. Theatre goes give an emotional response to the work and this could be the starting point to a more critical attendance.

Concluding, I would say that teenagers have to be involved in the process of creation, to highly engage them in order to construct the foundations of future attendance. It would be a huge error to transform theatre into another class course! As Émile Lansman said, a show for teenagers has to „give the chance to discover what a good quality creation can offer him *hic et nunc*: pleasure, emotion, thinking by looking over himself and the world around him.”⁹

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⁹ Émile Lansman, *Le théâtre pour ados, un théâtre à part... entière?*, dans Émile Lansman et Aurelie Bureau (coord), *Théâtre pour ados: paroles croisées*, (Manage: Lansman Editeur, 2009) 96. « lui permettre de découvrir ce que la rencontre avec une œuvre «de qualité» pouvait lui apporter *hic et nunc*: du plaisir, de l'émotion, de la réflexion à travers un regard sur lui-même et sur le monde qui l'entourait. »