

Ministry of Education  
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**Uncomfortable theatre**  
**Political in today's Romanian and Hungarian theatre**

Résumé  
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## 1. Introduction. Uncomfortable Theatre

One of the last scenes of *BLACKland*, a performance presented by the Krétakör Theater in 2004 and relying on SMS-news, stages the torture of detainees in the Abu Ghraib prisons in Iraq. Although the spectator was aware of the theatrical context all along and knew that the abuse seen on the stage was only happening “as if”, and that the actors performing the guards were not really harming the actors playing the prisoners, his own body reacted repulsively to the agony of the other body. When one of the actors playing a guard asked a spectator to hold the video camera with which, according to the directing, the humiliation of the prisoners was filmed (and the magnified, zoomed-in image of the naked bodies was projected on the stagewall), the spectator was called upon in a dual sense: as spectator and as social being.

The spectator had thus two choices. He accepts the camera and cooperates with the torturers, or he rejects the camera, in this manner objecting against the staged atrocities, or he finds another way to sabotage the situation, for instance, by accepting the camera, but not turning it towards the actors. In other words, he could be the well-mannered spectator and succumb to the directing, or, as a spoilsport, undermine it. Nonetheless, is it possible to decide what the directing expects from us in this situation? Obedience or action? And what is more important, to meet the expectations of our host artists, whatever those may be, or to disrupt the theatrical situation, ignore the other protagonists – actors, spectators – of the performance and resort to action? Would that not turn us into the ‘Southern yokel’ who rushes to the stage to save Desdemona from Othello’s suffocating grip? And if we do nothing, are we not becoming silent accomplices? There was no time for pondering.

The spectator called upon during the performance of *BLACKland* I have seen (on 8 October 2005, during the Dialog Festival in Wrocław), accepted the camera without further ado and the show continued without interruption. Nevertheless, the inner dismay I felt during the performance stuck with me after the show as well, albeit I was not the one approached by the guard-playing Nagy Zsolt. I was outraged that the directing exposed the spectator to theatrical etiquette and, because of this, I viewed *BLACKland* as a bad production. Later, however, I realised that in order to awaken the moral responsibility of the spectator without succumbing to the boredom of direct moralization, one needs to exploit the characteristics of the particular theatrical situation. The directing did not suggest what should be the “good”

choice, what the creators thought was the correct decision, let alone coerce upon us a certain direction. It changed me without showing me what I needed to become. It brought me into a state where I had to define myself. It pushed me into an identity crisis.

In the past ten years, I have learned to view director Árpád Schilling's above-mentioned scene as the best illustration of uncomfortable theatre. The plays I have seen before *BLACKland*, regardless of their directing and theme, all had the same common denominator: they granted the luxury of spectator passivity and the ensuing illusion of innocence. It certainly happened that I had to change seats in the middle of the play, or that the actors established eye-contact with me, and there were also instances when the thoughts and emotions triggered by the performance lingered on for a while. Nevertheless, none of these instances detached me from the theatrical situation consecrated in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, according to which, as spectator, I had no other duty than silently watch and assist to the actors' performance. In an era where our perception is shaped by the media, the spectator's silent vow of suspension of disbelief is more and more problematic. To be sure, we suspend our disbelief when we watch a war movie or when we shoot at each other on a playstation. Precisely because of the mediated character of the experience, learning of real tragedies through the same screens is not at all that different. The theatre's loss of ground in the face of the media is closely linked to the suspension of disbelief: it is easier to yield to media products, the experience they offer is stronger, but it is also safer, they can be turned off at any time. Ultimately, we lose connection with ourselves: we do not know what we would feel, if we only had to hold the camera, while a fellow human being was being tortured. In this context, it happens more and more often today that theatre, instead of offering us the anticipated entertaining experience, chooses a theatrical form that forces us to abandon our very own indifference, unconsciousness and independence. This kind of theatre pushes the spectator into the uncertainty of perception, comparable to the vigilance of a predator, simultaneously watching the prey and guarding its own safety.

## 2. The Object and Methods of Research

Recent productions of the Hungarian and Romanian theatre, creating a comparable crisis situation - which I call uncomfortable theatre -, have been the inspiration for my work. Namely: Gianina Cărbunariu's *Stop the tempo*, *Sado Maso Blues Bar* and *20/20*, as well as Árpád Schilling's *The Party (A Párt)*. Living at the meeting-point of Romanian and Hungarian culture, I view both as my own, self-same, natural context, which does not need to be divided – Transylvania is halfway between Bucharest and Budapest, both literally and figuratively speaking. I chose these performances on the basis of my subjective, spectatorial experience; my choices were not theoretically contaminated. There was no preceding criteria on the basis of which I decided what I *liked* (we will return to this term later on). In reality, my interest towards socially sensitive artistic manifestations and political theatre were shaped by the theatrical experiences and literature reviews of the past ten years. In other words, I first found the object of my liking, and only later the language, that allows me to talk about it.

This language was born out of the theories of two major personalities of contemporary European theater sciences, Erika Fischer-Lichte and Hans-Thies Lehmann, as well as the theories of the French philosopher Jacques Rancière, all elaborating on the potential ethical-political functions of theatre and art. When examining the various plays and elaborating on their “uncomfortability”, I relied on the following writings of the above-mentioned authors: Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative as Aesthetical Category*, *The Aesthetics of Disruption*, and *The Transformative Power of Performance*; Lehmann's *Postdramatic Theatre* and *Das politische Schreiben*; as well as Rancière's *The Emancipated Spectator*. These studies and books helped me uncover the aesthetic characteristics that, in my view, describe the uncomfortable theatre.

Although I staunchly resisted the temptation to write a thesis purporting itself to be a complete theatrical history work, I could not avoid the impulse of producing a chronological and historical presentation of relevant theories. The first part of my research elaborates on the relevant works of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht as well as on the theatre of the Romanian communist dictatorship period. In particular, the focused revisiting of those works of Piscator and Brecht proved useful, which established, in the first half of the twentieth century, the

concept of political theatre. These works elucidate on significant aspects of the contemporaneous meaning of the “political”. For instance, they show why Brecht, rather than Piscator – who first used the “political theatre” denomination –, is the most important contemporary reference in this respect. Reading these works also brought to light compelling associations with (not necessarily political) phenomena of contemporary theatre, such as various *ars poéticas* of acting techniques. Although these findings may blur thematic and scientific coherence, their elaboration is important, as their present relevance could revive interest in some of the long-shelved studies of theatrical history.

The ideological monitoring exercised by the Romanian communist dictatorship further “enriched” the meaning of political theatre. For this reason, a separate chapter discusses the manner in which state dominance, on one hand, and aesthetic, art-driven community-building endeavors, on the other, clashed in the period’s theatrical performances. When I started my research, I did not think much of this subject, as I was of the view that the chance for the political to be created is lost where political power strives for control. Nonetheless, while examining specific cases of ideological monitoring, I realized: the particular mediality of theatre, the futility of censoring the performance as an event becomes apparent when the content physically appearing on stage (text, gesture, etc.) is being moulded by powers foreign to art. Simply put, the very essence of theatre came to light just when theatre-making, as an artistic, free creation became impossible. Researching this period also revealed that the theatrical profession showed indifference – discontent? remorse? – towards and turned away from what it saw as the bargaining between theatres and ideological monitoring, although these provide abundant documentation regarding the operation of the period’s theatres and the circumstances of their creative effort. A further question that surfaced while researching this period deals with the impact of the 1989 regime-change: if it is not viewed as a clear dividing line, but as a milestone, then how did the sanctimonious criticism of social realism, coerced upon creators without their informed consent during the communist regime, influence the post-1989 theatre’s need for reality?

The reason for examining the contemporary phenomena is to understand the type of communication strategies created by these plays, and, correspondingly: why we *like* uncomfortable theatre? What causes the spectator’s *joy* and how does the attractiveness that turns uncomfortable performances into an inescapably important factor of today’s theatre, come about? The meaning of inescapable in this context deserves particular attention, as two

of the authors examined herein are repeatedly excluded, as “independent” and “young” artists from the mainstream of their own domestic theatrical institutions and from professional awards. For our purposes, it is inescapably important. Or: “In my view, the highlight of the decade is Gianina Cărbunariu’s *Stop the tempo*, every single line of which resonates in my emotions and thoughts, in my brain and in my chest.” (Popovici 2011) Or: “Nowadays it is evident that one of Schilling’s indisputable merits is that, every year, he transforms virtually anybody into theatre-goer, and moreover: into someone who honestly and courageously ponders on what he has seen, and he immediately reacts to it, or, in some cases, criticises it.” (Nagy 2007)

*Stop the tempo*, *Sado Maso Blues Bar* and the *20/20*, as well as *The Party* use very different mechanisms to make us feel uncomfortable. *Stop...* and *Sado...* primarily rely on the use of space to apprise the spectator that collective social reality cannot be left behind, as a mere coat in the cloakroom. The performance of space (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 151) dominates Cărbunariu’s both plays (put on stage in 2003 and 2007, respectively), and both suggest that space is what its use turns it into. It is more than geometrical delineation: it is also a meeting point, it is also a cultural context. “Or because of its nature it is not a work of art, but an event.” (ibid. 160) *Stop...* (as environmental theatre) gets its particular spatiality from the place of the performance (the Green Hours Bar in Bucharest) and from the fact that the theatrical scenes are also real-life outing places. This concurrence is thoroughly exploited by the directing to blend merge fiction into the spectator’s physical reality. The set of *Sado...* is built into one of the display windows of the Bucharest-based Very Small Theatre (Teatrul Foarte Mic) building. For the spectators sitting inside, the outside world becomes part of the spectacle through this window. For the urban users passing by, the spectators blend into the display. *20/20* and *The Party* each presents a painful facet of current Romanian and Hungarian society, respectively. The multilingual *20/20* was produced in the Yorick Studio with Romanian and Hungarian actors and it focused on the March 1990 Romanian-Hungarian ethnic clashes of Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş. The theme of the performance was the recollection of those events and the relationship of the two ethnic groups in a context where inter-ethnicity is both a defining and a destabilizing factor. *The Party*, presented on the eve of Hungary’s 2014 parliamentary elections,<sup>1</sup> puts on stage those themes of Hungarian public life that contribute to the decision-making of the voters, as well as those discourses that cut voting

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<sup>1</sup> *The Party* was performed on 27, 28 and 29 March 2014 in Budapest. The parliamentary elections were held on 6 April.

desire short, because of their failure to provide worthwhile alternatives for election. The latter two performances thus clearly raise the question whether the representation of politics is enough for the politics of representation. (Kricsfalusi 2014: 11)

My thesis also touches upon benchmarks of international theatre - for instance: the performances of the Swiss directing collective, Rimini Protokoll; or the productions of the Russian documentary theatre, Teatr.doc – which could also be interpreted as political phenomena. Although these performances are unquestionably important, the fact that, in my case, they were only accessible in a technically transmitted format, rendered them outside the focus of my research, as the temporal and spatial distance separating me from the event, precluded the very proximity of perception - the fundamental feature of the uncomfortable theatre. A recording only shows the stage-centred angle of the play, it does not fully deliver the theatrical event. The proximate accessibility of a production also meant that I always noted the fresh experience of the event, and I never judged my own insights, I simply supplemented the line of thinking I began earlier, and I linked the more novel, relevant literature to it. It is the purpose of this work to show how the directing strategies of political theatre changed with the productions put on stage two-three years apart from each other. For instance, how these strategies changed from the found space, through the adaptation of contemporary, concrete social issues, into ideology-free mobilization. This change also shows that the political theatre of these two speech-areas (or this bilingual area) also has a visible process and conscious creative strategies, and it is not a mere whim, it is not the incidental mimicking of Western tendencies.

Certainly, the palette of contemporary Romanian and Hungarian political theatre is wider than the performances herein discussed. The shows selected for analysis in this work have not been chosen as the most illustrious examples of that palette, but rather as the attempt of the present author to contribute to the professional debate generated by the ever-increasing scientific attention for political theatre.

### 3. From Crisis to the Politics of Perception. Literature Review

For the purpose of this research, the political of the theatre is understood as the politics of perception (Hans-Thies Lehmann), the efficacy of dissensus (Jacques Rancière) and the aesthetics of disruption (Erika Fischer-Lichte). The following paragraphs review and corroborate the relevant theories of the above-mentioned three authors.

First and foremost, let us return to the question raised in the Introduction: what generates *liking* of such artwork-events as the previously mentioned scene of BLACKland, seen, from the perspective of reception, as a state of crisis?

Discussing the avant-garde theatre, theatre researcher Magdolna Jákfalvi asserted that the balancing game of “*voluptas* born out of tradition” (delectation) and the “convention-widening *curiositas*” (curiosity) (2006: 21) tips the scale in favour of the latter and answers the question “why does one watch the other, that other who plays another? (...) what creates the joy of watching? (ibid. 10) Jákfalvi searches for the genre-specific characteristics of joy, and, on the subject of reception mechanisms construed through the spectator’s physical corporality, raises the question: “is it a good watching, if it hurts?” The same question is raised in relation to uncomfortable theatre as well.

Let us take a step back from the joy characteristic to theatre and look for a more general definition of this emotion. According to the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner – who borrows the *flow* concept from the psychologist Mihály Csíkszentmihályi and the anthropologist John J. MacAloon -, the most important feature of the optimal experience (we use this term as a synonym for joy) “is not teamwork (...), but *being* together ” (Turner 1974: 79), i.e. the *communitas*. This “Essential We” (as Turner refers to Martin Buber, ibid. 77) is a liminal phenomenon, thus transitional, in the sense that it exists, temporarily, in its own independent time, and also in the sense that it causes change.

The transformation, however, “may be for many the acme of insecurity” (idem), thus painful, or at least uncomfortable – and this eases the apparent contradiction between uncomfortable theatre and spectatorial joy. This independent time is the time of the ritual, “in which there is little distinction (...) between past, present, and future” (ibid. 87) To put it differently: “a distinguished present, which carries the past within and projects the future.” –



avers midwife Ágnes Geréb referring to birth, the most important transitional state of human life. (2011) Turner also links birth with the *communitas* as the ultimate encounter: “Has it any reality base, or is it a persistent fantasy of mankind, a sort of collective return to the womb?” (Turner 1974: 76) The authenticity of the *flow* does not necessarily stem from the content, the (self) goal is the experience, in the interest of which “people will culturally manufacture situations which will release flow.” (ibid. 89) According to Turner, in the context of tribal societies, the *flow* was born from the ritual, but since the industrial revolution it occurs in leisure activities, such as the arts. (idem) Overall, when we refer to the genre-specific joy-potential of theatre, we also signify humanity’s “species-specific” capacity- and need for joy.

The performance of Marina Abramović, serving as departure point for Erika Fischer-Lichte’s aesthetics of performance, can also be characterised as a state of crisis that carries both the possibility of flow and the peak of uncertainty within. On the occasion of her 1975 production, *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović wounded herself and bled until the spectators could not bear her palpable suffering anymore and ended it – equally concluding the artistic event itself. (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 9-11) In this case, such a borderline instance of perception was brought about by the necessity of the spectator to decide whether he behaves as a gallery-attendant and waits passively for the unforeseeable conclusion of the “work of art”, or yields to his inherent altruism and rushes to the aid of a fellow human being. Fundamental humaneness overpowered the centuries-old decorum of reception.

The aesthetics of performance explores new interpretive horizons and corresponding concepts to grasp the *event*-ness of various contemporary artworks. Interpretation might not even be the right term; we should instead refer to sensing, comprehending and transforming, as the very particularity of performance lies in its ability to annul our performance-related, established categories: expression as the creator’s act and the meaning-creative act of reception accomplished through interpretation of the expressed content. “The performance becomes a work of art – an object of *aesthetics* – not because of the work on which it is based, but as a result of the event, as which it happens.” (ibid. 45) The nature of the happening event is uncertain and transitional. In contrast with traditional theatre, where the actor renounces his identity to transform into another during the show, and where the spectator preserves himself unaltered during the suspension of disbelief, the theatrical performance articulated as an event brings its spectator into a transitional state of crisis. Performance turns the spectators into co-creators, who cannot remain neutral anymore: the safe distance of perception is replaced by

proximate (own) bodily sensations. “Theatre switches to the paradigm of aesthetic experience as sensory, bodily experience.” (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 67) According to Hans-Thies Lehmann, perception and personal experience is the re-weaving of the threads broken by transmission by media. The re-linking of the address-and-answer relationship creates not only an aesthetic, but also an ethical-political dimension of the theatre. “The politics of theatre, however, is to be sought in the manner of its *sign usage*. The politics of theatre is a *politics of perception*. (...) which could at the same time be called an *aesthetic of responsibility (or response-ability)*”<sup>2</sup> (Lehmann 2006:185) It is not only that the apparent difference between aesthetics and politics is dissolved, but also that the aesthetics of performance amalgamates “art, societal life and politics” (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 68) solely as a result of the “role-changing triggered by common physical presence” (ibid. 57)

In this context, what does politics mean? “Issues that we call “political” have to do with social power.” (Lehmann 2006: 175) Lehmann’s definition of the term is thus broader than its colloquial meaning. His definition echoes that of contemporary political scientists, who differentiate between politics and political: on one hand, the multifarious exercise and empirical space of politics, and, on the other, political theory, concentrating on the very essence of politics. The latter, the political “focuses on the mode through which society is created.” (Mouffe 2011: 25) “It is not through the direct thematisation of the political that theatre becomes political, but through the implicit substance and critical value of its mode of representation.”<sup>3</sup> (Lehmann 2006: 178) In contrast with the meaning of “political theatre” as introduced by Erwin Piscator in the first half of the twentieth century, Lehmann’s “political theatre” does not propagate any noble political thought; instead, it breaks the political discourse (Lehmann 2002: 17)

How does such a rupture come about and how can an aesthetical work that does not define itself as a political performer, have such a subversive effect? It is not meant to engage in the power-seeking and power-maintaining act of politicisation. “‘Aesthetic efficiency’ means a paradoxical kind of efficiency that is produced by the very rupturing of any determinate link between cause and effect.” (Rancière 2009: 63) Dissensus, as formulated by

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<sup>2</sup> In German: „Ästhetik der Ver-antwortung”. (Lehmann 1999: 471) Translated into English by Karen Jörs-Munby.

<sup>3</sup> The theatre researcher Gabriella Kiss translates the term „political” in the Hungarian „politikus”, which clearly distinguishes the Lehmann concept from other connotations of „political”. The Hungarian term does not, however, have an English equivalent.

Rancière, “the rupture of regularity makes the rule apparent – just as the miracle reveals the normal, mercifulness shows the law, and the happening highlights the trivial.” (Lehmann 2002: 17) It is not the dissentive content of overcoming the taboo or of dissensus that questions power relations – the evidence of perceptible facts -; it is rather the “disconnected community between two sensoria” (Rancière 2009: 64) that achieves that result. Therefore, it is important to note that the authenticity of overcoming the taboo is not the result of its dialecticalism, or of the fact that it happens in return to something, it is rather the departure from the obvious, which shows the same but differently, re-structured, in a new formulation. The “passion for the real” is characterised by productive subtraction<sup>4</sup> rather than destruction. (Badiou 2007: 48) Evident power does not merely refer to the legal or military (state) power or determinative political powers, but also denotes the unconsciously functioning order as well, such as the established practice and -reading of the theatre. The theatre that self-reflexively uses its own particular mediality and the simultaneous presence of actor and spectator, triggers, through the “aesthetics of disruption” (Fischer-Lichte 2012) a form of reception that lets “the freely wandering gaze of the spectator to create its own show.” (ibid. 67) In this case, overcoming the taboo happens with the unexpected alteration of the rules of the game, rewriting this way the reception limits of the spectator, his own receptive self. The “true joy of risk-free danger” (Jákfalvi 2006: 26) is replaced by the dreaded joy of transformation. Dreaded, because in this change we bid farewell to our earlier state, our identity, to face the irrational fear of the unknown. Liminality, as the general characteristic of the ritual, “may be the scene of disease, despair, death, suicide, the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well defined socialities and bonds.” (Turner 1974: 78)

In this sense, every contemporary performance, which, by way of the politics of perception and aesthetics of disruption, allows us to experience change, the natural and sacred passage of time, is a *rite de passage* that helps the ritual function of the theatre: it helps us live. “We experience what we are and what is happening to us as a community, as the continuously flowing interaction of actor and spectator – and through this, I believe, we truly experience the timeless festivity of theatre.” (Gadamer 1995: 43) Accordingly, the political

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<sup>4</sup> The theory of subtraction relates back to the Roman numbers and it provides the value of numbers by putting the lower digit before the higher, in order to subtract the former from the latter: 4=IV, 990=XM, etc.

theatre is a cultural performance, “characterised not by referentiality, but by the dominance of the performative function.” (Fischer-Lichte 1999: 57)

#### 4. Political Theatre in the First Half of the Twentieth Century

In this research, I examined various writings of Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht with the purpose of finding the origins of the contemporary definition of the “political”. In this respect, I view Erwin Piscator’s collected studies of *The Political Theatre* and Bertolt Brecht’s writings, especially *The Messingkauf Dialogues* as seminal works of the political theatre. When it comes to Piscator, I looked beyond the Marxist mind-set of the “red-revue director” (Kékesi 2007: 174) and searched for that sense of purpose, which aimed at transforming the spectator, victim of socio-economic trends, into a man of action. Piscator was aware that such a metamorphosis could not happen only as a result of the message of a performance. The countless innovations of the Proletar Theatre and the Piscator Theatre (the stage built on a rotating platform; the conveyor belt; the movie insets; the building of the “total theatre” designed by Walter Gropius), particularly the unmitigated, strong, unequivocal, straightforward, affectation-free (Piscator 1963: 42-43) artistic performance as well as the text, often relying on news-articles, everyday events, were all meant to push further the established boundaries of reception of the bourgeois theatre of illusion. “As many other authors of the historical avant-garde, Piscator did not see the political message as separable or distinguishable from the context of transmission.” (Kricsfalusi 2011: 84)

The political nature of art is an ethical imperative for Piscator. After he notes that bourgeois individualism „lies beneath a marble slab inscribed The Unknown Soldier” (Piscator 1963: 71), Piscator concludes that contemporaneous theatre should stop minding “the interesting hero” (ibid. 72) and should concentrate on the human being, as a political factor, a political being. Accordingly, in his definition of politics, the director of the Proletar Theatre inadvertently relies on the ancient Greek origins of European culture. In fact, he derives the main concept of his artistic creed from the etymological roots of ancient Greek: “this reality is a political (πολις – all-inclusive - elementary) reality” (ibid. 36), and he indirectly alludes to the Aristotelian political animal (‘zoon politikon’). In 1961, towards the end of his career, he himself differentiates between the ethical-political dimension and political mobilization: “This theatre used to be called ‘political theatre’; today I would rather call it ‘ideological theatre’.” (ibid. 153)

“Piscator undertook the most radical experiment to create a didactic theatre.” – states Brecht (1969: 142). Brecht defined himself as a follower of Piscator: “It is Piscator’s merit

that theatre turned towards the political, and without this, one could not imagine the playwright's theatre." (Brecht 1969: 331-332) Brecht wished to unify the entertainment value of the bourgeois theatre of illusion with the didactic value merely "affixed" to Piscatorian theatre. According to Brecht, these two functions of his period's theatre were marked by a mutually endangering and -invalidating co-existence: the "didactic" divides, while entertainment benumbs the public. (Brecht 1969: 146)

The duality created by the materialisation of the co-existence of stage and audience in two parallel dimensions is a particularity of the mediality of theatre and is seen by Brecht as progress-generative: the represented and the representation puts actor and spectator in two, ontologically completely different, yet concurrently present, valid appropriate situations. The portrayal of the relationship between the eyewitness account of a traffic accident and his audience highlights a very different model of the theatrical situation. (Brecht 1969: 371-383) The emphasis is not on the traffic accident, as it occurred in the past, but on its present illustration and on the changing opinion of those curious to hear the story. In other words, the very act of transmission, as social intervention, becomes decisive.

"The new theatre belongs to those who took upon to help themselves. (...) The V-effect is social regulation." (Brecht 1969: 396) For Brecht, the theory of alienation warrants the disintegration of the self-explanatory, only to gain new coherence in the process of restructuring, and to resurrect as a "new understanding" (Brecht 1969: 395), by provoking an active reaction from the spectator, the individual. Aesthetic efficacy is the image of its own linear functioning, nourished, since Schiller, by the bourgeois theatre of illusion, culminating in Piscator's theatre, and, ultimately, encountering the dissensus, the efficacy of disruption in Brecht's theatre. Although we must agree with Erika Fischer-Lichte, that the aesthetics of disruption "has little in common" with the montage-concepts of the Piscatorian and Brechtian theatre, striving to evoke previously established changes in the spectator, (2012: 67) we also need to concede that the efficacy of the V-effect in the present "global spectacle-industry" (Debord 2004) obtains new validity. In an era when media seizes social power and theatricalises all of its spheres, to quote Lehmann, it "creates a radical distance for passive viewing: the bond between perception and action, receiving message and "answerability", is dissolved." (Lehmann 2006: 184) In this context, the theatre able to self-reflect on its medial particularities and thusly sabotage the realisation of the traditional spectatorial function, validates the Brechtian legacy.

## 5. The Political in the Theatre under the Pressure of Politics

“Ideological theatre” is a political activity in the sense that it serves a particular political standpoint, the influence of which it aims to strengthen through message-transmission, through the pedagogic model of artistic efficacy. (Rancière 2009: 60-61) The failure of the model becomes particularly apparent in its own, self-defeating excesses, such as the ideological monitoring of theatre undertaken during the four decades of the Romanian communist dictatorship. For examining this period, I relied on the works of Liviu Malița, Marian Popescu and other researchers, on the minutes of the so-called “visionings” (illustrative rehearsals) and on the interviews I conducted with attestants of the period. I focused mainly on the Romanian-Hungarian theatre (in particular, the National Hungarian Theatre of Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu-Gheorghe), for two reasons: first, the relevant, impressively thorough Romanian literature does not cover this theme, and, secondly, the governmental control of the Romanian-Hungarian theatre uncovered characteristics that were not necessarily apparent in the Romanian theatre.

At the outset, we need to note that the expectations of social realism were nothing else but deceptive requirements, as they only permitted the beautified reproduction of domestic reality and the criticism of foreign ideologies. In the 1980s, the list of prohibited terms verged on the irrational: it contained banal words, such as “coffee”, “meat”, respectively “cold”, “dark”, all deemed subversive, the former because of their short supply, the latter as ubiquitous aspects of the spectator’s everyday life. (Malița, 2009b)

In the interest of population education, the state, employing various, institutional and informal organs of ideological monitoring, strived to keep the message of theatre performances under total control, but those proved to be unreliable mediators. This is confirmed by recollections of individual actors, who remember the compulsory domestic socio-realist productions as “always about someone needing to change to become a proper worker. These roles were so stereotypical, that I can barely remember their plot, let alone my own role in them. At best, I recall wearing a pink gown in one or the other...” – declared Emma Elekes, artist of the Nagybánya-/Baia Mare-, and later of the Szatmárnémeti/Satu Mare Theatre. (Boros 2005: 158) The intended message was therefore not efficiently transmitted by the play. At the same time, receptive interpretation created messages that performers did not place as factual, information-like elements in the performance. An illustrious example of this

is provided by the 1983, Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu-Gheorghe production of András Sütő's *Pompás Gedeon* (Pompous Gideon). At the illustrative rehearsal, the president of the ideological committee orders the removal of the first and only recited verse of the "Where are you, Szeklars?" song. In the plot of the play, it is Gideon, the president of the popular council, who forbids the revisionist song. Nonetheless, in the tearful rollicking scene of the third act, it is Gideon himself who strikes up the latter part of that verse: "I entrusted Transilvania to you." (Sütő) The explanation provided by the president of the committee for eliminating the song was that its first verse would remind spectators of the second, not recited in the play: "They took it away - your country does not belong to you." According to the minutes recorded, the president did not quote this verse, he only referred to it. (Sfântu-Gheorghe Office of the National Archives, Record No. 553, File No. 315/1983-1989, 19/1: 7) The propaganda secretary perfectly understood the trap concealed in the communicative functioning of the theatre: the performance, as a hermeneutic whole, does not only entail the content expressed and performed on stage, it is perfected in the spectatorial interpretation. During the 1950s, the regime still saw the popularity, accessibility and comprehensibility of theatre as the greatest merit of this branch of art, because it diverted attention from, among others, religion. For example, in the spring of 1957, when the formerly imprisoned, seen as *persona non grata*, but irresistibly charismatic Catholic bishop Áron Márton visited Kézdivásárhely/Târgu-Secuiesc, the Communist Party prepared an artistic anti-campaign: it organized film projections and productions of the Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş puppet theatre in order to detract the public from seeing the bishop. (Bottoni 2008: 317) By the 1980s, the performativity of the theatrical situation was seen as the greatest danger for the regime: theatre is an uncontrollable communicative process, its effect, the understanding "gained" by it, cannot be overseen.

In 1979, when post-visioning discussions still occurred in a relatively comfortable atmosphere, theatre-director Lajos Sylvester criticised the *Törtetők* (Go-Getters) production, for not having a hidden message. (Szemléltető főpróbák 1978-1979: no page number) This deficiency is precisely the fear of censorship: the "interpretability" of the performance. Party functionaries perfectly understood the manner in which, during the last years of the dictatorship, the rapport-complex, by which the Hungarian minority struggled to defend its spiritual wholeness, worked: on the basis of a very personalized morality, everything that defined it, was seen as and filled with value – including its own silence. Indeed, regardless of what was said or unsaid by the actor, the strong, unconsciously and silently enduring



understanding between the stage and the audience could not be matched by ideological monitoring, capable of censoring only the content expressed as text or gesture. The aesthetic interpretability of the production, of the theatrical product is replaced by the joint social act of actor and spectator. As frequently exemplified in the history of theatre, the performance is born out of the common articulation of stage and public; the flow of energy, resulting from the communicative situation actively maintained by the thoughts and emotions of both actor and spectator, is more important than the character-related information or the fictional content. In our case, the question arises whether this “conjoint breathing” was sufficient to create crisis in the act of reception, and, consequently, disrupt the discourse of authority. In other words, did theatre therefore become political?

It is beyond the purpose of this work to compare the methods and “precision” of Romanian censorship and security apparatus with that of other, Eastern-bloc dictatorships, such as occupied Poland. It is also beyond the aim of my historical review to compare how people survived under these dictatorships. The question is raised not as a judgment, but as mere observation: the Romanian communist-, especially the Ceaușescu-led regime, not only drew blood of the mainstream theatre, but also precluded the emergence of alternative theatrical trends.

The reason for this is manifold: the long-arm of the security apparatus and its informants, reaching even into private spaces and the ensuing fear of retribution (bluntly, the permanent fear of bugging); the system of placements and the so-called system of closed cities<sup>5</sup> allowing authorities to resort to administrative arrangements that prevented the formation of potentially dangerous professional hubs. In a 240.000-square-meter country of 22 million, where the distance between big cities is considerable and inter-connectivity is cumbersome (thanks to the intentionally complicated train schedules and fuel-restrictions), resistance is quickly dispersed.

Zygmunt Hübner, who portrayed the history of the Polish theatrical resistance, avers that apartment-theatre is the theatre of clandestine conspiracy and survival, a counter-effect of foreign occupation, tasked with salvaging own cultural values. (Hübner 1992: 170) Accordingly, one must ask why such a phenomenon did not emerge in the 1970s-1980s’

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<sup>5</sup> Fourteen cities of Romania – including those with a prominent Hungarian intelligentsia, such as Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureș, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca – were only open for residence if the placement system permitted it or if well-founded family reasons made it necessary.

Transylvania, where the Ceaușescu-led minority politics regarded Hungarians as internal enemies. Next to the reasons outlined above, the collective psychology of the audience attempts another: despite all the restrictions and prohibitions disabling it, Hungarian theatre in Romania had a permanent trump: the Hungarian minority, surviving in the context of a Romanian majority, had to perform its national and cultural self-identifying exercise through the use of its language, on stage, in the public eye. Regardless of the content put on stage, the Hungarian productions counted as cultural demonstrations and, in this respect, they somewhat made up for the lack of those theatres that abandon the official and embrace the role of illegal resistance.

It is also important, however, what kind of productions were put on stage. The performances that embraced an Aesopian style, with their metaphorical, oblique message, created an opportunity openly to criticise the regime and this way they satisfied the spectator – hence the vehemently defended illusion of the “immaculate Transylvania”. (Bottoni 2008: 169) These plays acted as safety valves, letting through just enough of the ever-increasing social tension and dissatisfaction as was necessary for the unperturbed functioning of the system. To return to the definition of political theatre, as formulated at the outset of this research, these performances did not sabotage the system, as the spectator “can maintain his self-esteem only if the concept of resistance is broadened enough to include passivity and order-abiding attitude. The result: the “tragedy” does not perturb him, nor compels him into soul-searching; in fact, it exonerates him of the duty of feasible, everyday resistance. These performances serve, rather than unsettle the audience. The spectator, reassured, filled with the soothing feeling of participation, returns home to rest his face in his applause-beat hands and, with a relieved sigh, falls into deep sleep.” (Bíró 1984: 133)

After establishing that both propaganda and the theatrical productions of the so-called resistance partake in the existing political discourse and, instead of disrupting it, they weave its nexuses further, I also look at the way in which the performances of the period’s Transylvanian Hungarian visual artists can be interpreted from the same viewpoint.

The contemporaneously and globally emerging action art faced a vacuum in the Transylvania and Romania of the 1970s. The artists searching for the truth of self-expression were increasingly forced to be on the defensive and hide; those who remained in the country resorted to a form of internal emigration, they conceived an underground existence next to their everyday occupation. The advantage performance artists had in comparison with fellow

actors was the compulsion that came to characterise the action art of the 1970s-1980s' Transylvania: seclusion into the creator's narrowest private sphere, virtually liquidating himself as artistic event, the indispensable condition of which would have been the simultaneous physical presence of audience. The event lost its very *event*-ness and it only happened in the presence of an imagined "model spectator", who could not be physically present and who participated in the shaping of the "feedback-loop" only as a result of the artist's mental construction of the ideal. (Fischer-Lichte 2009: 50)

Visual artists elevated the events of their everyday life to the level of creation, often in a spontaneous way: e.g. the actions performed on the Vizeshalmok hills near Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş effectively began as outings, holidaymaking; the landscape and ensuing social togetherness provided the inspiration and the motivation for art. (Elekes 2010) The Artists of Marosvásárhely (MAMŰ), the Sigma Group of Temesvár/Timişoara, or the Sepsiszentgyörgy/Sfântu-Gheorghe group led by Imre Baász, known from 1991 onwards at Etna, continuously chose spaces for their creations, which, because of their "uselessness" were external to society: the roofs of apartment blocks, forest glades, plough-lands. Taking possession of these spaces is particularly interesting from a land-art point of view, as it is an "innocent" act: with their use, the creators did not deprive the state of anything. But the very method of space selection was what the regime wanted to preclude: abandoning the dimension of party-ideology. These actions did not politicise, neither in an open, nor in an allegoric form; yet they became political through their politics-free nature.

In the context of uniform socio-realism, those manifestations that could step out of the obedience-resistance dilemma counted as political gestures and, by achieving the third option, they highlighted the constructed nature of the system and, implicitly, refuted its omnipotence. The 1981 "leaflet action" of Imre Baász was such an example. The action was a response to the pressed observance of the sixtieth founding anniversary of the Romanian Communist Party. In his "Mythology of the Victim" environment, the artist placed six blood-spattered shirts on a pole, and scattered leaflets around it, some of which were copies of flyers distributed by the illegal communist movement between the two world wars, while the rest were invitations to the exhibition organized by the Committee of Socialist Culture and Education of Kovászna/Covasna County in honour of the Communist Party. The same night, as part of his "Birth of the Myth" action, Baász, aided by his friends, filled the public squares of the town with the two types of leaflets. The text of the invitation did not contain anything

inflammatory: “The Committee of Socialist Culture and Education of Kovászna County. The Kovászna County office of visual artists organises on 6 May 1981, at 5 P.M. a gala exhibition (painting, graphics, sculpture, decorative art) for the 60<sup>th</sup> founding anniversary of the ROMANIAN COMMUNIST PARTY. You are invited to our exhibition in the exhibition room of the central Gallery! Read and spread the word!” (Chikán 1994: 30-34) The blurring of the past and of contemporaneous present thematised the political situation and implicitly drew attention to the incoherence of the official discourse – that the oppressed became the oppressor. The most attractive aspect of the gesture was the elimination of the contradiction between prohibited and expected behaviour: Baász found a way to highlight the dishonesty of regime-prescribed civic behaviour and artistic model without openly refuting either. “The Birth of the Myth” stepped out of the ambivalent discourse, which, according to the sociologist József D. Lőrincz, originates from the specific bipolar personality-structure formed in the Eastern European totalitarian system: the “true self”, in order to protect itself from the negative values of power, created a “public self”, which could choose between analogical speech or deliberate or inadvertent silence (D. Lőrincz 2004: 68-91)

All in all, my conclusion in this respect is that, in the Romanian context, the type of resistance which ignores the expectations of regime- and opposition ideologies, and generally refrains from statements and activity - the Hamacherian phenomenon of affirmativity -, can be found in the action art of various groups of visual artists.

## 6. After the Regime Change. Closer to Reality

In December 1989, the Romanian communist dictatorship fell and the institutional and informal organs of the regime's censorship system ceased to exist. The question arises, however, whether the forty-year influence exercised on the functioning and artistic representation of theatres also stopped together with the regime change.

One of the most obvious, long-term negative consequences of censorship was the 1970s emigration of numerous talented directors. Liviu Ciulei returned to the Bulandra stage in 1990, Vlad Mugur put together many significant productions in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca and Craiova, Andrei Șerban and Silviu Purcărete have been regularly working, for some years now, in Romanian theatres, Radu Penciulescu held workshops for young actors on numerous occasions, and Lucian Pintilie's movies are freely broadcasted today by television channels. Twenty-five years after the regime change and forty years after their emigration, could these "come-backs" make up for the vacuum created by the last two decades of dictatorship?

The professionally consolidated elite of present Romanian theatre, Alexandru Dabija, Victor Ioan Frunză, Mihai Măniuțiu, Gábor Tompa, belonged to the same generation and received their professional education in the 1970s. At the early stage of their career, they had to find their own style while evading censorship of the most obstructive phase of the dictatorship. Since the regime change, the productions of Mihai Măniuțiu, presently holding the highest number of UNITER awards (recognized as the most prestigious awards in Romanian theatre), are the self-referential manifestations of his own scenic world. They operate with fixed elements and form a hermetically closed system, which is completely independent from the theatrical and social context, in which it is created. The tardy response of the director to the previously mandatory ideological embeddedness and the false truth-demand of critical realism: the total social insensitivity.

We also find those creators whose work echoes the pre-1989 attitude. One of the most important personalities of Romanian theatre life, Ion Caramitru, the director of the National

Theatre, the president of UNITER and former minister of culture, sees resistance and the preservation of language as the essential functions of the National Theatre.<sup>6</sup>

Alexandru Tocilescu's communist-series<sup>7</sup> put on stage the parody of the former regime, as he asserts, with a critical objective. These shows are nostalgic, their impact relies on the desire of the audience to revisit the aspects of its former life, but their critical sharpness is weak, as they are beating a dead horse: the criticised regime belongs to the past. At the same time, these shows do not contribute to the collective, social processing of communism; they do not aim to confront the past and the resulting present. They do not raise questions, they simply provide reassuring answers.

Consequently, the conclusion of my research is that the "public apathy" (Sennett 1998: 13) of the elite of today's Romanian theatrical scene is the long-term result of the bygone struggle between the communist censorship and the then emerging Romanian directing theatre.

Among the post-1989 Romanian creators, the dramAcum group diverges the most from previous theatrical exercise. The project, launched in 2002 as a dramaturgy competition, was the result of a determination on the part of the students of the Directing Department of the Bucharest Academy of Theatrical Arts and Cinematography (UNATC) to find stage texts that mirrored their own artistic world. "We are tired of complaining about the bad, sick and obsolete manner in which performance texts are created. We are wondering – and we are expecting the answer from you! – how would Caragiale write today. After he has seen *Pulp Fiction* or *Everything About My Mother*. If you show us this, your reward is 2000 Euros. Think about WHY, HOW and FOR WHOM do you want to create theatre." (Onlinegallery.ro) The content of the announcement did not simply encourage text-writing, it also urged theatre-makers to reflect upon the social state, institutional conditions, economic opportunities and collective nature of their work as well as on the prerequisites of reception: to get ever closer to reality.

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<sup>6</sup> The statement was made on 29 January 2010 at the international conference held in Budapest at the Hungarian National Theatre, where the leaders of National Theatres of the Visegrad and other neighbouring states met to discuss the 21st-century roles of national theatres.

<sup>7</sup> *O zi din viața lui Nicolae Ceaușescu* (One day of Nicolae Ceaușescu's life) – Small Theatre, 2005; *Comedia roșie* (Red Comedy) – National Theatre, 2006; *Elizaveta Bam* – Bulandra Theatre, 2007; *Casa Zoikăi* (*Zoica's House*) – Comedy Theatre, 2009

The *work together in progress* working-style (Michailov 2006) was a significant departure from the pre-1989 practice, according to which the final text, finished and settled by the author, had to be approved by various institutions (literary secretariat, censorship), and ended up on stage unchanged, several months-years after being written. Neither did the 1990s view the drama-writer as part of the theatrical creator group. This is symptomatically demonstrated by the fact that the post-1989, self-confessed drama-writers (Radu Macrinici, Alina Mungiu-Pippidi, Alina Nelega, Saviana Stănescu) did not register as authors of contemporaneous dramas in Romanian (theatrical) popular conscience, but rather as organizers of cultural events (Macrinici, Nelega), public commentators (Mungiu-Pippidi) or as a result of completely different, later published works (Stănescu). (Peca 2008)

The decade-long work of drama-writer and director Gianina Cărbunariu, one of the founding members of dramAcum, challenged the Romanian spectatorial expectation the most. Although nearly all her domestic productions are invited to the National Theatre Festival (FNT), the professional incomprehension, unacceptance directed towards her is evidenced by the fact that (even ten years after putting the international-fame-bringing *Stop the Tempo* on stage) the selection, artistic directors of FNT continue to place her work in sections that implicitly differentiate them from the elite - the unspoken *off* categories. “The old elitist theatre rejects the new social theatre, the tools of which reach back to its purest avant-garde language.” (Tamás 2014: 25) While she is regularly invited to collaborate on international theatrical projects, a segment of the Bucharest profession sees Cărbunariu as an opportunist, who “learned in the West how to expose the post-communist misery in the interest of instant success”, and whose actors would deserve finally to be cast in “proper” roles. (Papp 2013) According to this discourse, the theatre that uses documentary tools is aesthetically *ab ovo* less valuable, even “un-aesthetic”, regardless of its artistic value. It tacitly views this kind of theatre as unrefined material, a crude piece of reality rather than intentional realisation, the artistic work of one or more creators. It is not the post-structural criticism of authorship that is formulated, but rather the validation tentative of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century author-concept: the creator has to be an “author genius”, someone who can create something objectively new from within, a god-like creation from nothingness; in other words, those working with proximate reality, with something ontologically pre-existent, are not creators. This line of thinking also ignores the theatrical-historical fact that theatre-makers always attempted to get closer to their period’s reality. This fact applies not only to realist endeavours; the objective of ensuing

attempts of theatre-innovation was also the search for the closest relationship with reality and the sheerest possible elimination of theatrical convention.

The common characteristic of the productions analysed in the following chapters - Gianina Cărbunariu's *Stop the tempo*, *Sado Maso Blues Bar* and *20/20*, as well as Árpád Schilling's *The Party* – is that they adhere to the terrible passion for the real (Badiou 2007: 48). According to Alain Badiou, the artistic creations directed by this passion attempt to reveal the remoteness between and the dichotomy of reality and appearance: “The artistic gesture ultimately comes down to the intrusion into semblance – exposing, in its brute state, the gap of the real.” (Badiou 2007: 50) The political in them is the politics of reception.



## 7. Spatial Theatre. *Stop the tempo. Sado Maso Blues Bar*

### 7.1. *Environmental Theatre*

“What happens to a performance when the usual agreements between performer and spectator are broken? What happens when performers and spectators actually make contact? When they talk to each other and touch?” (Schechner 1973: 40) In numerous works of his, Richard Schechner, the leader of The Performance Group (1967-1980, New York), was looking for the answer. In his book, *The Environmental Theatre*, Schechner uses the Group’s productions to review his own motivations and objectives as a creator. Although Schechner’s works do not qualify as manifests of the political theatre, the experiments accounted by him are all meant to open the theatrical situation and change the forms of perception. I included these experiments in my thesis, because the productions of The Performance Group are often compelling illustrations of Lehmann’s aesthetics of responsibility.

Hungarian theatrical-science studies offer several translation possibilities for the Schechnerian theatre, but since the concept is very rarely mentioned, there is no widely accepted Hungarian terminological equivalent. In the present work, I rely on Magdolna Jákfalvi’s translation and use the environmental theatre term (environmentális színház). The undeniably awkward neologism has the advantage that, unlike “environment-specific theatre”, “environment-theatre”, “location-specific theatre”, it unequivocally refers to Schechner’s book. Relying on Allan Kaprow, Schechner establishes the concept of environmental theatre (Schechner 1973: 68) as a phenomenon bouncing between traditional theatre<sup>8</sup> and performance art.

In the mesmerizing context of the 1960s’ American social revolution, Richard Schechner wanted to integrate attitude, consciousness into theatrical performance. Spectatorial participation, absent from Western theatrical history in the centuries of illusion theatre, became again relevant during those years, because people lived in otherwise closed, one-directional communication systems. As acknowledged by him, *4/66* (the title refers to its

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<sup>8</sup> Schechner repeatedly defines environmental theatre in relation to what he calls orthodox theatre. This tradition is the fourth wall aesthetics, realism – emerged during the Italian Baroc’s box- or peeking theatre and developed towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century Meiningian, Antoine an Stanislavsky theatres.

production date: April 1966) was the first event<sup>9</sup>, in which Schechner “had ever asked a spectator to do anything in the theatre except buy a ticket, sit still, laugh in the middle, and applaud at the end.” (Schechner 1973: 68) Schechner experiments with various methods of spectatorial inclusion, searching for the most effective form of provocation, which does not permit the spectator to remain indifferent, but which does not aggressively manipulate him either. In 1970, together with his theatre company, Schechner puts on stage *Commune*.<sup>10</sup> In its 28 February 1971 show, the intervention of the spectators produces a spontaneous *event* that suspends *directing* for three hours.

The majority of the TPG’s plays were produced in a hall known as The Performing Garage. As with most modern studios today, the non-compartmentalised, neutral nature of the Garage allowed it to become whatever the production needed it to be. For Schechner, space was very important, as the spatial expression of an event could compellingly describe the nature of that event. For this reason, the preliminary step of TPG in creating the production was the search for, the discovery of space, its “cleaning”, and then the “bargaining”, the calling-upon of space.

In his book, Schechner puts forward five fundamental principles of environmental theatre (Schechner 1973: 1-39) We will refer to those most important for the present research:

1. For each production the organization of the entire space is compulsory. Entirety also refers to the fact that theatrical space is not a hermetical unity, cut out of the world, but it is part of the wider environment, it fits into the life of the city, into its culture, society, history, etc. If in a certain production a part of space is only used by the actors, there must be a good reason for that restriction. Otherwise, “the areas occupied by audience are a kind of sea through which the performers swim; and the performance areas are kinds of islands and continents in the midst of the audience.” (Schechner 1973: 39) One spectator needs to appear in the vision-field of another; they then unconsciously become a visual part of the performance as well.
2. Planning needs to take into account space-senses and space-fields. Schechner presumes a dynamic relationship between space and the body moving within it: the movements elongate the body, they cause the emergence of invisible boundaries, connecting points, energy hubs.
3. Every part of the environment is functional. The decor of traditional theatre is two-dimensional; that of environmental theatre has three dimensions. Its director is not interested

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<sup>9</sup> Schechner does not call 4/66 a production or a play, but an event.

<sup>10</sup> For the detailed description of the production, see: Schechner 1973: 46-59

in how the space will look like; he only cares about how it will function. If a space is found to be congruent with the dimension, attitude of a performance, it will become part of that performance without intervention. The elements of space cannot be seeming or illusory. Functionality also means that the spectator is unequivocal about the functions of his environment, so that he feels safe, should he give up passivity.

## ***7.2. Stop the Tempo***

The use of space in the 2003 production of Gianina Cărbunariu meticulously applies the above-mentioned principles of the Schechnerian environmental theatre. *Stop the Tempo* emerges from the spatiality of theatrical communication – from the associative identity of its location (the Green Hours Bar in Bucharest) with the space in which the plot occurs (outing places).

In Cărbunariu's play three people loiter. The club, where they meet, represents the place of joyless, strained roles, of failure, from which, disgusted, they escape together, only to suffer a road accident. A tacit agreement brings them back to the place of their first encounter, where, again pursuant to an unspoken common desire, they blow the fuse. The act does not remain unique; turning power off becomes their vocation. "If only Romania was connected to one giant circuit breaker..." (Cărbunariu 2008: 314) After countless, successfully blown fuses, the story ends with the boy and one of the girls being caught in the act at a concert and dying of electrocution.

The three characters bear the names of their performers: in one scene of the show, they read out their personal details from their IDs. The theatrical technique-shifting blurs the boundary between reality and fiction and pulls the spectator out of the intimacy of his passivity; it calls upon him to conjoin elements of fiction with those of reality.

One prerequisite for this is common cultural knowledge, shared by actor and spectator, the guarantee of which is none other than the Green Hours Bar on the Victory Boulevard in Bucharest. Its central location is countered by the fact that it is accessible only through an inner courtyard and leads into a wagon-like cellar. Due to its secluded location, small holding capacity and profile (jazz bar) it counts as an alternative outing place. It falls outside the Bucharest show-biz elite; it is not worth a fuse-blowing, because its guests are as miserable as the trio and no "extracools" would end up there. (ibid. 308) The spectators of *Stop the Tempo*

ought to know this feeling. This type of accomplice appraisal, critical stance is unacceptable in the popular and acclaimed mainstream theatres, merely a few hundred meters away from the Green.

Theatrical practice fondly criticises the inadequacy of host stages in the case of guest productions, but these objections refer to the external, objective space and usually refer to its physical aptitude, measurements, (absence of) equipment, etc. Apart from these manageable, practical obstacles, the production can change location. In contrast, the Green is so organically embedded into the theatrical world of *Stop the Tempo*, that it is impossible to present the play elsewhere, unless it is recreated, as a new production. This form of coexistence between space and creation is also characteristic to statues placed in public squares: the artwork lives on the culture, history, tradition of the place, where its ideal reader is also to be found. Another particularity of the use of space in *Stop...* is the visualisation of theatrical space without the decoration, alteration of the external, objective space. The director mostly relies on the aptitude of the found space: the main occupation of the play's characters relates to outing places, Green is a bar according to its original purpose. The play represents the space in its own functioning.

### ***7.3. Sado-Maso Blues Bar***

For the set of her 2007 production, *Sado-Maso Blues Bar*, Cărbunariu chose a display window. When analysing this performance I try to reveal how the choosing and configuring of space changes the theatrical communication. Additionally, I try to point out the fact that, although Maria Manolescu's text is not socially concerned, the use of space brings this kind of sensitivity into the show.

The Very Small Theatre is located in the heart of central Bucharest, on First Carol Boulevard, just a few buildings away from University Square and the National Theatre. The performance is set in one of the anterooms of the theatre, otherwise closed to the public. One of the walls of this room consists of a large display window.

According to its traditional function, the display window makes the merchandise attractive, stimulates consumption. The display window of the theatre has the same purpose: obtain a paying spectator. Those windows that look onto the street are covered with thick, stage-like curtains, on which then performance photos are hung. The message: all that

“wonder” you see on the photos, comes to life when the curtain is lifted. What the display window of the theatre accentuates is that the performance is a privileged, closed world, to which entrance is granted in exchange of the price of a ticket. *Sado-Maso Blues Bar* upsets this convention, when it makes the “sacred” instant of the performance available to the passer-by.

The shop-window, just like the window and the painting, is a symbolic structure, which, according to art historian Hans Belting, maps the detachment of the subject from the world. (Belting 2003: 46) The room surrounding it functions as the surface of the window through which the world opens up. In *Sado-Maso Blues Bar*, the display window acts as a medium for both the outside and the inside onlooker, as well as for the world itself.

The passer-by looking onto or lingering in front of the window, inadvertently becomes spectator as well as participant of the performance, without the deliberate acceptance of the theatrical contract: he is led by spontaneous curiosity. At first, he does not know that the sight is a staged performance, he does not sense the institutional context. Then, he recognises the performative situation to which he now unintentionally belongs: he realises that he is also being watched, so he either loses courage and leaves, or yields to his curiosity, and joins the street-side of the performance, fools around for the inside audience, or watches the performance without minding the other spectators. In any case, from the outset, he also becomes a performer.

The performance operates with few constructed elements. It moves into the features of the city beyond the window: the pedestrians, the cars, the buses, the buildings on the other side, the people appearing in the windows of those buildings, etc. – they all become part of the scenic image. Although the screen, the stage or the window directs our vision and constructs the image, this scenic image also suggests that the world that happens behind it, is not “then and there”, is not fictive or virtual. It is rather the reality of the spectator, from where we stepped into the theatre and to which we will return after the play. In fact, the eye-piercing reality that gleams through the fiction of the performance is not characteristic to television, commercial theatre or contemporary Romanian mainstream artistic theatre. The motive for isolation is the preservation of a feeling of safety: as long as we surrender to the magic, the uncomfortable events of the world cannot harm us. In the background of the performers’ play, the inside spectator seems to catch a distorted glimpse of himself in the

mirror; while observing the real reactions of the passers-by, he realises that their trigger is he himself. Therefore, this theatre throws back its spectator into inter-subjective reality.

## 8. Present Politics in the Political Theatre

In the last two chapters of my research I examined a Romanian and a Hungarian performance (the Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş Yorick Studio's *20/20* performance and the Budapest Krétakör's *The Party* production), the common characteristic of which is that their theme is drawn from political life without joining a particular political discourse and without attempting to channel a particular political ideology.

### 8.1. *20/20*

The topic of *20/20*, put on stage in the fall of 2009, is Black March, i.e. the ethnic clashes that occurred in Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş in March 1990. The multilingual performance was written and directed by Gianina Cărbunariu; Hungarian actors from Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş and Romanian actors from Bucharest teamed up in the production. I collaborated as dramaturge, directing assistant and translator.

The preliminaries of the performance had three phases: the collection of information was followed by improvisations, and later the text was written in parallel with holding rehearsals. At first, only the theme and the performance group were known. The primary purpose of information collection was the acquirement of knowledge, which, given the fundamentally differing approaches of some of the performers, also became a team-building exercise. Accordingly, certain members of the thirteen-strong team grew up in Bucharest or in cities geographically and culturally remote from Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş, and were young children at the time of the events; the topic thus left a neutral, blank spot in their historical knowledge and personal life. In contrast, others experienced the post-1989 ethnic clashes as teenagers living in Marosvásárhely/Târgu-Mureş or other Transylvanian cities, and the events became part of their adult life. Therefore, while some team members had to become more familiar with the topic, others needed to detach themselves from it.

Language as identity, the relationship between mother-tongue and foreign language, the dilemma of existence through language characterised the performance. For these reasons, we did not want to make translation “transparent”, but rather turn it into an organic part of the performance, closely linked to its theme. For the projection, Maria Drăghici put together a visual background that changed at each scene and on which the uttered Romanian and

Hungarian words appeared translated in the other language. In order to show the act of translation - the process through which we are searching for the right word, and sometimes we make mistakes or correct ourselves -, certain words in the projected text were stricken through.

As part of the information collection phase, we also conducted interviews with individuals willing to talk about their approach to the March events. Some of our subjects were public figures, but the majority was randomly selected. The only factor we took in consideration was the wide representativeness of the group and the need to interview people of varying ethnicity, age, occupation, financial and educational background, as well as individuals affected to varying degrees by the events. In our interviews, we relied on a previously prepared list of questions, but we did not use it as a questionnaire; it only served the purpose of preparing us for the discussion and we did not demand an answer to each query. We allowed the discussion to take spontaneous turns, as we wanted our interlocutors to speak freely about the events and remember as much as possible about those moments that bore the most significance for them. We were deliberately looking for micro-stories, which, albeit biased, are self-legitimising; their truth is unquestionable. Bit by bit, the best-documented moments of the events – the historical tableaux – were squeezed out of the script and were replaced by mosaic-like story-fragments. The found micro-stories came to define the dramaturgy of the entire performance as well as the performers' play. There was no justice delivered, no black-and-white, ethnic line-drawing between victims and perpetrators, no bow for the former and acquittal of the latter. The great narrative and the ensuing catharsis failed to occur.

*20/20* ended with a question-mark: “What do you think?” (Cărbunariu 2009) The answer – if so wished – had to be found by the spectator. After the applause, we asked the spectators to return to the room following a short break and symbolically occupy the stage: the space of turmoil, where it is impossible to tell who is Romanian or Hungarian, who is friend and who is enemy. We encouraged them to participate in a common discussion, where they also could tell what they thought, where they could write the second act of the performance. It was our view that the post-performance discussions would give the respect and emotional safety necessary for the spectator to re-think, “re-write” his own memories. Simply put, we hoped that after the performance blurred the polarised sense of identity of the spectator, the discussions would create the opportunity to partake in the truth of the other side.



For this purpose, we never moderated the discussions. All we could offer the city was the concrete and symbolic place, the agora for the dialogue, where they themselves had to practice a direct kind of participative democracy. If we had assumed a bigger role, the “second act” would have easily turned didactic, as we would have forced upon the participants some kind of reconciliation, consensus, or – ultimately -, forgetting, otherwise successfully avoided by the performance itself. It was cathartic to comprehend that this was all – so much and so little - that theatre could do. The post-performance discussions facilitated the “opening-up” of the artistic performance with the everyday reality of the audience, in which the March memories still have a lasting effect.

In my research, I tried to answer the question whether *20/20* becomes political in the sense that, relying on the medial particularities of theatre, it triggers reflective reception and transformation. In this case, the object of reception is the spectator himself as social being, the individual, who, one way or another, but without exception, connects to the evoked historical events.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, the work of the historian begins when the groups of memory have vanished, when the past is not “resided” anymore. (cited by Assmann 2004: 36) As a group, the Marosvásárhely urban society lives in a pre-history, but not yet post-memory phase. Indeed, the performance itself was born out of the curiosity triggered by unprocessed, disorganised history: the objective reconstruction formulated by Halbwachs and Assman did not take place, group memory was left to its fate. Accordingly, the interviews revealed very much unconscious forms of memory. To take further Halbwachs’ metaphor: this past is still resided, but the room that holds the amorphous memories of March 1990 is sealed with the lock of taboo. This society is unable to deal with its own dual self-determination: on one hand, it constructs its own identity in an ethnicised relation towards the other (Gagyí 2010), while on the other, it flaccidly surrenders to global consumerist culture, which does not solve, but rather avoids the taboo of the post-March trauma. As portrayed in the final scene of *20/20*: descendants of Transylvanian aristocracy and second-generation Romanian incomers are downloading the same American music on their Japanese laptops, while they are chatting online with each other in English.

The endurance of the paradoxical state is not the spontaneously shaped sacred process of memory; it is rather the result of the very prosaic, political-economic intention. National conscience as collective memory is the basis of the political current of nationalism; its

survival is thus a national interest. Nationalism excludes diverging concepts and thus creates the stranger. According to Christoph Jamme (quoted by Nyíró 2010), art is the only space where the self can relate productively, and not aggressively to the stranger and “abandon its dominance over him”. Art contains the opportunity for “the aesthetic essence to acquire ethical and even political dimensions.” Or, as Lehmann puts it: “theatre can respond to this only with a politics of perception, which could at the same time be called an aesthetic responsibility (or response-ability).” (Lehmann 2006: 185) *20/20* forced the self to abandon its dominance over the stranger by consistently obstructing the drawing of a clear boundary between self and stranger.

## **8.2. *The Party***

Ten years after the socially critical, strongly pervading *BLACKland* and six years after the dissolution of the theatre company performing it, Árpád Schilling put on stage a new, socially-concerned performance. The performance was presented in the spring of 2014, a week prior to the Hungarian parliamentary elections. The premier was held on the International Day of Theatre, the motto of which, as written by Brett Bailey, emphasised the indispensable role theatre played in the *polis*. The timing is part of the conception, the director wants to discuss the nature of politics with the spectators, precisely when the topic receives the utmost attention. In other words, the audience of the *The Party*'s premier (and of the following two performances, held on consecutive nights) is none other than the voters of the elections. This dual quality is exploited by the directing, in order to mobilise the community. “Although I did not know which direction yet to take, I definitely wanted to step out of the comfortable role of the “inciter”. I wanted to assume a greater role in the matters of the community.” (Schilling 2013) The assumption of responsibility is undeniably heroic, as the available tools are bound to be inadequate for the greatness of the purpose. Simply put, it is heroic because, in the two hours of the performance, it attempts to trigger that social revolution, that re-thinking of the senseless into the sensible, which failed to occur in the past twenty-four years. “What do the ethnic-cleansing photos on the gallery wall expect from us? Should we revolt against the executioners? Should we empathise – without any consequence – with the sufferers? Should we get angry with the photographers, because they construct an aesthetic experience from others’ misery? Or should we get appalled by our own guilty glimpse, which reduces these people to victims? Insoluble question.” – says Jacques Rancière

about the efficacy of art. (2011: 39) The ending of *The Party* is also inconclusive; the performance continuously oscillates between open and stereotypical statements, solemn, self-serving political stances and the all-unmasking irony. The performance raises the following question: can a theatrical performance do more, and if so, what more than “to incite”, to provoke? Does *The Party* surpass the propagandism of the political manifesto theatre, does the performance disengage the spectator from his self-functioning, imperceptible spectatorial and bourgeois routine?

If so, then it succeeds by questioning its own statements from the very outset: before the spectators gathered in the Trafó Theatre to watch the interactive, musical theatrical performance, *The Party*<sup>11</sup> ensemble comes on stage, the vocalist of which introduces the concert’s guests, the actors of Krétakör. The musical production of the ensemble and of its vocalist, Juliette Navis, is impeccable, their skill confirms their claim, that we are watching a concert, we thus are forced to accept the rule of the game, only later uncovered: in this concert, nothing is what it claims to be. The success (or efficacy) of the performance depends on whether the spectator senses this duality. Schilling offers very few helpful hints, suggesting this way that true responsibility in a representative democracy lies not with the parties, but with the citizens who vote for their representatives; that freedom of opinion in a democracy is also a tormenting constraint: the individual has to form his own opinion and for that purpose, he needs to be adequately sensitive and focussed.

The performance outlines the dominating common conditions and social complaints of Hungary and then proposes the actors as candidates for the mayor position. The lights in the auditorium are turned on: let’s vote. The performance takes us out of our comfort zone only in the sense that it makes us indignant for having to participate in such a make-believe mobilisation. There is no true risk in it, because the voting does not make the spectators rethink their own condition, it does not make decision impossible. To be precise: there is no real option in the fiction between the lost-for-words, nostalgic Sándor and the populist, boasting from the table-top Zsolt. There is nothing at stake with the decision whether or not to vote, because, as it is ultimately revealed, the result of the election is ensured by insiders. The directing only offers apparent participation to the spectators, but it does not see them as equals, with whom it is worth bargaining about the roles, conditions, and course of the

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<sup>11</sup> The name of the ensemble is used in English, so as to confer its double meaning: political group and entertainment event.

performance as social event. The story rushes towards tragedy; towards the end, the stage is seized by a group of teenagers, who demand a similar takeover of power; next, Márton Gulyás, wearing a suit with the “Krétakör” party-insignia, takes to the stage to hold an official campaign speech. As the manager of the Krétakör Foundation, he invites contributions for the functioning of the Krétakör Free School, the first grade of which could be previously seen on stage – he thusly uncovers the “spontaneous” intervention, but continues the outrageously phony political discourse: he also wants our money, vote, sympathy, he tells us what our opinion should be, what we should and should not like.

Through this multiple deconstruction, Schilling’s directing succeeds to coerce the spectator into reflective reception. The scenes turn each other into make-believes, it is impossible to decide, which one is real in relation to the other. It is impossible to tell which statements can be taken seriously and which are total irony. Even as experienced theatre-goers, we become uncertain about our spectatorial “task”. We do not know what is “merely theatre” and what has a realistic stake. In our desire to understand, we are confronted with ourselves as *voyeurs* in search of a safely closed illusion. Equally, as spectators of *The Party*, we are confronted with ourselves as citizens of a representative democracy who, by voting, consign their social responsibility, but who become indignant if the options are poor and choice is impossible. In this sense, *The Party* can be seen as an effective, political artistic manifestation: it does not offer us the “correct answer” as to which party-advocated political ideology deserves our vote in real life. Instead, it offers us the experience of the frustration we feel when we are forced to think independently without any external guidance.

## 9. Summary

The political nature of theatre, the interest of theatre towards the functioning of society is not a novelty in the history of European theatre. Perhaps it is not too bold to state that the history of Western theatre could be written with a view to find the political in the theatre. This undoubtedly anthropologised history would look at: the way in which theatrical art, at the relevant period, sees itself in relation to social reality; how strong its effect on society is; what ethical onuses it serves; and how conscious and assumed, or how hidden and unreflective its purpose is.

As asserted in the first chapters of this research and as apparent from the examination of the work of Piscator and Brecht, the Lehmannian concept of political theatre stems from Brechtian aesthetics. Its essence is the reflectivity that, pursuant to Helmuth Plessner, Erika Fischer-Lichte characterises as *conditio humana*: the human is the only being capable of confronting itself as another. (Fischer-Lichte 2001: 9) According to Fischer-Lichte, the *conditio humana* can be described as a theatrical situation (one watches another doing something), and *vice-versa*: structurally, the theatrical situation always visualises the *conditio humana* - the detachment from oneself and the self-reflection through the other -, and thusly, the formation- and transfer of identity. (ibid. 10) Based on the phenomena examined in my research, let us add: the performative act of identity-transfer, though structurally, can only happen in practice if the performance does not partake in any existing social consensus as power discourse. The theatre which fails to disengage the spectator from the suspension of disbelief through the aesthetics of disruption, maintains the consensus and does not stimulate reflective perception. The maintenance of the suspension of disbelief in the interest of theatrical convention is equal to the isolation of the spectator from his own self. In such a state, the individual sitting in the auditorium is his own avatar, he has no direct relation with his self, existing in the social reality outside the theatre; his body, his being within the world is switched off during the performance, just as his cell phone is... Conversely, the contemporary political theatre, through the politics of perception, ceases the isolation of the spectator from his proximate reality.

In contrast with the political theatre characterised by the efficacy of dissensus, the subsequent chapters of my research highlight that the theatre of the Romanian communist

period and the mainstream of the post-1989 decades reinforced the existing identity of the audience, and allowed the continued functioning of social automatisms.

Notwithstanding this, the new millennium saw both the Romanian and the Hungarian theatrical performance turn towards reality and embrace the political in theatre. Political theatre does not have to deal with questions of political life, in order to qualify as political – although it certainly can embrace such topics. To revisit the BLACKland scene discussed in the Introduction, Schilling's performance is not political because it deals with the Iraqi war and other topics of public life; it is a political performance that (also) deals with a political topic. Likewise, the performance is not political because an actor crosses the invisible boundary between stage and audience, and gives the spectator a stage requisite. The performance is political because it breaks the mimetic representation of torture and exposes the comfortable position from which that was watched by the spectator. It transforms the spectator from mere bystander into a fellow being with responsibility. But it is the spectator's choice, what to do with this responsibility.

It is the conclusion of my research that the present Romanian and Hungarian political theatre is affirmative: it only goes to the point of uncovering the applicable situation or the unacceptability of a particular state. It does not embrace a world-improving purpose, it does not attempt to show what would the right direction be. In this consciously assumed inertia and inability, the haunting memory of the twentieth century lingers on: the memory of the utopias leading to horrors, the resigned acceptance of the impossibility to change the world as well as the acknowledgment that “the medial particularity of theatre allows for the diversity of perspectives to be revealed rather than facilitate the (political) message transmission.” (Kricsfalusi 2014: 12)

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