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SCIENTIFIC PhD THESIS IN THE FIELD OF THEATRE
AND PERFORMING ARTS

„THE ACTOR, LIKE THE MINER”.
THE MYTHS OF THEATRE REFORM IN THE 1990s

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PhD Thesis Summary

Content

Introduction	3
Sources and methodology	5
The academic context of the research	9
Conclusions	11
The content of the thesis	15
Bibliography	17

Introduction

The thesis *"The actor, like the miner". The myths of theatre reform in the 1990s* is trying to outline the concrete context in which, during the so-called "transitional" period (the 1990s, until 2004/2007 – Romania's accession to NATO, respectively the European Union), various theories were advanced regarding the directions of theatre reforming, connecting them with the immediately preceding history and its elements specific to the regime in Romania. The reform of the theatrical system never actually took place, so this is, at best, the history of a non-event. But the same reform is one of the most enduring topics of discussion and one of the liveliest aspirations of the theatre in Romania, hence the temptation to treat it as a myth, in the sense of Roger Bastiade – "[myths are] screens on which collective anxieties are projected" – which the literary critic Eugen Negrici used in his book, *The Illusions of Romanian literature*.

As far as theatre reform is concerned, it turned out to be, above all, an aspirational projection into the future, fueled by collective narratives. The intention of the present approach is not, however, to explore the production of myths, legends or illusions (whose semantic spectrum overlaps in use) in the Romanian theatre, but to recover the basic information and the dynamics of a recent history, since this knowledge can help to a better understanding of contemporaneity.

Just as the system, both the ideological and the economic one, in which theatre artists worked before 1989 directly influenced their way of working, the current theatrical system resulted – in all its components, from human resources to the artistic specificity – from decisions, options or accidents, of all kinds, immediately after the Revolution, some of them (for example, the progressive increase in the numbers of students in Acting) being reactions to the situation from the previous period. "History matters" is what is called a path dependence. There is a causal relationship between events of the present and those of the past, and what researchers call "initial conditions" – "the configuration, historically specific, of the variable at the 'beginning' – possibly even before the beginning – of a sequence of events" – do have a causal effect. This effect is not, however, absolute, the present is not condemned to follow the "initial conditions" set by the past. The outcome depends on options or intermediate outcomes, and for this reason, it has an unpredictable nature: there are

moments, in the course of events, when rupture is possible, and moments when the present is "doomed" to submit to the past.

Without wanting to explore whether, as far as Romanian theatre is concerned, the preservation of the mode of production involuntarily introduced at the end of the 1940s is a consequence of path dependence, we considered it inevitable to discuss the specific political, economic and social conditions of these theatrical production structures in the recent past (mainly the 1980s), given the central place it occupies in all debates in the field, to the end of the early 2000s, and the reality that, despite widely contested spread, this system of publicly subsidized repertory theatres with a permanent troupe has been remarkably preserved. Thus, a chapter of the thesis discusses, mainly interpreting archival documents, the rationale for the introduction of the self-financing mechanism in culture, in general, and in the theatre, in particular, and the way this mechanism worked, using contemporary recollections in order to describe the adaptation of institutions. The same chapter investigates the financing structure of the "Song of Romania" Festival, the differences between this structure and the perception of the cultural environment, as well as the effect these perceptions had, in the long term, on the relations between the professional and the amateur areas of the artistic sphere.

It is obvious that no (other) "world project" of what the theatrical production system should look like existed at the time of the collapse of communism (nor immediately after). As in the case of the publishing milieu, the early 1990s were dominated by the impulse of restoration and recovery – if the literary world was obsessed with the publication of authors and books that had been banned until then, the theatre brought back the directors who had fled the country during communism. If writers wanted to be translated and participate in professional networks in the West, theatre artists were concerned with touring the West and staging plays in translation – and in order to understand the exceptional interest in the West in those years, I researched the opening-closing (to the outside scene) dynamic which marked the evolution of Romanian communism and the reflection of this dynamic in the theatre world. Like the whole society, the artistic world was dominated by an everyday ideology that articulated communism, with all its components, as something integrally "bad", (Western and of interwar Romania) capitalism undifferentiated "good", and the post-communist transition, as, in the terms of political scientist Vladimir Pasti, "the path full of purifying suffering" from "bad" communism to "good" capitalism". In the theatre, this simple and simplistic scheme required thought contortions, which would preserve the legitimacy of the central elements of the creation: not every component was bad, only the

playwriting under communism; it was not the idea of publicly subsidizing theaters that was bad, only subsidizing all theaters was, etc. I have tried to show how this perspective led to the removal of almost all incumbent directors in 1989 (these purges being replicated at various levels of society), sometimes with remarkable symbolic brutality, and immediate post-revolutionary repertory chaos.

The central part of the thesis, however, explores the vast spectrum of the fluctuating meanings of the reform, as they were debated in the "marketplace" of ideas during the years of transition, while also trying to find answers to a set of questions, still valid: if we do not share the opinion that the repertory theatre itself, an "invention" of the end of the 19th century, two decades before the appearance of the Soviet Union, of an artist (Konstantin Stanislavski), is not a system in its essence to be thrown away, what exactly, from the way of this theatre was operating (outside of political censorship, dead alongside Nicolae Ceaușescu) required restructuring, from the point of view of the 1990s? What transformations could the political will or should have effected and, more precisely, why did the will not manifest itself in the theatre but it did in other fields? What were the reforming options and what was their framework for discussion? **What was the evolution over time due to which, in Romania at least, theatre people came to the conclusion of the privilege-generating character of a system that the local political police themselves previously reported that many of the same theatre people contested?** These are some of the aspects that we try, as far as possible, to follow in the present research: an exercise in the archeology of missed possibilities.

Sources and methodology

The decision-making dynamics of the first post-revolutionary years are difficult to reconstruct based on the documents of the moment, for the good reason that those turbulent times remained unarchived – and not only with regard to the marginal subject of culture, but as a whole. If at the Cotroceni Presidential Palace, at least until 1996, not even the discussions within the Supreme Council of National Defense (CSAT) were recorded and preserved, there are even less traces of political processes regarding culture, and my direct experience at the Ministry of Culture (in 2016 and 2021) indicates that even today the archiving of institutional documents is deficient, such documents being almost impossible to recover when it comes to materials from before the digitization era. For example, it was so far impossible to discover in the archives any trace of the theatre law "drafted in the

spring-summer of 1991" and "thrown into the waste bin of the Parliament immediately after the fall of the Romanian government, in September 1991", which theatre critic Miruna Runcan mentions in a study dedicated to a similar topic. This leaves as direct sources of research, almost exclusively, the press of the time, rich and too little digitized, the contemporary records of the events, published "in the heat of the moment", and the recollections, at different distances in time, of the participants in the various unfoldings of events. All, covered by a smaller or larger dose, more insightful or more diluted, of subjectivism, which reflects the emotional involvement specific to moments charged with historical significance.

The late and gradual opening, after the 2000s (sometimes, much later) of archival funds regarding the era ended in December 1989 – from the National Archives of Romania or from the National Council for the Study of Security Archives – has made that the most consistent corpus of research on Romanian communism is dealing with the first decades of the regime, with limited attention given to the 1980s or the austerity that strongly marked the theatre. Precisely because it was the decade they had lived through and felt most strongly, participants reporting on the reform debates of the 1990s, as well as memoirs and sometimes theoretical/academic approaches, are predominantly focused on first-hand experiences. We tried to subject these reports and approaches to the test of data and documents, investigating a diversity of primary archival sources (transcripts of party leadership meetings, reports, thematic and financial plans, Security reports, memos, statistics, etc.), the legislation of the time and secondary legal literature, alongside memoirs, notes, diaries and periodicals. Their reading is often likely to contradict many of the interpretations common to those who lived those times, without diminishing the role played by these interpretations, and equally indicates the level of degradation of the cultural condition in Nicolae Ceaușescu's last phase of dictatorship.

This degradation affects multiple planes. Reading the publications of the transition – especially the specialized magazine, *Teatrul*, turned into *Teatrul azi*, with the playwright Dumitru Solomon as editor-in-chief, the critic Marian Popescu (who, in the first part of 1990, also became one of the leaders of the newly established professional association) as deputy editor-in-chief and another critic, Cristina Dumitrescu, as editorial secretary general –, it is clear that the term "reform" was on everyone's lips. It's just that everyone understood something different by that, maybe also because extremely many things – everything – would have had to be changed, transformed, recovered, from the public theater companies

to the Romanian theatre's relationship with the West. In general, everything was to be reformed and everyone had a different definition of the reform itself.

Except for Marian Popescu's writings, almost contemporary with the events or immediately after (in books such as *Oglinda spartă* [The Broken Mirror], 1997, which includes texts written in previous years, or *Scenele teatrului românesc 1945-2004. De la cenzură la libertate* [The Stages of the Romanian Theatre 1945-2000. From Censorship to Freedom], 2004, both published at the publishing house that Popescu was managing at that time, Unitext) and Miruna Runcan's analyses, some of them ongoing, the history of theatre in Romania during the period called, in political or economic sciences, the post-communist transition (technically, finished with Romania joining the European Union in 2007) lacks an approach in terms of system dynamics or changes in production modes. We can list extremely few texts that look towards the turning point of the theatre in 1990, written by authors belonging to the later generation, without a direct involvement in the events of that time (for example, Maria Ghitta's article, "Șocul eliberării. Teatrul în anul întâi [The Shock of Liberation. The Theatre in the First Year]", published in the anthology *Viața teatrală în și după comunism* [Theatrical Life in and after Communism]).

An important source for the analysis, in addition to memoirs, the media of the time and, in the case of the 1980s, the archives, were also the interviews (carried out in writing, face-to-face, via Zoom or by phone) with people directly involved in the events covered by this research, whose testimony is all the more precious because, three decades after the Revolution, a large number of the participants in the debates and decisions have died – from Ion Caramitru himself to the legal expert Ioan Onisei, parliamentarian, secretary of state for culture, the stage director Sanda Manu, vice-president of UNITER in the 90s, etc. (unfortunately, the director Nicolae Scarlat also left us, less than a year after the interview).

Considering the risks associated with such sources, similar to those in the case of recollections, we tried – as in the case of volumes of memories – to cross-check the information received, seeking to obtain confirmation of dates, names and actions from several interviewees and confronting them with sources contemporary to the events (mainly from the press, considering the precariousness of the archives of those years). In many situations, however, oral testimonies are the only available source, especially when it comes to non-public decision-making processes, but also, for example, regarding one of the most circulated moments, in the public space, regarding the postponement of the theatre reform in the years 1996-2000 (the story of a questionnaire related to the expectations of theatre employees; impossible to find in the UNITER archive or among the materials kept by those

involved, it is to be hoped that, at some point, the documents related to this survey of the acting body to come to light).

As in the case of research, recently published books of interviews and recollections of artists often exclusively discuss the artistic component, work on stage and performance construction, completely avoiding the socio-political context and noting even less the economic one. This, despite – or, perhaps, precisely because of – the fact that theatre people were among the most politically active social groups in the early nineties, mainly in the declared anti-communist area. The absence of artists' socio-political perspective on those turbulent times can only be regrettable.

Regarding the time frame for this approach, discussing the pulsating evolutions of the discussions about reform, as well as the interventions, changes or attempts at institutional or systemic change in the first two decades after the Revolution, I appealed to the intersection of several types of periodization. The one proposed by Cornel Ban, one that takes into account the dynamics of economic policies, talks about "the first steps of capitalism" (1990-1992), "populist neo-developmentalism" (1992-1996) and the "neoliberal revolution" (1996-2000). Writing, *in media res* (in 1994), about the reactions of the cultural environment to the new post-1989 world, literary critic Ion Bogdan Lefter was talking about a period of "general agitation", exhausted in the fall of 1991 (the resignation of the Petre Roman Government and the installation of the Stolojan Government) and completely exhausted after the 1992 elections (like Ban, he also saw the limits in the dynamics of government alternations). The political scientist Vladimir Pasti believes that the transition (from socialism to capitalism), as a unitary period, began immediately after December 22, 1989, while from another perspective, of the intellectuals' political engagement, writer Gabriela Adameșteanu calls the continuum 1990-1996 as "the romantic years".

In the case of articulating the impulses to reform the Romanian theatre (and culture, in general), I used the time boundaries marked by the changes in public policy caused by government alternations – 1990-1992, 1992-1996, 1996-2000 – which, however, I sub-segmented in direct dependence on the dynamics in the performing arts. The first months of 1990 (a final landmark would be the miners' interventions in Bucharest on June 13-15, 1990) represent a distinct, revolutionary phase, marked by compensatory-restorative legislative interventions and a spirit of moral purification (decisive being the replacement of theatre directors), followed by a stage of institutional construction (of some theaters, of international relations...) and confrontations of various reformist visions.

The recentralization of cultural institutions – culminating in Alexandru Dabija's dismissal from the management of the Odeon Theatre –, the departure of the last of the managers appointed in 1990 among the stage directors returned from exile and the reaffirmation of political control tendencies over the theatre (and culture, in general), processes triggered during the year 1993, make 1994 another year of inflection, this period ending with the electoral victory of the Democratic Convention in Romania, in the fall of 1996. The period 1996-2000 is the one in which the theatre system settles in a womb of adaptation to the existing regime, and reformist aspirations are limited to secondary elements of the theatrical production mode. This, however, is also the central interval in the present approach – the culmination of the accumulation of hope for the decanting of the ideas intensively circulated previously –, because it is the only one in which, through the presence of UNITER president, Ion Caramitru, at the head of the Ministry of Culture, any restructuring of the system theatrical production could be considered free of previous political obstacles.

Even if this research also addresses the process of finally adopting, in 2004, the first post-1989 law on theaters, its operationalization in 2007 and, tangentially, the adoption of the first regulation (by Government ordinance) of management in culture, in 2008, these are, in reality, "leftovers" from the previous decade and a half, transposing components of the vision that had come to dominate the discourse on theatre reform in 1996-2000.

The same approach also covers the analysis regarding the period of self-financing: although the elements of the cultural policy of the era are those established, starting from 1971, through the July Theses, the economic perspective assumed a focus on the processes started in 1980-1981, with Nicolae Ceaușescu's decision to pay Romania's external debt in full, with a major impact on theatre institutions starting from January 1, 1984 (the time of the dramatic reduction in subsidies).

The academic context of the research

Literature and the publishing system under communism and during transition have benefited, especially in the last two decades, from in-depth studies, going beyond the investigation of the role and functioning of censorship, regarding the literary institutions of communism, including from the perspective of their specific economy, the constitution of the canon, the strategies of functioning and adaptation of writers and critics, the history of

alternative institutions with a direct impact on the generational change in the 1980s, but also the ideological dynamics after 1990 and the transformation processes of the nationalized system. A similar process of historical-analytical reflection is beginning to take place in the field of cinema as well – on the one hand, in the historical approach of the communist decades, on the other hand, in the transition (including the subject of film privatization).

One of the reasons why such analysis lack in the field of theatre would be the secondary role played by the theatrical environment in the market of ideas, in Romania and elsewhere, the temptation being to identify the figure of the intellectual, in a culture so literary-centric as the Romanian one, almost exclusively with the writer; moreover, if the developments in the literary space occupied the central place in the external "monitoring" of the Romanian culture during communism, the same thing also happens in the researches (sociological or historical) done in post-communism, regarding the interpretations related to both the transition and the previous period.

A second reason is related to the intrinsically ephemeral nature of the theatrical performance, whose "loss in history" is transferred to the system itself. Moreover, a constant in reading the research dedicated to the evolution of the cultural field in the 90s is the precarious state of factual information itself, as well as the high level of preconceptions and biases, regarding the theatre, which migrate over time. Even when individual concerns overcome the dominant feature of the Romanian stage to encourage impressionistic and event criticism, not in-depth, possibly historical analysis, the epistemic isolation of theatre from the rest of the socio-humanistic domains has always induced a preference for taking over group perceptions, in favor of confronting these perceptions with concrete research tools (the illusory benefits of hard labor groups, the way the self-financing mechanism worked or the financial privileges of the "Song of Romania" Festival under Ceaușescu, which this theses talks about at length, are such unquestioned collective narratives, with a direct impact on the ideas about the progress of theatre in post-communism). The post-communist bibliography on the period before December 1989 is dominated by interest in the institution of censorship and the question of playwriting, with occasional – though deeply relevant – extensions to the tribulations over time of the institution of criticism or the function of the literary secretary.

On the other hand, unlike, again, cinema or the literary/publishing sector, the post-1990 transition of theatres in Eastern and Central European has received relatively little international academic attention (and rather focused on the emergence of independent theatre) – for the good reason that, unlike those fields, in the theatre there was nowhere a

systemic, deep reform, and international researches rather focus on individual examples of transformation, against the background of preserving the old modes of production. What made the difference was what this mode of production looked like at the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall. "Redefining the relationship between the state and culture" was, for many post-communist spaces, the central issue in the restructuring of the cultural system, even if there was always too little debate about how public cultural institutions should serve the public, each of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. It is having its elements of uniqueness.

But the common elements are just as numerous. Although in Romania – sometimes, to a greater extent than in other post-communist countries – the privatization of the public system of cultural production and distribution was perceived as the magic solution to all problems, as far as the theatre is concerned, it was not even remotely identified with the aspirations related to systemic reform. From this point of view, the experience of our country is similar to that of the entire Eastern space, where the performing arts have escaped the "frenzy of privatization", in Dragan Klaić's terms, primarily because they "offer few opportunities for quick profit" and are uninteresting for foreign capital – which had the consequence of protecting this sector from the standard elements of a transition economy, primarily from mass layoffs of employees.

Conclusions

As in any context and in any history, there were, in the 1990s, visionaries and Cassandres, those who wanted radical change and those who wanted compensatory satisfactions, enthusiasts and frightened people, directors who returned to work towards change and directors for whom a true return was not possible. As in the case of the Romanian industry, the economy as a whole, the decisions taken or postponed in almost every field of social life in the first decades after the overthrow of the communist regime, the choices (because, in the last instance, the actions and non-actions, political or no, implied an option) made in those early years by those in the position of opting on behalf of the theatrical medium decisively determined how the theatre is looking and functioning three decades later. More precisely, as a two-lane system, which preserved in the center state institutions heavily subsidized on the component of salaries, utilities, maintenance of the spaces, performing in a repertory regime, with a permanent troupe of actors, employed (especially before 2007, respectively 2016) for an indefinite period of time. In other words, artists with

maximum social protection, while, with the constant increase in the number of Acting and Directing graduates, a "competitive market" was born around these performance institutions, quasi-inaccessible to the graduates in question, whose work is not recognized as labor, a "market" dominated by precariousness, in relation to which the State (actually, the theaters or their managers) holds an oversized position of control.

None of the theatrical regimes (repertory theatres with a permanent company) in the post-communist countries was subjected to a systemic restructuring during the transition period, due to the same set of factors found in Romania: the lack of commercial "viability" of the theatre and the political risks associated with affecting the socioeconomic status of a social category with very high symbolic capital (in the case of some of the states of the former Yugoslavia, the systemic conservation was generated by the war of the early 90s). Each such national system evolved "step by step", over time, under the pressure of external forces (economic transformations and, except for Albania and part of the former Yugoslavia, integration into the European Union), keeping, however, the fundamental coordinates with which it had emerged from communism.

Almost three decades later, repertory theatre has proven, especially in Romania, a surprising resilience: indeed, independent artists created an alternative mode of production, but it was, little by little, assimilated by the repertory mainstream companies, against the background of the subsidy monopoly for institutional funding, and the "dragon" of the repertory system "digested" and transformed, according to its own needs, the independent innovation that thus ensured an infusion of fresh blood. Indeed, a significant part of the public theatre with a permanent company has turned into a producer of commercial performances, without, however, giving up either the system of repertory programming or abandoning subsidies (which, whatever their variations in fixed amount, still represents between 75% and 95% of an institution's budget), while others (usually outside Bucharest) focused on "excellence", most of them opting for a mixture between the two options. None has relinquished – nor has economic conditions forced that – its monopoly over resources and infrastructure. Like capitalism, repertory theatre rose even stronger after each blow.

There is, in the theatrical environment and among the researchers who approached the subject of the unfulfilled reform, an agreement of opinion regarding the fact that the main obstacle was the fear of the unknown and the self-protective conservatism of the theatre people, and this perspective can be encountered starting from the moment when the former minister of Culture and president of UNITER Ion Caramitru had declared the postponement of that reform.

Without wanting to dismiss this interpretation, which also illustrates the background of contradictions of the transition, I tried to identify the objective and subjective conditions likely to feed the positioning of the artists, including in relation to other cultural fields (publishing and cinema). I did not discuss the theory of institutional transformations, but the practice seen from the grassroots and how subjectivities shaped the horizon of these unfinished transformations.

Many of the decisions and transitional inflections of Romanian theatre were also responses to previous situations, even when it was not an ultimately understandable (and relatively fleeting) reaction of rejecting everything what had previously existed. If the artists (but also the cultural world, in general) were not animated, in the era of transition, by the spirit of solidarity with other socio-professional groups, the explanation lies in the fact that they had perceived themselves as privileged victims, a direct target of Nicolae Ceaușescu's hostility – ignoring, largely due to the lack of information and communication between social classes, that the same Ceaușescu denied the right to retirement to miners suffering from middle stage silicosis or to the mutilated, he had decided to penalize the workers who could not fulfill increasingly fanciful plans, he had decided that the peasants had no right to compensation for crops lost in floods, but they had to re-sow at the beginning of autumn to have something to put on the table, etc. Ignoring, as far as performance institutions are concerned, even the fact that, in theaters, the working hours and the square meters to be cleaned by the cleaning personnel kept increasing.

If Romania faced, almost immediately after the Revolution, a crisis of the theatrical language and an extremely difficult emergence of the independent scene, the reason can be identified in the total lack of alternative stage discourse at the time of 1989. I tried, therefore, to show the process by which the amateur movement was forcibly absorbed into the official propaganda system and placed in a position of falsely-perceived direct competition with professional artists, generating a visceral and long-lasting reaction of rejection of the very idea of amateurism. The need for social recognition of artists had its specific roots in the very difficult period of the "profitability" of theaters – but that period (as well as the autarky of the Ceaușescu regime after 1980, which practically closed the theatre in a time capsule) also influenced, at least in part, the relatively prolonged interest of the international market for Romanian shows, after 1989. Hence the special attention given to the mechanism of self-financing and the 1980s – completely ignored as a research topic until now –, considering that it represents the source of a "post-traumatic syndrome" of the theatre, to which the world of performance constantly returned in the first post-communist decade. And especially

considering the fact that the only point on which, at least for a while, there was total agreement was that everything (starting with the directors and the plays in the repertory) had to be the reverse of how it had been until 1989.

The expectation that systemic changes would occur through mechanisms of horizontal democracy, and that the "subjects" of these changes would not only agree to them, but also actively participate in them, was one encountered exclusively when it came to the intellectual environment – another "by-product" of the reaction to communism, specific to the transition. In the immediate post-communist public narrative, resistance to change was an effect of fear, and fear was the exclusive attribute of those designated as the losers of the collapse of communism: the workers. And they were called to overcome this fear, to "understand" and accept the cost of "restoration", not to wait for understanding and solidarity. The fear was of those meant to "pay" for Ceaușescu's excesses and economic aberrations, not of those who had suffered because of those excesses. The symbolic position – and its associated capital – of various social groups played a disproportionately large role in that era (just as many of the desired "reparations" pursued symbolic aspects), and accepting and trying to heal fear (an already collective one, from 1994 onwards, and fueled by personal experience of the immediate post-communist socioeconomic chaos) was something incompatible with projecting the "winner" image of giving up communism. Discussions in the theatrical environment, extended over time, about "recognition of value" were, in fact, closely related to the confidence of artists that, unlike communism, the "market economy" rewards "value" and only those professionally incompetent have to lose in the new system.

The alternative to reform through participatory democracy was, of course, the political decision. Its legitimacy was intensely sabotaged, especially in the period 1993-1996, by a succession of aberrant measures, administratively-bureaucratically operated and motivated by petty priorities (such as the recentralization of cultural institutions to "combat" the lack of object of activity of the inspectorates for culture) or of deeply personal interests (how to allocate the subsidy for cultural magazines or the replacement of "unsympathetic" directors), against the background of a total absence of political commitment and the activation of the old cleavages between protochronists and synchronists. At the time of Ion Caramitru's appointment as minister, the theatre in Romania had become a self-administered environment (by the companies actors), with a high degree of hostility and suspicion towards any type of authority. And the reversibility of the gains of that period (as happened with the legislation on sponsorship or the one on the much-claimed hard labor groups), as well as the

implosion of the coalition in which a consistent part of the cultural milliey had placed so much hope, did not help much. Never after that, the theatrical environment found any hope in party politics (unlike the other intellectuals, who later saw the reactivation of their radical anti-communist ideas from the 1990s – and a new, apparently, space of influence – in the figure of President Traian Basescu).

The content of the thesis

List of acronyms

Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

2. The reform that was not meant to be (the starting point)

- 2.1. The political context: the Manichaeism of the 1990s
- 2.2. The actor and the director, the impossible equation
- 2.3. The economic context of the promised reform

3. Self-financing. The spectrum of the economically profitable theatre

- 3.1. Theatre as "history of accounting books"
- 3.2. "Auto". Participatory democracy in a planned economy
- 3.3. The real-life forms of self-financing in theatre
- 3.4. "Personalization" versus ideology. Some explanations about real socialism
- 3.5. The myth of the generous funding of the "Song of Romania" Festival
- 3.6. The 1980s crisis of international touring

4. The misleading sense of moral purification

- 4.1. Contesting the faculty at the Theatre Institute
- 4.2. The 90s purges in other universities
- 4.3. The "Great Purge" in theaters
- 4.4. Addendum. The first success of the ultranationalists

5. The reform that was not meant to be (continued)

- 5.1. "Entering Europe"
- 5.2. Value, not money. The status of the artist
- 5.3. "Getting rid of the chains"

6. The wave of restoration. Management and the market

- 6.1. 1994. "The Dabija Case"
- 6.2. The National Theatre Festival: UNITER vs the Ministry of Culture

6.3. Director vs. the company: The Winter of Enmity

6.4. Director versus manager

6.5. Decentralization-recentralization

6.6. Postscript on decentralization: 2002-2004

7. Promises, fulfillments, disappointments

7.1. Money and value. The copyright law

7.2. *Teatrul azi* [Theatre today] and the first experiment of the market economy

8. Three attempts at the theatre law

8.1. The revolutionary episode

8.2. "A sublime idea that died in the womb": 1997-1998

8.3. The attempt materializes: 2003-2004

8.4. A footnote on the history of management law

9. Were artists like miners? – epilogue

10. Conclusions

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