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## EVERYDAY LIFE DRAMA: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECT IN PROGRESS

**Abstract.** Do young people react and represent themselves in the actual post-communist society? What kind of images do they have about the recent past, especially related to the socialist era? The field of political and social representations of youngsters seems blurred, and the so called refuse of civic implication of the new generations became a stereotype of daily conversations between adults, school teachers and media anchors. In real life experiences, this stereotype suffers profound corrections: a strange interest for religious experiences tends to fill the gap of the political distaste; the urban groups of teenagers in Romania, especially the male ones, reveal a flexible universe of representations and a particular rhetoric of discourses, built on fragmentary quotations from popular culture, parody of media clichés and a lot of paradoxical sadness related to the recent past – including their intra familial experiences. But, this uncomfortable

combination – “Kill Bill”-like – is not entirely escapist and does not exclude the accuracy of social observations.

The research and creation program *Everyday Life Drama* was born in 2004, as an interdisciplinary project with two immediate and even urgent dimensions: the first one was to re-link the playwriting practices to the social and political context, after more the one decade of aesthetical escapism and symbolical dominance of the theatre directing in Romania; the second one was the need of renewal in educational methods, by joining together the students from different programs, in a common effort of re-building a coherent perspective about their lives and their discourses. The program combines the workshops for video-journalism, creative writing in media and theatre, and photo-journalism, but also direct anthropological field research, in a research camp of ten days, each of the last five years. The importance of the program is that it offers each year a new bunch of artistic products: video-productions and documentaries, plays and film scenarios, written reports and interviews,

photo exhibitions. The last two years, the program was awarded two consecutive grants for Cultural Intervention from the Ministry of Culture in Romania.

From 2007, the theme is “*X-Men & Women Generation*”. Next year, the interest of the team will focus on the ways recent history – and especially the communist period – was

absorbed by the young people representations. The paper will resume some of the actual conclusions of this work in progress, and will present a small part of the plays and scenarios founded on recent history and everyday life stories....

**Key Words:** Theatre, History, Young people, Self-Representations

### **1. Tradition and History Representation in Romanian Theatre. Documenting the real life, past and present. The socialist communist heritage double bind.**

A small part of Romanian theatre critics and historians – but also the majority of the foreign critics and journalists visiting Romania - reported, at the end of the 90<sup>th</sup>, that the beauty and the aesthetical value of the theatre performances is not balanced with a substantial playwriting. It was hardly possible to find Romanian contemporary plays on stage, especially plays based on profound reflection of recent past issues, or debating the dramatic changes the society was passing through. Even if some interesting and provocative plays were written and published in volumes and collections – as, for example, *ȚȚara mea* by Radu Marcini<sup>1</sup> (*My Country/My Wound*) - no company and no important theatre directors were willing to stage them. Even if this strange resistance to the social and historical reflexive dimension of theatre has its own complex explanations,

we have to admit now that the struggle and tensions between the “universalistic” theatrical performance, freely interpreting well known literary masterpieces (from Sophocles to Shakespeare and from Chekhov to Beckett) and a more actual and direct drama seems to continue till our days<sup>2</sup>.

The resistance to the social and historical problematic subjects on stage continues to be significant not only in the theatrical milieu – companies, managers, stage directors and theatre critics – but also characterizes the mentalities and dispositions of usual audiences, especially late adult and old people who still use theatre as a social ritual, or as a leisure practice. The profound roots of this “cultural” and “museum like” attitude are stratified and tangled. In principle, we can split them in two large categories: first, *the aesthetical canon* of Romanian theatre, settled in the last three decades before communism failed; second, *the contextual allergy to realism and social-political impli-*

<sup>1</sup> Radu Macrinici, *ȚȚara mea*, București, Editura UNITEXT, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> See, on this topic, Miruna Runcan, *Modelul teatral romanesc*, Bucuresti, editura UNITEXT, 2001, or, Marian Popescu, *Scenele teatrului romanesc*, Bucuresti, Editura UNITEXT, 2005.

cation, shared both by artists and audiences in the late 80<sup>th</sup>, due to a prolonged exposition of artistic environment to the dogmatic and propagandistic discourses. None of these two categories of reasons benefits from some theoretical manifesto, nor would we dare to speak about a visible and assumed argumentation of the theatrical community in their favor. But, in fact, these roots of perception, representation and attitude about “*what theatre does, or has to do*” continually work and nourish, like some invisible pith, the entire establishment of mainstream – public financed – theatre in Romania. With some significant exceptions, most of them born after 1997 and belonging to younger writers, directors, actors and critics who expressed their intention to work freely in independent companies, or to accidentally co-produce with public ones, the implication of theatre in social, political and activist life of communities is still perceived as a marginal oddity.

The resistance – aesthetically founded – to the debate and reflection of our own personal and collective history, as much as the resistance to the direct response to the everyday life provocative issues, has several historical premises. The public institution of theatre, financed by the centralist state, suffered a slow and continuous process of modernization in the last century, and the communist era was considered by the majority of the

members of artistic communities, if not benefic for the freedom of expression, at least comfortable. Even in the interbellum period, the model of public “repertoire” theatrical institution had not to confront a consistent competition from alternative forms of theatrical discourses, like vanguard companies, independent theatre groups, or political cabaret. After the Second World War, the communist nationalization and the harsh ideological control and censorship made all alternative movement impossible. In the crucial moment 1957<sup>3</sup>, a new generation of stage directors (such as Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Giurchescu, Sorana Coroama, Horea Popescu and many others) manages to impose itself in the context of a large theoretical and professional debate run by the *Contemporanul Cultural Magazine* and by the new reborn monthly *Theatre Review*. Afterwards, the theatre performance aesthetics release itself, step by step, from the “socialist realism” dogmatic rules, but also from any obligation of activist implication into the social-political life, and thus manages to protect the theatrical communication from the ideological and propagandistic aggression. The dominance – or even the hegemony – of the stage director’s power over the performance, combined with a more and more sparkling prestige of the “cultural” and “universalistic” value of theatre into the public opinion, produces

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<sup>3</sup> See, on this topic, Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea si retreatralizarea teatrului in Romania. 1920-1960*, Cluj, Editura EIKON, 2003.

a sort of consensus about the functions of theatre itself. More and more, the show is not perceived as a public form of usual entertainment, nor as a public arena of debate, but as a escapist shelter, where both artists and spectators can exercise their small but substantial part of freedom by – what is called then, and it is called till now – “cultural resistance”. In this process, the theatrical discourse becomes more and more abstract, allegoric, inter-textual – very much similar to an academic essay of philosophical, metaphorical literature: basically, lyric. The super-ego of the stage director – seen as the one and only master of the theatrical experience –, and the super-reality of the stage artificial universe, melt together in huge, complex and expensive productions, with captive spectators inside.

What the 60<sup>th</sup> founders intended to be a normal and healthy process of authentic theatrical freedom expression, including the challenge of the spectator’s imagination and direct reflexivity, became after 1990 an *undeclared canon of aesthetical self sufficiency*. This phenomenon of “canonization” was widened by the enthusiastic reaction of the western audiences, confronted in the first years after the 1989 revolution with a perfectly exotic product exported by the eastern countries: “*Le Theatre D’Art*”, as in its Russian definition from 1920, but with a concentrated century of cultural-artistic-philosophical experience inside. Acclaimed from Paris to London and from New York to Tokyo, the great Romanian performances labeled by directors like Silviu Purcarete, Alexandru Darie, Tompa

Gabor, Mihai Maniutiu and others, returned home and became not only the foundations for Romanian theatrical brands, but also a kind of new-academism norm: “that’s how theatre does, that’s how theatre has to be”.

But, the second root of the lack of interest for historical and social reflection and intervention has, we have to say it clearly, a political dimension, even if it is a contextual one. Subconsciously, the theatrical establishment and its captive oldish audiences perceive all direct reflection to recent past – and to present even more – as leftist political gestures, fearing both propaganda and “commercialism”. That’s why we called this level of representation and causes “an allergic reaction”. Paradoxically, in the same time, the theatrical mainstream community manifested a constant rejection of any liberal reform of theatre institutions; but it conserved also a constant self sufficient rightist attitude about theatre’s means, themes and functions. Recent history, past debates, actual controversy topics and issues were expelled till recently from Romanian stages as vulgar and suspect of the capital sin: politically leftist tendencies. In a society dominated for decades by former communists moguls dressed in Armani costumes, the mainstream theatre people and their audiences are ashamed to question social structures and political developments, acting like a fashionable undeclared Tory club, where prestige and aristocratic fame is founded on theatre products box-office on western festivals market.

## 2. Arguments and themes for a change in attitude and in methods. The theatrical education as re-linking research to creation.

At this point, is really important to mention that the mutation of the mentalities and representations in terms of “what theatre does and has to do” begun after 1997, pointed out by some critics and playwrights, such as Marian Popescu, Alina Nelega, Radu Macrinici, Miruna Runcan. But two factors contributes to this shift also: in the artistic environment, the completely different orientation of the new generation of film directors, protected and encouraged by Lucian Pintilie ( first, Nae Caranfil, then Cristian Mungiu, Cristi Puiu, Radu Muntean, to cite just the few internationally known now). Their productions stated firmly a direct social implication, and also an assumed critical perspective on the Romanian past, especially on communist era and its consequences. On the other hand, the mutation on mentalities, attitudes and theatrical practices become really consistent and fruitful only when a new generation of audiences – not marked by the old canon, raised and educated in freedom – grew up. Of course, it is futile to draw a clear cut between old and young audiences in theatre, without a

sociological and psychological support of field researches and academic application. Still, it seems obvious that new drama and new performing arts forms couldn't be perceived as such become a substantial alternative without the younger audience's needs and support.

Alexandru Dabija, maybe the only important stage director of the eighty's generation who directly participated at this change, declared one, in a press conference: “I do not say that a dislike the metaphorical and allegorical style of theatre that me and my generation use to make. I like to see it, sometimes I even love it, but I cannot stage it anymore”. But, maybe more eloquent is the apparition of a new theoretical concept, born simultaneously in the public works and essays of a playwright and a stage director, Alina Nelega and Radu Alexandru Nica<sup>4</sup>: the so called “*de-theatricalisation*”. The concept is invented in opposition with the “*theatricalisation*” of theatre, a term used by the press debate on theatre directing in 1957, documented in a book of theatre history published in 2003<sup>5</sup>. Alina Nelega, a constant fighter for new playwrighting formulas and a stubborn constructor of debate platforms on alternative theatrical expression, uses the concept as a weapon: theatre has to re-link with real life, has to

<sup>4</sup> Alina Nelega, ‘Intoarcearea dramaturgului: resuscitarea tragicului si deteatralizarea teatrului’, in *Observator cultural*, nr. 269, November 24, 2005, and Radu Alexandru Nica, ‘Noul realism si deteatralizarea’, in *Man.In.Fest*, nr. 2, 2006.

<sup>5</sup> Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea si retreatralizarea teatrului in Romania. 1920-1960*, Cluj, Editura EIKON, 2003.

suffer a nearly ascetic process of poverty on its imagery, by turning back to the simple story foundation, to human direct experiences and to consistent depth of the spoken word. It is exactly what their most known recent plays – as *Hess* (2005), or *Amalia takes a deep breath* (2006) – do, reinterpreting social experiences from personal historical experiences bases. On the other hand, Radu Alexandru Nica, whose interest for new plays was proved by a bunch of well received performances, refers to “*de-theatricalisation*” as to an instrument to produce a fresh relationship between the performance and its audiences, a renewed syncretistic dimension of perception, founded both by the urgency of problematic content and by the almost cinematic dynamic of “editing” the staging processes. That’s why, for example, one of his most acclaimed productions, *The Ballroom* (scenario by Mihaela Michailov, 2007), based on the Ettore Scolla’s idea of a space that contains an imaginary life of its own, resuming collective and personal history experience, becomes a non-verbal show, whose fragmentary composition and dramatic personal loading becomes, on music and dance grounds, an epopee re-interpreting the history of a Transylvanian town, with maximal emotional effect.

Even if the two artists seem to have different angles in putting a meaning into the “*de-theatricalisation*” concept, one thing is clear: a new, alternative perspective

made room, the last decade, opposing to the allegorical canon of mainstream theatre a strongly consistent effort of rewriting and reinterpreting on stage social and historical problems and issues, for fresh audiences interested in a more direct and (as Habermas would say) “*communication actions*”<sup>6</sup>. But such a shift of direction in alternative theatre forms and formulas, supposes not only intuitions and talent, but also a change of perspective regarding the relationship between history and everyday life, as much as between methods and techniques of social and inter-personal research. That’s where the theatre educational (and academic research) system has to assist and serve. If we start by realizing the fact that each spectator and each theatre person is, first of all, a citizen of the post-industrial media society, the fact that we share the same social, political and communicational benefits and aggressions, the necessity of re-linking social research to theatrical and media experimentations becomes instantly not only clear, but also urgent.

This new philosophy of educational and academic research practices emerged simultaneously in Bucharest and Cluj, at the beginning of 2003. A small group of actual and former students in stage directing – from the Theatre University of Bucharest – founded, with the support of their professor Nicu Manda, a program meant to encourage the new and young

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<sup>6</sup> Habermas, Jurgen, *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, NY/London, Beacon Press, 1985.

playwrights to scan and document actual social-psychological issues. Entitled “*dram Acum*” (a words game between “*Drama*” and “*Now*”) the program ho still exists is in the same time a process of selection for new talents, a continuous bunch of creative writing workshops and also a system of staging the plays in their final and improved forms. The initial team of young directors grew, and eventually started different other interventionist theatre programs, such as *Tanga Project*, or *The Offensive of Generosity*, meant to revitalize and help pauper communities, marginal groups or orphans by involving them in theatre performances built particularly in these goals. Meantime, some of their best theatrical accomplishments managed to travel and gained an international recognition, such as *Stop the Tempo* or *MadyBaby.ro*, written and directed by Gianina Carbuariu, or *The Sunshine Play* by Peca Stefan, directed by Ana Margineanu, to cite only the most famous.

In Cluj, first under the umbrella of both an independent company, Teatrul Imposibil, and of the Faculty of Theatre and Television, another group of students and professors, who also previously founded the alternative performing arts magazine *ManInFest*, started in 2004 a research-creation program dedicated to young writers, journalists, stage directors and video artists, namely *The Everyday Life Drama*. Its goals: to re-link and educate the team working of media and theatre people on one hand, to document, report and process in artistic fictional scenarios the sensitive and dramatic stories of everyday life.

### **3. Everyday Life Drama Research and Creation Program. Hypothesis, field experiences and actual results.**

The research and creation program *Everyday Life Drama* was born in 2004, as an interdisciplinary project with two immediate and even urgent dimensions: the first one was to re-link the playwriting practices to the social and political context, after more the one decade of aesthetical escapism and symbolical dominance of the theatre directing in Romania; the second one was the need of renewal in educational methods, by joining together the students from different programs, in a common effort of re-building a coherent perspective about their lives and their discourses. The program combines the workshops for video-journalism, creative writing in media and theatre, and photo-journalism, but also direct anthropological field research, in a research camp of ten days, each of the last five years. The importance of the program is that it offers each year a new bunch of artistic products: video-productions and documentaries, plays and film scenarios, written reports and interviews, photo exhibitions. From 2007, the theme is “*X-Men & Women Generation*”. Next year, the interest of the team will focus on the ways recent history – and especially the communist period – was absorbed by the young people representations.

One of the leading sources of the program was the – now classical – work of the Canadian anthropologist and sociologist Erwing Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), and

particularly the key concepts of “*social acting roles*”, “*symbolic interaction*” and “*dramaturgical analysis*”. But, in the same time, the elaboration of directions and methodologies were strongly inspired by the effectiveness of other Romanian groups works, especially the Bucharest sociologists and anthropologists (coordinated by Professor Zoltan Rostas and his assistant Sorin Stoica) who documented by means of interviews some recent history topics like the Second World War, the dramatic passing from democracy to communism in the fifties, the condition of women in communism era. Also, a great impulse was given to us by the anthropological journalists group coordinated by Professor Ruxandra Cesereanu, who published several volumes of interviews and reports dedicated to Romanian resistance to communism, or to every day life rituals, behaviors and marginal communities in Cluj.

But, to be honest, the most important model of research we had in mind was an older one, and – in a way – it represented for us the most precious tradition we had to, modestly, continue: that is the sociological field researches that Dimitrie Gusti and his team conducted between 1935-1938 in the Arges and Valcea Counties, for documenting the economical, institutional status, family systems and ethnographic production of countryside’s people. This monumental and courageous collective work on discovery and archive constitutes till now one of the most brilliant examples of dedication and intervention in the social, anthropological and artistic fields.

First of all, the group focused on its three goals: to reconfigure the relations between the field research and the experimental creation of artistic personal projects, to find and document sensitive and urgent social phenomena and sensitive issues by collecting personal stories, to transform all this material in convincing and emotionally powerful cultural products. If possible, we hoped the products to be aesthetically fresh and well done.

Moreover, we had to build a methodology in progress, combining team-building sessions, workshops and trainings for field research, for creative writing in media and theatre, and for rewriting the scenarios in inter-personal relationship writer-director, in order to see them staged. Working together and developing individual potential is a hard process, but it worth to be done, especially when one starts from a shared idea and focuses one’s energies on a generous and creative experience.

Last but not least, the group had to find and agree on a paradigmatic theme of the research, capable to coagulate the interests of each member. The first stage – between 2004 and 2006 – we choused to focus on the most dramatic and traumatic problems Romania confronts our days: the working migration and its effects on the home-staying individuals involved, on families and communities. It was then considered that more than two million Romanian people were – legally or illegally working abroad. They are, most probably, more today.

We started this three years long journey with a research camp in a small village in the northern county of Maramures, Baiut, where a three centuries old mine was to be closed. We have to admit now the beginnings were really modest: the team was small, inexperienced, without any technical and financial support; thus, we obtained no significant results, except a bunch of written interviews, reports and non fictional stories. The next year, we choused a town in the same county, Baia Mare. The group grew, coagulate and begun to forge an improved methodology, developing teambuilding and trust exercises, and extending the creative writing workshops. We had our first consistent results in playwriting, with two plays, one of them becoming the scenario for an experimental short fiction movie. Then, we moved in our third year to south, again in a mining county, settling a partnership with the local theatre of Targu Jiu. We managed to produce our first small documentaries, video reports and interviews, but also to publish, in the ManInFest special issue, four plays inspired by the personal stories the interviews revealed.

The second stage of the program produced a significant change both in choosing the new theme and also in the complexity of the methods and techniques. For this new level, we managed to receive a small but important support from the University, and we were awarded a grant from the Ministry of Culture. The new and ambitious theme was – what we called – *The X-men & Women Generation*,

trying to scan and analyze the profound mutations produced by the technological developments in psychology, behavior and interpersonal communication of teenagers and young people, as much as their universe of representations. The fourth edition of the Everyday Life Drama Camp took place once more in Targu Jiu, but was largely preceded, a couple of month before, by workshop in focus group conducting, different types of interviewing, story selection and dramaturgical development of conflict situations and characters. The resulting material, in media and drama, were visibly more consistent and aesthetically valid. This new methodology was continued and improved at the fifth edition, now taking place in Targu Mures, in partnership with an independent theatre company, *Teatrul 74* and with the Theatre Arts University of Targu Mures. A new and generous location, an extended team of 22 students, 2 journalists and 3 professors, as much as a better video equipment offered, probably, the ground for an unexpected evolution of the results: six video reports, documentaries and portraits, a large section of written journalism and 18 fresh and stylistic different new plays and scenarios, all published in only a month after the camp, in a 114 pages special issue of *ManInFest*.

How do young people react and represent themselves in the actual post-communist society? What kind of images do they have about the recent past, especially related to the socialist era? The field of political and social representations

of youngsters seems blurred, and the so called “refuse of civic implication” of the new generations became a stereotype of daily conversations between adults, school teachers and media anchors. In real life experiences, this stereotype suffers profound corrections: a strange interest for religious experiences tends to fill the gap of the political distaste; the urban groups of teenagers in Romania, especially the male ones, reveal a flexible universe of representations and a particular rhetoric of discourses, built on fragmentary quotations from popular culture, parody of media clichés and a lot of paradoxical sadness related to the recent past – including their intra familial experiences. But, this uncomfortable combination – “Kill Bill”-like – is not entirely escapist and does not exclude the accuracy of social observations.

What our interviews, focus groups and story collecting process really did, in two successive editions was, first of all, to modify in a discreet but determined way, our first hypothesis. For example, we expected girls and young women to communicate more freely and more enthusiastically than young men. On the contrary, we hardly found young women willing to freely speak about themselves, about their real life, problems or even tastes. On this matter, Targu Jiu, from the southern side of the country, seemed to be more generous than Targu Mures, from Transylvania. It is, probably, a symptom for the regional differences in customs and education-family systems.

On the other hand, we presumed that young generation suffers from a drastic reduction of vocabulary and verbal communicative skills, due to the continuous and uncontrolled exposure to the computer and internet practices and formats. We were again wrong in some extent, because the field situation proved itself more nuanced and complex. First, we discovered in Targu Mures that teenagers between 14-17 years old were no more so interested in spending hours and hours at their computer desks, but were surprisingly active and involved in direct inter-personal or group pastime.

More, we were charmed by their capacity to combine funny group slang, melting cultural experiences, musical taste and practices, quotations and hints from cartoons, comic books or sports, in some kind of strange and parodist manner.

It doesn't mean we didn't find real and emotionally involving subjects, situations or stories. But the stories do not become theatre or film scenarios by a simple process of translation. Some of the plays of this year's crop were based on media news involving young people or family dramatic crises, some of them even gathered from the morning papers. But news combines one with another, is melt in personal and cultural experiences, the characters combine and stratifies; the dramatic situations create a complex network of significance. That's how, let's say, *Veronica does not decide*, by Andreea Chindris and Alexandra Bacanu (initially inspired by the Tanacu convent's scandal) is born. In the same way, Georgiana Truța

wrote *On the balcony*, or Mihai Gadalean wrote *About Monsters, Mothers and Men*, to mention but a few.

The style, the structure, the ideology or the meaning of each play is different and depend on the authors' imagination, talent and aesthetical preferences. What the program does is to provoke, to stimulate and to develop this skills, to encourage competition balanced by team spirit.

Are young people interested in recent history? When starting this new stage of our research, we used to be very skeptical on this matter. We proved again to be influenced by stereotypes. Young people are not only our field subjects, but also the members of our team. Some of our interviews subjects, as much as some of our colleagues are really interested not only on historical debate, but also on ideological criticism, as *On the house*, by Mihai Pedestru proves. The excellent reactions this play obtained, even during the camp's workshops and readings, determined the whole team to debate the

possibility of using recent past as theme for our next step. Next year, we all will celebrate twenty years from the Berlin Wall fall. How do teens and young people, born after 1990, see themselves in this context? What do they know about? What family stories influenced their perceptions and judgments? How do they feel their lives were influenced by communism, if they still are? How personal past combined with the historical phenomena? How do they integrate the cultural experiences of their parents?

Using this questions as a starting point, the coordinators of the program choused to make an example, an offered to the group a new play dedicated to the parents/children relationship and different perspectives about 1989: *Play List*<sup>7</sup>. Then, we unanimously agreed that young peoples representations on recent past that will be our next theme of research. We want to document it and to work on, the year to come.

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<sup>7</sup> C.C. Buricea-Mlinarcic, 'Play List', in *Man.In.Fest* / Special Issue, October 2008.