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ON ART, KEEPING THEATRE IN MIND...

This spring, when I accepted the invitation to be one of the three curators of the National Theatre Festival, a major yearly event in Romanian theatre, I realised that organising such a festival implies an honest and lucid reflection not only on theatre, but also on art in general. Parenthetically, the previously mentioned Festival was, traditionally, a showcase of the most important 30–40 productions from the previous year, a kind of summary of the most notable events from our couple hundred stages. For every edition, a concept is sketched, meant to reflect a dominant coordinate, a major topic around which the event is put together.

This year, however, everything seemed different. Alongside my fellows, Mihaela Michailov and Oana Cristea Grigorescu, I understood that something profound has been altered in our recent past, as if all the certitudes we used to have about theatre suddenly developed unstable contours. The pandemic, the implicit urgency of introducing new technologies as a main topic, and the war in Ukraine, with the doubts related to the possibility of art taming the abysses of human nature, contributed, I believe, to a new type of attitude relating to art. It, certainly, is not about something manifestly different, but only about a deep current that lets us know that the tectonic plates of our aesthetics no longer have the stability they used to have in the last decades.

This is an annotation that I consider relevant. For one of the classes I have at the Schools of Philosophy and of Theatre, I give my students, every year, an assignment: let's assume that, in the city's public Garden, you meet an alien that, one way or another, asks you to show them, through a factual example, what "art" is. I have been proposing that assignment for five years, to each generation, for various reasons: firstly, as it makes the students give themselves the answer to the

question “what is art?”, secondly, because it is facing them with the need of understanding the differences and the similarities between the possible culture of the Alien, of the Other, and their own, and, thirdly, as it gives me, as a professor, a picture of the possible opinions on art and of the variations from within this picture, year after year. Strangely, if in the first two years the examples from the sphere of classical art were dominant (painting, sculpture, fragments of classical music, ballet etc.), in the last two years, our alien was given completely different references. Michelangelo, Mozart, Beethoven and the other patriarchs of art gave ground in favour of surprising examples that brought into discussion the worlds of virtual realities, complex video-mappings, intensely and explicitly technologised sounds, softwares from different fields considered... art works, but also references to a dark contemporary art, that explores, in multiple manners, the undergrounds of human nature. Frequently, art was no longer called upon as an illustration of the joy of being alive, but, on the contrary, as a sign of a depressive personal horizon, a background of the lack of meaning, of a neo-absurd of our time.

Perhaps these mutations should not surprise us. Hegel, Heidegger, and, more recently, Gadamer are only some of the philosophers who brought into discussion, someday or another, the death of art or, in any case, the possibility of certain major turns that could impose radical redefinitions, structural rethinkings of a millennial concept. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel, for instance, forecast the disappearance of art through its total association with works from the past; in other words, the German philosopher suggests that the new creations of humankind will no longer be able to ensure the essence of what he, in the nineteenth century, still called art.¹ Inevitably, gradually, at once with the distancing from the founding past, art dies out, says Hegel. Heidegger,² Gadamer³ and other modern philosophers prefer analysing a decadence of art, that no longer is a “bringing-forth” (*Hervorbringen*), but, rather, a “mode of making” (*Anfertigung*).⁴ Our times, dominated by the will to efficientize culture, by the new mall-

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Prelegeri de estetică* [Lectures on Aesthetics], vol. I–II, trans. D.D. Roșca (Bucharest: Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1966).

² Martin Heidegger, *Originea operei de artă* [The Origin of the Work of Art], trans. and footnotes Thomas Thomas Kleininger and Gabriel Liiceanu. Introductory study by Constantin Noica (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1995).

³ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Elogiul teoriei. Moștenirea Europei* [The Eulogy of Theory: The Legacy of Europe], trans. Octavian Nicolae and Val Panaitescu. Foreword by Ștefan Afloroaei. Iași: Polirom, 1999.

⁴ On this “decadence” or “disenchanting” I am speaking in detail in my study entitled “O dezvrăjire: arta timpului meu [A disenchanting: The Art of My Time],” in *Ordine și libertate. De la metafizică la politică* [Order and freedom: From metaphysics to politics], ed. Cristian Moisuc and Viorel Țuțui, introduction by Ștefan Afloroaei (Iași: Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza,” 2020).

spirituality, by the translation of the art-work into a consumable object seem to agree with them and to announce that an ancient paradigm is almost collapsing.

The situation becomes more and more complicated, as the borders between different fields of art are being erased. A new deity, the Hybrid, seems to have taken charge of us and to dictate new tendencies, aesthetics of the mixture, of the eclecticism that would frighten not only the classics, but even the recent generations of the twentieth century. Although the discussions about the concepts of transdisciplinarity, interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary seem somehow obsolete, in fact, the contemporary creators enthusiastically apply a theoretical apparatus that offers them unimaginable freedoms. It becomes impossible, for instance, to think of theatrical art bearing in mind only the image of some actors who speak on a stage. To most of those who risk engaging in such an exercise of imagination, the first thing that comes to their mind is... a video projection. Or a body in movement. Or a complete dematerialization. Or the screen of a laptop. An increasingly acute relativization makes the attempts of precisely defining art, in general, or the art of theatre, in particular, to be foredoomed to failure.

In such a context, a form of “organising art” (another problematic syntagma), such as a post-pandemic Theatre Festival (although we do not yet know if it is not intra-pandemic) while having a war taking place as we speak a few steps away (the dramatic events our Ukrainian neighbours are going through deeply affected Romania’s population) calls for a different approach compared to how we would have organised the same Festival a couple of years ago. Below is the official description of the concept I proposed alongside Mihaela Michailov and Oana Cristea Grigorescu. It is a text that speaks about the new, unsettling, yet exciting perspectives that we think the art of theatre conveys in our complicated century.

NTF 2022 – FRAIL BORDERS. FLUID HISTORIES

REFLECTIONS ON THE PRESENT TIMES – PERFORMATIVE MIRRORINGS

In a time of socio-political convulsions, in a time when the affiliation with the nation and with the national values is constantly being re-written through the perspective of turbulent collective and individual histories, NTF 2022 aims to explore aesthetic, social, conceptual placements and dis-placements, as they are reflected by the local performing arts.

More than ever before, the social and spiritual collisions of the present time face the performing arts with new demeanours, lucid, critical, and compassionate interventions. Even more necessary now than «in times of peace», the question regarding what the point of art is in a society contrasted and exhausted by contradictions needs to be formulated loudly and integrated into the act of creation.

How do contemporary performing arts relate to society? How do they explore its traumas, its vulnerabilities, its failures, its disappointments, its faults? How do they mend its wounds and how do they help it gain self-awareness? Are performing arts capable of such a *mirroring*, one that is active, transfiguring, transformative, capable of modifying the core and the contours of what-is-being-mirrored? Can the artist become an *influencer* in the community they activate in and which they are addressing (to us). What is happening with the venerable concept of *theatricality* in this performative landscape where borders, frontiers, clearly defined territories cease being stable landmarks? To what extent does the art we practise hold in itself a feeling of urgency, of unsettling fluidity, of ceaselessly de-structuring and re-structuring the «North» and the «South» of the established forms of theatricality?

The previously tested theatrical configurations leave the matrix, fusing in strange, poliform mixtures, that, yet, are tempting exactly for their unpredictability and the peculiar aesthetic issues that they raise. The contemporary production, a hybrid itself, addressing with more ease to a spectator who has a hybrid intake capacity, cannot ignore the current settings of our world and our way of being.

The philosophies we are guiding ourselves by for this edition of the NTF leave behind the traditional frameworks of a so-called ‘official selection,’ understood, for a long time, as a display — not devoid of pride — ‘of the best Romanian theatre essentially has to offer.’

Our options are, rather, the result of an *overflight* above the Romanian theatre field, one during which we sought to observe the answers given in the past year to challenges such as: the urgency and the intensity of certain approaches, the fragility of several certitudes, the interference with different mediums and re-contouring ‘theatricality,’ the multidisciplinarity transposed in the artistic sphere, the instability of ethical horizons, the performative challenging of various crisis. More than just a selection, we, thus, intend to create a series of snippets meant to illustrate different angles of artistic approach regarding what we still understand, with a certain degree of precaution, through the term of ‘reality.’

Beyond displaying productions, we believe that the meaning of a Theatre Festival is to generate a context for reflection and performative questioning, a continuous mediation between the forms of theatricality that have already been acknowledged and the experimental ones that come from creative laboratories, a space of aesthetic decentralizations and revivals, as well as of frontal debates on acute topics of the present times. The purpose of the Theatre Festival is, therefore, not only *to exhibit*, but also *to examine* who we are and, more importantly, who we can become.

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