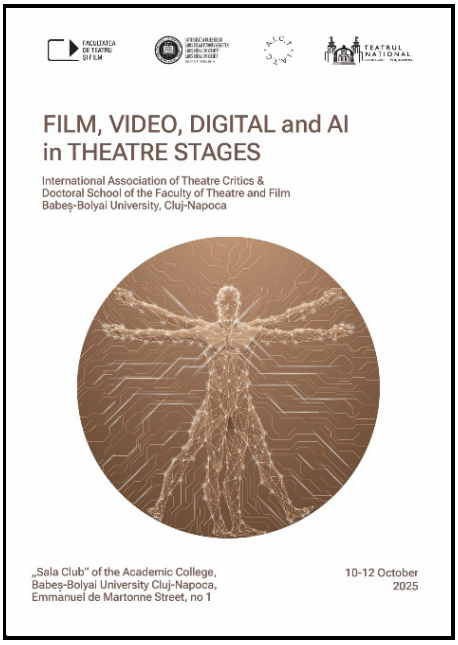
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To Be or Not to Be?: How Does AI Manage to Change the Rules of the Game?

CONFERENCE REVIEW:

Film, Video, Digital and AI in Theatre Stages, ***October 10 - 12, 2025, organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC) — Doctoral School of the Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, in partnership with „Lucian Blaga" National Theatre Cluj-Napoca***



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Since the appearance of humanity, there have been defining moments that contributed to our evolution as beings, to the easing of our lifestyle. It is not hard to name some of these tools, such as fire, the printing press, electricity, and later the telephone. These are just a few examples that generated changes in the world and marked us deeply. Until now, man was the central figure, he held control, but what happens today, when technology takes off and flies out of our hands? The development of Artificial Intelligence leads to strong conflicts between generations, can have a deep impact on our psyche, and influence the way we view art. Where and how do we position ourselves in relation to an algorithm much more advanced than us? Either we learn to adapt, to integrate it into our life, or we let ourselves be controlled by this immaterial entity, increasingly threatening. It is good to point out that this fear is valid, the speed at which the world operates exceeds our capacity to keep up. However, it is important to realize that we can negotiate the intrusiveness of this mechanism in society. Our initiative to discuss these emerging problems is almost mandatory, especially when ethics and morality come into play.

Within the conference ***Film, Video, Digital and AI In Theater Stages*** held between October 10–12 2025, organized by the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC), together with the Doctoral School of the Faculty of Theatre and Film, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, the central topic was about the breach of Artificial Intelligence into the artistic environment. Academics from all over the world gathered to present their research and interests regarding this subject. The themes discussed: human ontology in theater, AI as a tool, and socio-cultural change, are universally debated points. This conference focused our attention on the fact that there is an artistic unity, grappling with the same anxieties. The diversity of perspectives presented broadened our horizon and put us on the map.

Under the guidance of Ioan-Pop Curșeu, Oana Cristea-Grigorescu, and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, the themes were explored through numerous points of view. Presence appeared often as a subject of debate, due to the unbalanced relationship that appears between physical presence and digital presence. This issue divides into: the presence of man threatened by a new technological discovery much more advanced, and the presence of man in

theater, considered vital by some participants. Thus, we can talk about a crisis that is happening on both a macro and micro level. Mercè Saumell (Institut del Teatre Barcelona) presented examples of performances (*Three Sisters, Android Version* by Oriza Hirata; *Robot* by Blanca Li) in which human and technological bodies do not reject each other, but collaborate towards obtaining a stronger theatrical effect. She specified that these two systems almost create an intimate, friendly relationship. However, she launched an important question: *What leads us to other bodies?* Curious about the status of the director in the new artistic tradition, Andrianna-Anna Tsiotsiou (Aristotle University of Thessaloniki) experimented with two Artificial Intelligence models, Perplexity AI and ChatGPT, with the purpose of obtaining exercises and indications for training actors. She concluded that, despite working with advanced AI models, the human imprint of a director is still needed. The models are not developed enough and remain somewhat at a superficial level, which cannot intuit nuances or dig deeply into, inherently, human situations, marked by feelings and emotions.

Human essence never changed. The world is the way I want to see it. These are two strong statements by András Hatházi (UBB Cluj). He rejected the idea that his work as an actor can be dictated by an external mechanism. He argued that Artificial Intelligence is just a new toy, which will not affect the actor's presence in theater. In his eyes, this is just a moment of transition, one that resembles many others in history and it won`t change anything in our core, as humans. He showcased his opinion passionately, with an amazing devotion, which can shock or disturb, but I appreciated that he did not shy away from debate or criticism. After all, a conference wants to spark contradictory opinions, which enrich human interaction. Marius Alexandru Teodorescu (UBB Cluj) showed us how the idea of stage presence, marked by voice, changes in the contemporary society. Today it is no longer necessary for the actor to be on stage to hear his/her voice live, as there are enough algorithms to reproduce it. Not only that, but AI also has the possibility to create new voices. Through the connection between body and Artificial Intelligence, we also encountered the research of Horea Avram (UBB Cluj) who curated different examples of performances in which this relationship is explored: *Corpus Nil* (2016) by Marco Donnarumma, *Una Isla* (2023) by

Agrupación Señor Serrano. Ștefana Pop-Curșeu (UBB Cluj) brought back into discussion Craig's concept of *Übermarionette*, alongside Maeterlinck's *android*, and how these ideas, that once seemed absurd, today can not only become reality but norm.

Once the downsides of Artificial Intelligence have been debated, namely that of canceling human presence, we can also talk about the utilitarian function that AI can fulfill in theater. Like any other technological development, the concept has pros and cons, and it is important to see what novelties or improvements can be brought to theater with the help of this tool. Therefore, the next theme discussed within the conference concentrated around AI as a tool. Raluca Sas-Marinescu (UBB Cluj) wants Artificial Intelligence and digitalization to have a beneficial role in the literary secretariat and in archiving theatrical materials that otherwise would be lost. However, it would be necessary for papers not to be thrown away, but kept physically as well: *We're not allowed to kill tradition through technology*. Hana Strejčková (Academy of Performing Arts Prague) offered us an example through which theater can become a space of exploration, of development through multimedia tools and AI. Through the *Laterna magika* project, which facilitates: *live contact between performers and children*, kids are introduced into a theatrical universe with an educational purpose. In a similar area of interest Anca Ghenoside (UBB Cluj) experimented, who uses adjacent tools such as Mocap (motion capture) and VR to take the theatrical experience to the next level, namely to something called Pocap (performance capture). A surprising, even revolutionary idea, if it will be put into practice, is the construction of a national theater in Oman with an integrated AI that will solve problems and facilitate live services. Karim Jawad (IATC Oman) presented the ambitious project, spread over thousands of kilometers, which will need little managerial staff.

Socio-cultural changes create a new context in which we operate, therefore the need to discuss them is vital. To be aware of our new way of living means raising awareness of some problems that exist, but it also means adapting. For this reason, some research papers were closely linked to the new framework of everyday life and what kind of different dynamics are determined. Cătălin Ștefănescu (UBB Cluj) told us about a dynamic co-evolution between church/religion and science/technology, and the idea of

promise, whether spiritual or material. Savas Patsalidis (Aristotle University) observed the significant departure from the Aristotelian unity, and how technology substantially modifies the way theater feels, thinks, and produces meaning. The different procedures that appear, such as the use of pre-recorded materials, non-human presence, and live digital feedback completely change what we understand today by the idea of theater. "The stage becomes haunted by its own technologies." Ilinca Tamara Todoruț (UBB Cluj) observed how the era we are in shapes a certain type of dramaturgy in theater, and thus classifies three major traditions: *industrial dramaturgy* (continuous, whole, non-modular, non-adjustable, non-variable), *digital dramaturgy* (episodic, discrete, modular, adjustable, variable), *algorithmic dramaturgy*. The latter is closely linked to contemporary society, to the concepts of *surveillance capitalism* (data collected and sold for ads) and *algorithmic governmentality* (processing large amounts of data and using the algorithm as a governance tool).

Of course, these themes follow the general lines of discussion, but the subjects were far more numerous to be encompassed. The conference functioned as an open forum for meditation on new ethical, moral, and even technical problems. The world, and implicitly theater, will adapt over time and will learn to coexist with Artificial Intelligence. They will no longer be a threat to each other, but will enhance each other. Theater will adapt, as always, and will grow together with society. It will survive, but in different forms. As for us, humans, whether we will still be present or not remains to be seen.

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