

New Europe College Yearbook 2010-2011



IONUȚ FLORIN BILIUȚĂ
DUNYA DENIZ ÇAKIR
ANA-MARIA GOILAV
MARIANA GOINA
SILVIU-RADIAN HARITON
SUSAN MBULA KILONZO
CRISTIAN NAE
THEODOR-CRISTIAN POPESCU
COSMIN GABRIEL RADU
KONRAD SIEKIERSKI
ANDREEA ȘTEFAN

Editor: Irina Vainovski-Mihai

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New Europe College
Str. Plantelor 21
023971 Bucharest
Romania

www.nec.ro; e-mail: nec@nec.ro
Tel. (+4) 021.307.99.10, Fax (+4) 021. 327.07.74



THEODOR-CRISTIAN POPESCU

Born in 1967, Turda
Ph.D., University of Arts, Târgu-Mureş

*Thesis: Overflow of People or Overflow of Ideas. The Pioneers of the Post '89
Romanian Independent Theatre Movement: Attitudes, Strategies, Impact*

Assoc. Prof., University of Arts, Târgu-Mureş

2000-2001 Fulbright Grant, University of Montana

Theatre director, more than 40 performances staged in Romania,
Canada and USA

Numerous awards and participations in festivals, workshops and conferences
in Romania, United Kingdom, Germany, Slovenia, Bulgaria, The Netherlands,
Poland, etc.

Several articles published in Romanian theatre magazines

THE FIRST WAVE OF THE ROMANIAN INDEPENDENT THEATRE AFTER 1989: FORMS OF MANIFESTATION*

A new model comes into existence; three different interpretations of the notion of “failure” in connection with the Romanian independent theatre of the nineties

Toward the end of the nineties, the notion of “failure” is more often than not present in the discourse of the Romanian independent theatre’s most visible practitioners.

The general economic, social and political context is not very optimistic. Not unlike every other ex-communist society in Eastern Europe, the Romanian one is excessively politicized. The first half of the decade sees the radical polarization of the Romanian society in two parts: one consisting of those seeing themselves as victims of the former regime, the other of those perceived as former profiteers. The confrontation is harsh; the society seems to reach the boiling point.¹

The CDR-PD-UDMR government, arriving to power in 1996 with a message constructed around the notions of “morality” and “competence”, gives eventually the impression of not being able to “change” Romania. The president Emil Constantinescu declares that he is permanently obstructed by the former “nomenklatura” and “Securitate” and decides not to candidate for a new term, so that in 2000 the options for president consist of the ex-communist Ion Iliescu and the radical nationalist Corneliu Vadim Tudor . In general, the ex-communists seem to adapt better to this new reality, but then again, not only in Romania:

* The author of this paper was a NEC-*Adevărul* Fellow for the academic year 2010-11.

While the heroes of the anti-Communist protests continued to indulge their dreams of a new society based on justice, honesty and solidarity, the ex-Communists were able without difficulty to accommodate themselves with the new capitalist rules. Paradoxically, in the new post-Communist condition, the anti-Communist stood for the utopian dream of a true democracy, while the ex-Communists stood for the cruel new world of market efficiency, with all its corruption and dirty tricks. (Žižek, 2009:10)

Miners come several times to Bucharest to impose their will; during their sixth approach the authorities decide finally to confront them in the Olt County: the TV stations broadcast apocalyptic- ridiculous medieval-like fights between the gendarmes and the miners, talking about “the battle” of Costești and “the peace treaty” of Cozia. While big banks (Dacia Felix, Bancorex) and mutual funds that seemed solid (SAFI, FNI, FDF, etc.) crash noisily, sweeping away people’s deposits, the press uncovers illegal cigarettes operations carried by military airplanes on the country’s main airport.

Corruption seems endemic.

Many decide to live elsewhere. Romania becomes a country that gives an important emigration, the census of 2002 recording more than a million people that have left the country during the previous decade.²

In 1999, the total budget for culture represents 0.10% of the Gross Domestic Product and the minister Ion Caramitru is interpellated in the Parliament regarding the “general bankruptcy” state of the Romanian cultural sector³.

Under these circumstances, the survival instinct prevails and the “unique” theatrical model of the state subsidized repertory theatre⁴ closes unto itself: to an inquiry conducted by the Ministry of Culture among the employees of state theatres, the majority responds that it supports the preservation of the *status quo*. That means that a majority of state employed theatre practitioners has chosen the benefit of permanent (even if poorly paid) employment against the risk of creating a theatrical open system.

As a result, the notion of “failure” is assumed by more and more artists that have chosen to create independently. The new UltimaT magazine writes about the “failed genealogy” of the theatrical alternative and about “the creative unrest, the adventurous interrogation, the willingness to serve acute pains”:

One cannot, obviously, display an alternative critical discourse in the absence of an alternative to the mainstream theatrical practice. What if one has enough of writing in the same way about performances that use the same old means and techniques (already obsolete) relating to the same audience that the theatre makers of the sixties used to relate to? We are in 1999 – let us note the apocalyptic references of this number – a moment in time when, despite the decade-long efforts, the alternative practice of the Romanian theatre reclaims itself from a failed genealogy.⁵ (UltimaT 1999, #1:3)

But being independent implies a way of thinking and acting that leads to models different from the “unique” one subsidized by the Romanian state: the repertory theatre.

In what follows I will argue that the notion of “failure” does not apply, despite the almost general impression at the time, to the impossible task to replicate and compete with the state theatres in terms of structure and permanence of operations. The new models came into being with new structures and characteristics. The disappearance or the transformation of some of those newly imagined organizations does not necessarily prove to be a failure, but a sign of normalcy according to the rules of the new reality. On the contrary, the notion of “failure” can be ascribed to the lack of recognition of these new models by a harmful environment, causing their retarded development and to the independent movement’s own weaknesses, to their lack of solidarity and support for each other and to their lack of courage to depart from the validated esthetic models and their fear of marginality.

The contradiction of the “art theatre” as institution.

A rhythm of destruction and construction.

The new cultural entrepreneurship

Contrary impulses: to take roots or to leave. To cultivate and protect your territory or to go out hunting. The comfort of one’s fortress or the adventure into the unknown.

Throughout the nineties, the Romanian theatre is forced to look for ways to reposition itself in the world. The “unique institutional model” (Miruna Runcan) of the state theatre functioning in a repertory system⁶ proves to be a structure able to cultivate and protect the “art theatre”,⁷

but also a restrictive formula because of its outdated and cumbersome structure and functioning practices. Its problem now is how to re-link itself to the society, how to become necessary again:

Beyond the aesthetic results, the well-deserved fame and successes, there is the problem of theatre's presence in its historical context, of theatre's meaning. For theatre cannot be reduced to performances; it is not only an artistic form, but also a form of existence and reaction. (Barba, 2010:20)

From this perspective, there are artists who feel slowed down in their endeavors, isolated or even completely blocked by the unique formula that has turned the "art theatre" into "state theatre", artists who realize that what they miss is precisely the "fear of nothingness" that such a "state art" manages to protect them from, artists who were ready to give up their "immortality" (permanent employment in an officially sanctioned structure) to regain their "mortality" (the freedom of action, with all the "dangers" implied).⁸

This is a double impulse.

On the one hand, those who have chosen a dimension for their artistic project of a scale closer to „human needs“ have given up the „major idea“ of being arts' servants in one of its „temples“, of a project „bigger than themselves“ for the „somehow diminished status“ of a kind of „entrepreneur in an artistic world and market.“⁹ Their independence includes a new relationship with the society – impossible during the previous historical period – and a different cultural attitude, becoming a component of their practiced art, in agreement with the contemporary dimensions present in all of the other artistic fields.

On the other hand, all methods that strive toward renewing theatrical practices aim to avoid „the atrophy of its artistic muscles“ – it is the very idea that Stanislavski and Nemirovici-Dancenکو have placed at the base of founding MHAT¹⁰. The notion of a rigid, fixed, permanent institution is in contradiction with the idea of „art theatre“, which Anatoly Smelianski associated „by necessity“ with „a certain ephemerality“.¹¹ The contradiction between the idea of means and practices' renewal and the idea of institution that Stanislavski was so afraid of when he was trying to persuade the new Soviet authorities “to avoid showering money over the young theatres, in order to leave them a certain feeling of danger, of a risk inherent in the theatrical profession”¹², is “one of the problems that

confront the world's art theatres. Often their promoters are in conflict with their own creation. The idea has dried out, but they are still trying..."¹³

That is why one of the most significant directors of the twentieth century, Peter Stein, proposes "a rhythm of destruction and construction" to fight "the petrification":

The art theatre that we are talking about here feels the need to create institutions, and that produces a contradiction. An avant-garde action like that of the art theatre ends up as institution and it becomes, as a matter of fact, a tombstone weighting heavily upon theatre's development. Then the danger of petrification emerges. Yes, petrification remains the biggest threat... We intend to propose the community a serious thing, with its own rules and, in the meantime, we sacrifice the other important dimension of theatre, its futility, its vocation for entertainment, its mobility. That is why we have to construct, then to destroy relentlessly and then to reconstruct. It is the correct rhythm.(Stein in Banu, 2010:91-92)

Let us explore a few facts about the "rhythm" of the Romanian theatre of the nineties.

Cosmopolitan beginnings. Foreign exploitation of the socialist infrastructure. The new internationalism of the nineties: Easterners are meeting in the West

Taking advantage of its president's (Ion Caramitru) constructive energy and prestige, The Romanian Association of Theatre Artists (UNITER) becomes, during the first years after 1989, the privileged, almost unique partner of the external links with the Romanian theatre. UNITER changes rapidly its structure from a section-based organization into a project and programs institution. Two big projects define its rebirth : "Seeding A Network" with the British theatre – "created in 1991 by The British Council, The Royal National Theatre in London, London International Festival of Theatre, the Romanian partner being UNITER (national coordinator Marian Popescu) covering all the performing arts fields (acting, directing, stage design, playwriting, literary management, management)" (Măniuțiu, in Malița, 2006:398) and "Le printemps de la liberté" with the French theatre, involving the presence of numerous French artists in Romania between March and June 1990: Antoine Vitez, Gérard Desarthe, Patrice

Chéreau, Virgil Tănase, Robert Pinget, Joel Jouanneau, Raymond Cousse, Hélène Delavaut, Massimo Schuster, Elisabeth Macocco, Peter Brook in Bucharest, Timisoara, Cluj and Iasi, the revenue from tickets sales being donated to the host institutions. Numerous other tours, exchanges, visits and participations in festivals abroad will continue to be facilitated by UNITER.

During a first visit of France as part of a Romanian political delegation in 1990, Ion Caramitru proposes the creation of a Franco-Romanian theatre, inspired by the model of the old Romanian-born French *sociétaires* of the *Comédie française*, which were touring Romania before WWII, presenting (in French) some of the successful shows of the previous Parisian season. The French side accepts a project-type, non-permanent structure on an alternative basis: a French Director, Sophie Loukachevsky, is invited to create a performance with Romanian actors using a French text in Bucharest and the Romanian director Alexandru Tocilescu is invited to direct a Romanian text with French actors in Paris. Cristina Dumitrescu is named director of this "project, not institution" (Bărbulescu, 1994, #2-3:38). Confused by the contact with a Romanian society that seems to be completely disoriented, Sophie Loukachevsky decides eventually to propose a collage of different authors (Marx, Sartre, Claudel, Pirandello) under the title "Six Characters In Search Of...". The performance has just a few Romanian representations with a very limited impact, but is toured extensively in the francophone world: Montréal, Québec, Limoges, Paris, Strasbourg, Geneva, Orléans, Avignon, etc. Tocilescu's answer will be to put on stage Matei Vişniec's "Old Clown for Hire" (under the French title "On mourira jamais") with the French clown troupe Les Macloma at Théâtre du *Rond-Point* in Paris. The third project (and the one with the biggest impact) will also bring, paradoxically, the end of the Franco-Romanian theatre. By inviting theatre practitioners from French Canada, the Romanian side steps unwillingly on the mined field of the delicate intercultural relationships between France and another French expression territory. The French side decides to abort the project. The two Romanian actors, Sandu Mihai Gruia and Oana Pellea, take the show on their own and exploit it successfully for many years.¹⁴

Another model of a bilingual theatre is the Irish-Romanian Theatre, defined by its initial coordinator Marian Popescu as "not an institution, but a formula of cooperation between Romania and Ireland" (Bărbulescu, 1994, #2-3:36). The first project is named "Ceausescu's Ear" (written and directed by Gerard Stembridge) coproduced by UNITER, Teatrul

Mic in Bucharest (where three representations are hosted) and the Old Museum in Belfast. Again the representations abroad (restricted this time to Ireland) outnumber the ones at home. The facilitator of this project is a person that mediates constantly and vigorously the Irish-Romanian cultural cooperation, Professor John Fairleigh. A foundation has replaced eventually this project, initiating diverse cultural events in different artistic fields.

The "Eugene O'Neill" Romanian-American Theatre, created and led by the director Alexa Visarion, does not always exhibit a very visible American side. The staging (in English) of Sam Shepard's "Fool for Love" and Tennessee Williams' "Orpheus Descending" by Adrian Pintea in the mid-nineties are enriching the Bucharest theatrical landscape, but they do not penetrate the American market. Other stagings are also exclusively realized by the Romanian side, such as Sam Shepard's "The Buried Child", directed by Cătălina Buzoianu and coproduced with the Bulandra Theatre in 1996.

These bilingual institutions are fuelled mainly by the Romanian theatre practitioners' desire to create a framework for the collaboration with their colleagues from abroad, followed by a presence in the respective foreign cultural spaces. Gradually, this process is controlled more and more by the Romanian state theatres that prefer to build their own international relations, taking advantage of the inherited infrastructure that they exploit exclusively. The majority of the Romanian state theatres begin during these years to look for and cultivate external partnerships, sometimes in a spectacular manner, like the National Theatre of Craiova, whose representations abroad outnumber by far the ones at home during several seasons.

Such a mutation is best exemplified by the most complex British-Romanian theatrical exchange program – NOROC. Initially twelve British partners associated to promote individual exchanges, visits and "know-how" transfer. The Romanian coordinator was UNITER.

The initial concept of the NOROC program was that of a reciprocal infusion of creativity by direct contact (tours, internships, workshops in both countries) between two theatrical realities displaying a great appetite for this form of art, but completely different experiences and history. The NOROC program was the longest, the amplest, the most coherent and fertile international project that the Romanian theatre was involved in after 1990. It made possible the international confirmation of many Romanian

actors and directors, the Romanian theatre being seen, for several years, as a highly creative and vital movement. (Măniuțiu, in Malița, 2006:402-403)

A first wave of projects is absorbed by the state theatres due, on the one hand, to the monopoly they hold on the theatrical infrastructure (which gives them credibility to the foreign partners, despite their slowness in decision-taking and actions) and on the other hand to the influence of big festivals, which prefer to invite mainly big shows with huge casts (as an exemple, Silviu Purcărete's performance based on Aeschylus' "The Danaids" has a cast of more than 100 actors) that are almost impossible to produce in Western theatre anymore. The Romanian theatre acquires thus an exotic aura, displaying high artistic qualities, but selling itself cheaply, quite often the Romanian artists receiving only a per-diem for their participation in festivals, instead of substantial fees. The impulse expected from abroad by some Romanian theatre practitioners toward the transformation of the Romanian theatrical landscape through the encouragement of independent initiatives changes direction: by cheaply exploiting the big state theatres' ensembles, the foreign partners encourage implicitly the Romanian *status quo* and privilege the big Romanian partners that monopolize the resources.

It is to be mentioned that all of these exchange programs are taking all through the nineties the East-West direction, between the "small" and the "major" cultures.¹⁵ The Easterners are neglecting each other, and when they meet, this happens invariably in the West. There is no Romanian-Czech or Romanian-Polish theatrical initiative, although these cultural spaces could have benefited a lot from a common framework of exchanges. The links are also broken during this decade throughout the Balkan space, where conflicts spring and spread rapidly. The Easterners aim to assert and validate their new identities in the West and this is seen as a crucial action in order to take part into the European and global new order:

After 1989, we can, however, notice that there are two key contradictory demands in cultural policies that had influences that were both specific and not always positive on the cultural cooperation measures within the region. The first demand – **identity questioning** – could seem to lead to greater mutual regional cooperation, but in fact, it constituted itself in a barrier and was more of a constraint. [...] In opposition to this quest for a lost national identity, the second characteristic, **the need of integration in the world**, was also "destimulative" for Balkan cultural cooperation. To be present in London, Paris and New York became a crucial demand

and guaranteed the feeling of being acknowledged as part of the world, of global culture, of the values that count, i.e. values recognized abroad. (Radu, Ferchedău, 2005:16)

For me personally, the participation in the “Seeding A Network” program (by hosting the Black Mime Theatre artist Denise Wong and engaging in a research trip that took me to London, Leicester, Sheffield, Manchester, Nottingham, Belfast and Dublin) and my participation in a group project together with the London’s “Central School of Speech and Drama” students under the supervision of playwright Caryl Churchill and director Mark Wing-Davey (that led to the creation of “Mad Forest”¹⁶) influenced greatly my beginnings as a theatre director. Many other exchanges followed.¹⁷

Taking a great part of their energy from the contact with foreign partners, who during the nineties are coming almost exclusively to Romania’s Capital, most of the first Romanian independent initiatives in theatre took place in Bucharest.

Too many people or too many ideas for a theatrical system? Forms of crossbreeding

Aiming to propose an alternative to the culture of success, to the triumphal tours and international co-productions privileging the big institutions, the playwright Radu Macrinici initiates in 1992 the International Theatre Festival “Atelier”: “a festival of the new experiences in the twentieth century theatre, forbidden or intermittently present in the life of the Romanian theatre practitioners and audience.” (Macrinici, 2000, # 2 (22):14) His action derives from the observation that Romania did not take advantage of the international visibility brought by the violent crash of its totalitarian regime to promote its young artists, but “exported Hamlet, Richard III, Ubu Rex – big theatre on big texts”.¹⁸ The festival tries to be a less glorious meeting place, less obsessed of the big names and more interested in the intimate dimension of dialogue. The performances are followed by late night discussions involving artists, critics and audience. Like most of the independent initiatives, the “Atelier” festival uses the infrastructure of a state theatre, first in Sfântu-Gheorghe and now in Baia Mare (with some editions in Sighişoara in-between).

This way of “parasitizing” the state theatres by the independent initiatives was first defined as “crossbreeding” by the director Mihai Măniuțiu:

I do not believe that the weak, but tenacious alternative strivings are a real competition for the subsidized state theatre. But they should exist. They are a form of crossbreeding. Nobody can afford to live from what the independent theatre provides. The alternative artists are getting into a form of crossbreeding, forced to work inside the system, but also wishing something else. Nowhere in the world does a director who cares about his interests abandon the subsidized theatre. Crossbreeding is a vital element, the blood mixing creates formulae that, even if initially annoying, prove themselves fertile in the end. The crossbreeding is even more necessary now, when neither the subsidized theatre, not the independent one can have an autonomous existence. It is necessary because it is a proof that one can do otherwise, too. (Măniuțiu, 1999, #12:6-7)

This way of presenting the facts suggest a new type of pressure on the theatre system. But there are different opinions about the origins of this pressure. Some theatre practitioners consider that:

Generally speaking, the alternative theatre is practiced by actors, directors, playwrights, etc. that did not have or had restricted access to “un-alternative” stages. [...] I strongly believe that any playwright, actor, director, designer, composer, etc. can hardly wait to get rid of the “alternative”, providing that they find a place in the opposite camp. (Cornișteanu, 2000, #2 (22):10)

or

I believe that the independent theatre’ birth is caused by an inflation of actors, directors and even designers. A great number of people have no access to theatres anymore. It is irrelevant why. And they are trying to express themselves, they are not looking for permanent employment. (Dinulescu, 2005, #282)

In other words, too many people are fighting for very few available places in the institutionalized theatres, a situation due to the exponential growth of the number of accepted students by the schools of theatre after 1990. Waiting for the next available place inside the system, the “unemployed” artists are doing what they can to keep themselves busy and to attract some attention. Others believe that

attaching the idea of independent theatre to a surplus of practitioners that cannot find employment anymore is not the best example. Many of those who would easily find a place in state theatres prefer to work with independent theatres, or with both systems. I think we could rather speak about an overflow of ideas, not an overflow of people. (Popovici, 2005, #282)

In this last case, we are talking about

[...] a reinvention of the theatrical codes affecting all the creative sectors. The alternative theatre represents, I believe, an attempt to adapt the theatrical language to the present time sensitivities. [...] The assumed risks and difficulties, organizational or of a more subtle nature, provoke, I think, an artistically aggressive attitude and often radicalize the theatrical act. This "artistic radicalism", whether nourished by important artistic experiences or juvenile anxieties, increases the vitality of the theatrical gesture and the interest for the revival of the theatrical communication. [...] The alternative theatre continues, I believe, the attitude of creativity and wish to communicate that have generated all the known forms of theatrical manifestations and denies the museum-type culture, the indifference toward the present time sensitivities and anxieties, the wearing out and incapacity of the dead forms. (Galgoțiu, 2000, #2(22):11)

Both "overflows" are valid reasons for an independent theatrical act. But regardless of what is putting this new pressure on the institutionalized system, one cannot deny its existence. Throughout the decade, the state theatres are shaken by crises, resignations or even strikes.

There is too much commotion in the Romanian theatre" declares indignantly an old critic, Valentin Silvestru.¹⁹ And another one, Paul Cornel Chitic, demands "a set of instructions to use freedom" to calm down the theatre practitioners: "What happens with the theatres and inside the theatres after the 22nd of December 1989? [...] Exactly what was inevitable to happen. The liberation from the dictatorship was taken for freedom. And freedom, defined as unhindered access to opportunity, is privatized. Directors, actors, consider that freedom is their own, everyone's own freedom, everyone as a social being and not as an artist. This freedom is harmful because it leads to an amnesia affecting the minds. Most of them forgot that, as people belonging to the stage, they have dreamed and tried to snatch from the censorship bits and pieces of what we all used to call THE FREEDOM OF THE THEATRICAL ART, THE FREEDOM OF THE STAGE.[...]

Everybody is impatient. We are all waiting. What are the theatres waiting for, obviously, without wasting their time? A law for theatres. Even if they do not want it, this law is necessary as a set of instructions to use freedom. (Chitic, 1990, #1:19)

The “creative silence” that defined the times before 1989 is lost forever.

The first impulses for independent projects are coming from different directions. Besides the stimulus offered by foreign partnerships and exchanges, another impulse comes from the desire to exploit freely a theatrical production, which now has a legal framework. In 1990, The “Scorpio” Private Theatrical Society assumes a theatre study on Caragiale from the National University of Theatre by Professor Mircea Albulescu’s acting students, exploiting for the first time publicly an internal theatre university presentation. “ARCA (Romanian Artists in Faith and Truth)” stages Marc Camoletti’s “Boeing Boeing”²⁰ mainly with National Theatre actors. The critics are unimpressed:

[...] we are asking ourselves if in the case of this new theatre [...] we are experiencing an original way of privatizing. Legal, of course, but not very encouraging for the desired new spirit that should animate private companies, for the necessary independence of private theatre. Which, we hope, will not be just an original, legalized new way to exploit old gigs. (Parhon, 1990, #3:27)

In the same spirit of a popular theatre, that aims to make use of the extended network of the country’s cultural houses to organize long tours throughout the country, Dorina Lazăr founds the “Bucharest Company”. She remembers the huge crowds that gathered when actors from Bucharest were touring the countryside before 1989. Hoping to continue this success, but exploit it commercially this time, the Bucharest Company (registered as a “for profit” organization) produces three comedies: “I come home from Paris” in 1990 (directed by Nicolae Scarlat, with Hamdi Cerchez, Mitiță Popescu, Mihai Dinvale, Mihai Mihail, Dorina Lazăr, Adina Popescu), “Midnight Holdup” by Sami Fayad in 1992 (directed by Tudor Mărăscu, with the same group of actors plus Tamara Buciuceanu) and “A Farewell to Women” (directed by Mihai Berechet, with Ștefan Iordache and Angela Similea). The staging formula comprises, in all of these three cases, a minimal stage design, but very well-known actors (all of them permanently employed by state theatres). The actors are putting on and taking off the set,

driving the minibus, hiring a very limited number of technicians, in an effort to minimize expenses. They like what they are doing and they feel free, getting in touch with their inner condition of the all-ages itinerant actor. But whatever worked before 1989 proves irrelevant in and after 1990. The Bucharest Company ceases activities in 1996 and radiates itself in 2000, when Dorina Lazăr decides to join the management team of the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest. This is one of very few cases of an independent cultural manager transferring her competencies to a state institution; there are also Mircea Diaconu at Nottara Theatre and Constantin Chiriac at the State Theatre (later named National Theatre) in Sibiu.

This type of theatrical private enterprise that aims at financial independence and profit proved ephemeral at the beginning of the nineties. After long years of being offered low-priced state subsidized theatre tickets, the audience is unwilling to pay more and they do not seem interested in the same things that they found entertaining during the previous years. The audience changes and nobody can anticipate what will interest them. It is too early for commercial success in this field.²¹

But several independent formulae will try to place themselves under the sign of artistic excellence.

The first notable example is that of Levant Theatre, founded in 1990 by Valeria Seciu. The plays are chosen on already proven contemporary texts, the performing spaces are often unconventional and the actors very well-known in order to attract the audience to these new spaces: "the independent version of a high-class theatre."²² The Levant Theatre opens its first production in 1991 at the Atelier Stage of the National Theatre in Bucharest with Matei Vişniec's "Old Clown For Hire", directed by Nicolae Scarlat, with Mitică Popescu, Alexandru Bindea and Adrian Negru (who is also stage managing). There were 30 representations and one invitation to the Bonner Biennale of 1992. Later the same year they continue with a second production at the "burned hall" (a space inside the Bucharest's Royal Palace that was burned during the December 1989 events): Stefan Janev's "Socrate's Last Night" directed by Ştefan Iordănescu, designed by Nic Ularu, with Maia Morgenstern, Claudiu Istodor, Mircea Andreescu, Valentin Uritescu, Cerasela Stan. There were 40-50 representations, demanding huge efforts to schedule it (due to the actors' employment in different state theatres, each with its own schedule and priorities) and it was toured to the Tramway Theatre in Glasgow through the NOROC program in November 1993. In 1994, the Levant Theatre produces "Death and the Maiden" by Ariel Dorfman, directed by Cristian Hadjiculea,

designed by Ștefania Cenean, with George Constantin, Dana Dogaru, Dan Condurache. Only nine representations were possible, this being, regretfully, George Constantin's last character in theatre.²³ Then came Levant's most admired production: "The Pelican" by August Strindberg, directed by Cătălina Buzoianu, stage design started by Nic Ularu and finished by Lia Manțoc, with Valeria Seciu, Vlad Zamfirescu, Oana Tudor, Domnița Constantiniu, Valentin Popescu. It opened in 1995 at Dalles Hall (in the space of a visual art gallery), was nominated at UNITER prizes in six categories and presented at the Sitges Festival the following year. "The Pelican" is considered Levant Theatre's highest artistic achievement. One last project is started, but never finished, by a German choreographer with four young actors, based on Horia Gârbea's "Madame Bovary Are The Others". It is too late, because the tiredness took over: after six years of huge efforts, The Levant Theatre runs out of steam and closes operations in 1996. Although it has reached the highest artistic recognition, as it had strived to, confronted with the perspective to start again from scratch with a new production, the team of the Levant Theatre did not find the energy to continue. The ceasing of Levant's activities proves another point: an organization can go only that far when all of its energy springs from the charisma and dedication of its founding leader (in this case Valeria Seciu).

There are two other relevant examples of organizations striving for artistic excellence that attained highly recognized results during this decade: SMART (Select Management Art), a private theatrical enterprise that is part of the Media Pro group built by Adrian Sârbu and The Art-Inter-Odeon Foundation that will later turn into Teatrul Act.

SMART introduces the concept of advertised limited series of representations (in coproduction with a state theatre), hoping to exploit the performance as an audio-visual product once that the theatre audience shrinks below a certain point. Benefitting from aggressive advertisement campaigns through the Media Pro channels (television, radio, written press), SMART built the image of a luxury producer: paying generously and selling expensively. The tradition of low-priced state-subsidized theatre tickets was rewritten. The tickets to "Joan of Arc" and "Richard II" (directed by Mihai Măniuțiu), coproduced with the National Theatre, "The Taming of the Shrew" (directed by Mihai Măniuțiu), coproduced with Bulandra Theatre or "A Stormy Night" (directed by Mihai Măniuțiu) and "Saragosa – 66 days" (directed by Alexandru Dabija), both coproduced with Odeon Theatre represented the double or triple of the value of tickets to other performances presented by the same state theatres. It was thus

proven that an insistent advertising campaign that transforms into “stars” the theatre practitioners persuades the audience to pay substantially more. A secondary negative effect was caused by the “legend” of the high fees accompanying every project of this organization, so that SMART’s passage through the state theatrical system left great expectations regarding the fees of any private or independent coproducer, a fact that endangered or made impossible many other “crossbreeding” projects. Eventually, toward the end of the nineties, SMART ceased discreetly to operate.

The Art-Inter Odeon Foundation is important from a different perspective. Initiated after the sudden dismissal of Alexandru Dabija from the position of manager at Odeon Theatre, it represented the natural continuation, into the independent territory, of the artistic program proposed by him for the state theatre that he was not allowed to reform.

At Odeon Theatre we made all kind of attempts.[...] But only a few of us, very few, were trying to do everything all the time – from moving a table to sketching the repertory or organizing a tour. The idea to separate the competencies or to structure a normal functioning system did not exist. We have used all of these three years’ time to prove ourselves. [...] Then, after three years, when I considered that we had proved ourselves and when I had a clear and solid program for the year to come, we tried to alter the theatre’s structure. [...] Of course we have proven ourselves, we attained success, but underneath the theatre is rotten as a system, as a structure. I did not manage to overcome this purely Romanian stage of the leadership: if the leader vanishes, everything crashes down. Or I was trying to structure an institution able to function after 3 or 15 years, too.” (Dabija quoted by Măniuțiu in *Malița*, 2006:403-404)

With a substantial external (mostly British) support, the artists forming the creative core of what was defining Odeon Theatre (mainly Alexandru Dabija, Mihai Măniuțiu, Marcel Iureș and Doina Levintza) have formed in 1995 the Art-Inter-Odeon foundation that would lead in another three years time to the opening of the first independent theatre space in Bucharest, Teatrul Act. “Murder in the Cathedral” by T.S. Eliot (coproduced with the National Theatre in Cluj), presented mainly on a British tour, will be the only performance created by this organization before the opening of Teatrul Act. The decision of these first-class artists to move their operations into the independent field had a remarkable impact, including upon themselves.

In retrospect, I think the Odeon moment had a tremendous importance for the development of our independent theatre movement. Whether they were aware of the exemplary value of that moment or not, the theatre practitioners that were feeling the need of an alternative to the institutionalized system have realized that they cannot succeed inside the system, but separate of it or, wherever there was a desire for “emancipation”, in partnership with it. (Măniuțiu in Malița, 2006:404)

After the opening of its own space on Calea Victoriei, Teatrul Act continues to pursue the artistic excellence as a priority, but eventually it evolves, after 2000, into an open space, a host for performances, concerts, workshops, conferences, playing the role of an independent cultural centre.

Against the prevalence of a pessimistic general opinion, that usually predicts the failure, and not the success of new initiatives,²⁴ new theatre companies continue to emerge by mid-nineties. Some of the most visible include: Teatrul Fără Frontiere (“Theatre Without Borders”), Compania Teatrală 777, Fundația Antigona, Fundația Toaca and Teatrul Inexistent. The common denominator of these otherwise very different theatre companies is their placement in a theatrical territory that privileges communication above artistic excellence. These new companies reposition themselves by looking for a new relationship with their targeted audience and by cultivating the free choice at all levels of artistic creation.

Artistic director Mihaela Sârbu aims for her Teatrul Fără Frontiere „to attract the 18-40 years audience, a realist and pragmatic segment, passionate of social and political themes and not interested any more in the conventional theatre, perceived as distanced from reality, counterfeited, theatrical.” (www.teatrulfarafrontiere.ro). Starting in 1996, Teatrul Fără Frontiere follows an uneven and winding road, with several creation periods, succeeding in staying active and managing sometimes up to four productions per season.

Regarding Compania Teatrală 777, I quote from an interview given at the time of launching its first production:

For this company I am proposing a three-directions project: the identification of sensitive points in the collective mentality and of unexplored territories in the complex relationships of the individual with the contemporary society; original plays or national premieres that are tackling the issues mentioned above and the production of these performances in (Romanian and foreign) partnerships. (Francia, 1997)

The company is active between 1996 and 2000, creating four productions with Odeon, Nottara and Bulandra theatres, together with other Romanian and foreign partners.

President Lelia Ciobotariu explains the birth of Antigona Foundation:

[...] I could not find in theatre what I had imagined this profession would mean for me. I do not see this as a matter of generation, in my case is very personal, something to do with my inner structure. Everything looked alien to me, I could not meet my dreams, nothing mattered. So I said No, this means we have to look somewhere else, we have to create our own... (Dumitru, 2007)

The Foundation produces performances irregularly and reinvents itself periodically, lately creating a sub-structure named "Proiect Replica" which realized coproductions with Bulandra and Metropolis theatres.

Regarding Teatrul Inexistent, artistic director Theo Herghelegiu names "a few essential points:

- To orient the repertory toward immediate problems from community's life and that address to the community
- To approach the audience as a live element, co-participant in the artistic act
- To avoid dependence of a certain space; multifunctional, minimalist stage design
- To use the participants (actors)' abilities in a varied and surprising manner
- Interdisciplinarity (dance, music, visual arts) (Herghelegiu, 2000, #2 (22):11)

Teatrul Inexistent has functioned tenaciously for more than a decade (since 1998) in theatrical and non-theatrical spaces, creating recently "the first independent musical" in partnership with Teatrul Arca, another independent organization in Bucharest.

Finally, Toaca Foundation wants to be "a working structure for contemporary arts, outside the state system", focussing on international partnerships and becoming a member of networks such as IETM (Informal European Theatre Meeting), EMF (European Mime Federation) and TEH (Trans Europe Halles) (Măniuțiu, in Malița, 2006:411-413). Toaca Foundation has a relatively discreet presence with five theatrical productions (the first in 1997, the last in 2001), but also with workshops, conferences, exhibitions, interdisciplinary projects.

All of these companies collaborate with state theatres, as Teatrul Inoportun (an UNITER project, with Victor Ioan Frunză as its first artistic director, which has produced four performances between 1991 and 1994)²⁵ and Trupa pe butoaie (“Troupe on barrels” – another UNITER project active between 1994 and 1997) have done before them and as many other will do after them. With very few exceptions, this is the road to be taken by all the independent structures that do not have a performing space.

Let us notice already that the independent companies’ association with state theatres will become a general practice, perpetuated up until today. The reason is simple enough: the lack of necessary funds not only to rent or fit up a space to perform, but also to maintain it functional, if supposedly obtained. (Măniuțiu, in Malița, 2006:396)

Trying to compensate as it could for the lack of performing spaces available to independent companies, UNITER offers its building (a former villa used by Nicu Ceaușescu in the central area of Bucharest) for some of the performances produces under the banner of Teatrul Inoportun or Teatrul de Cameră (both structures being UNITER’s creation). But this generous offer did not manage to create more than just “beginnings”.²⁶ The only structures offering a space for independent creations are the festivals, among which only one is exclusively dedicated to them. *Altfest* (“different, something else, somewhere else” as it defines itself) is “an independent theatre festival, uncompetitive, open to alternative creations – music-theatre, movement-theatre or image-theatre – in unconventional spaces targeting the independent companies in Central and Eastern Europe.” (Stănescu 2000, #2(22):18). *Altfest* survived only two editions, in Iași and Bistrița.

Many independent projects die a natural death when the energy of their main founder and animator dries out. Others take long breaks, reinvent themselves periodically and have a syncopated existence. Only three organizations have managed during those years to have their own performing space: Teatrul Act, managing its own space in a basement on Calea Victoriei; Teatrul Luni (Monday Theatre, named after the day of the week when state theatres have their free day and actors are free to perform independently) in the Green Hours Club on Calea Victoriei, not far from Teatrul Act and the Underground Project of Dramafest Foundation using a space belonging to Ariel Theatre in Târgu-Mureș.

Two new organizations turned themselves rapidly into state institutions, obtaining permanent state subsidies since opening, due to the strong

personalities founding and leading them (and to their strong political connections), and to the specific niche they occupied: Teatrul Masca (led by Mihai Mălaimare) and Teatrul Excelsior (led by Ion Lucian).

Independent, alternative, experimental

All through the nineties, but later, too, the terms of independent, alternative and experimental are used interchangeably and somehow confusingly to define different theatrical initiatives outside the institutionalized system. In this paper, I decided to use the term independent as the least common denominator for a variety of theatrical creations produced outside state theatres.

The “experimental” theatre is not necessarily linked with the notion of independence, but with that of research. Obviously, every artistic act implies researching in a certain degree, but the notion of experimental theatre has more to do with a laboratory-type activity, aiming the discovery of new means of artistic expression that can be carried away perfectly (as it has been in the past) inside state-subsidized institutions (the case of Jerzy Grotowski in Poland or Aureliu Manea here, for exemple).

The concept could be diluted, extended (for Brecht, any non-aristotelic theatre was experimental) or, on the contrary, restricted to very specific theatrical experiences that target either the dramatic or scenic activity in its wholeness (such is the case with the first experimental studio in the history of theatre founded by Stanislavski in 1905 under the umbrella of the Art Theatre in Moscow and offered to his disident disciple Meyerhold who stages here a text by Maeterlinck without presenting it to an audience) or just a part of the scenic process – the text (like the Italian or Russian futurists), the architecture and stage design (see Gropius), the costumes and the gestuality (see Oskar Schlemmer and the experiences of Bauhaus). (Măniuțiu in Malița, 2006:392)

Regular subsidies and a protective framework can foster research. Moreover, many independent theatre practitioners are not privileging research, so I will not use the notion of experimental to describe their activities.

The problem with the notion of “alternative” theatre is that one has to place it in permanent relationship with the type of theatre that it aims to be an alternative of. In other words, the alternative theatre can be defined only in opposition with another theatre, and this can limit the definition both

aesthetically (for whatever is today “alternative” can become “mainstream” tomorrow) and institutionally (for such an organization can gain access to public funds at some point). We could probably go back in time to find elements of alternative manifestations trying to take roots whenever conditions allowed it.

That is why I believe that the notion of “independent” theatre can cover the examples analysed briefly in this paper if they conform to the three minimal conditions defined by a well-known personality of independent cultural policies, Emina Višnić:

- a. “They have not been set up by the state or by some other external organization, but have established themselves
- b. They independently decide on their organizational structures, bodies and processes of decision-making and management
- c. They depend neither on the state nor on any other entity for their program content or finances” (Višnić, 2008:10)

The advantage of this definition is that it is broad enough to include theatrical practices that are not limited to a specific scope (aesthetical research) or reference (alternative to mainstream), but restricts the organizations to those not depending on the state or other bodies, which seems an acceptable understanding of the notion of cultural independence. The examples of the organizations I selected to present in this paper will correspond to these three definitions.

Why independence? Independent organizations in collision with the immediate reality of the nineties. Between ideology and structure

The break-up with the past in the former communist countries means the abandon of some standards that had been perceived as compulsory:

After the change of political regime, the social standards were also converted: what had been black was white now and all was upside down. This black and white view at the communist past was probably logical and necessary, and it is perhaps characteristic for every society after a change of political regime. (Kunderová, 2008)

But if this was visible in the immediate reality, it wasn't necessarily the case in the legal system, which did not allow a wide margin of innovation

for theatres. The main obstacles were the old socialist-generated working laws, which governed the employment of theatre practitioners. That is why the project of turning the old culture house “Mihai Eminescu” in Bucharest into a project theatre named Urmuz failed at the beginning of the nineties. It is not hard to imagine the impact of such an institution on the independent theatre’s development, once that it would have been turned into a centre for presentation of new theatre works. The director of that time, Corina Şuteu, whose successful subsequent career will focus on cultural policies,²⁷ is very radical on the matter: “My personal solution is as follows: except the National Theatres, all the other state theatres should become centres for presentation of the theatrical creation.” (Şuteu, 1994, # 2-3:8). She considers that the notion of “trust” could have compensated, for a while, the outdated legal system.

If there is a project theatre, there should be a clear law stating its structure and how it is supposed to function. Not to be told, like I was “solve the problems, but if it does not turn out well, we will fire you.” We do not even discuss about a very simple notion named trust. Or, when you get the feeling that is not about a proposition, but a trap, the trust vanishes. They destroy in this manner the fundamental impulse of the cultural manager, which is the desire to do something because one loves what he/she is doing. (Şuteu, 1994, # 2-3:8)

The notion of “trust” was placed highly on the list of fundamental values defining the interdependence of the independent cultural sector with the society at large by the participants in the 2010 conference “New Times, New Models”, an “International conference on governance models of independent cultural centres” held in Maribor, Slovenia. The conference tried to look at the role that the independent culture plays in the development of the society, both on a global and a local level, focusing on inventive, dynamic and sustainable models of governance of independent cultural centres and the relationship between these and public authorities.²⁸ “If they do not trust us, why do they hold public offices?” someone asked at the conference.²⁹ Because when one innovates and creates new formulae of structuring and developing cultural organizations, one operates near the edges of legality and the trust is needed in order to move forward; the legal confirmation could come later, sanctioning a positive experience, if that is the case. Or, trust is one of the missing links during the nineties in Romania not only between theatre practitioners and

authorities, but even among theatre practitioners themselves, who wanted opposite things: some of them the preservation by all means of the closed institutional system guaranteeing their permanent employment, others the experimentation of new formulae of transformation and opening of the theatrical practices and the relationship with the audience. "The past weights down on the spirit and the future does not bring immediately the new. In Romania, let us dare saying it, the theatre practitioners do not prove ready to change everything. The old mentalities persist." Thus writes the most prestigious Romanian-born theatre theoretician and critic, George Banu. (Turcoi, transl., 1990, # 11-12:73)

The quest for the relationship that would make a space dedicated to cultural activities necessary again to the community it belongs to is retarded for several reasons. The communitarian action is compromised after the long decades of communism; people are longing now for private spaces, and not for more common ones. Nobody wants to experiment anything else but the pure and tough capitalism, nothing can impeach the privatization of everything. When that is not happening fast enough, it is seen as a weakness of the government. Also voluntary or not-for-profit activities are not popular, after many years of people's exploitation by the socialist state under the cover of these concepts. The notion of cultural or communitarian activist sounds unbearably immediately after 1989. Everything that seems leftist is suspect, there is a civic deficit. It is a time of maximal individualism, of fast accumulations of wealth and getting rich above all and by all means. Many non-profit organisations provide cover for commercial activities.³⁰

Many spaces formerly used for cultural activities are laid hands on by different private entities that transform them into bars, discotheques or casinos (the network of national cinema theatres is almost completely dismantled like this). From this perspective, the determination shown by the state theatre employees in defending their institutions had at least the positive effect to keep them functioning: no state theatre was ever closed; the circuit was kept intact, even if sometimes it proved to be extremely weak.

There is no policy regulating the occupation of the empty public spaces, so that an offer for cultural purposes or community services is treated by the authorities on equal terms with a commercial one, which greatly reduces the not-for-profit sector's abilities to get access to public spaces. In other countries, the artists squat public places and start directly to offer cultural or communitarian services. The authorities are thus forced to negotiate with them, and more often than not the solidarity shown by the local

community strengthens the artists' position, helping them to keep the space they occupied. The squatting, used all over Western Europe during the seventies and eighties is also adopted by the Slovenian and Croatian artists after their countries proclaim independence and the Yugoslav army retreats during the nineties: "Pekarna" independent cultural centre in Maribor is a former bakery of the Yugoslav army³¹, "Metelkova Autonomous Cultural Centre" occupies a former barracks in the centre of Ljubljana, another former barracks – "Karlo Rojc" – becomes an independent cultural centre with the same name in Croatia, etc.³²

The artists that had occupied – illegally, as it is always the case in the beginning – these premises have been supported by the local communities because they had opened the spaces to those communities and other artists, and did not keep them only for themselves. The notion of "openness" represents, besides that of "trust", values that were mostly missing during the nineties in the Romanian theatrical system. In order to protect their own working place and having lost the habit of open competition, the employees of state theatres have monopolized the inherited infrastructure, instead of sharing it with other artistic organizations. Although, as it was the case in other ex-communist countries at the beginning of the nineties, a lack of energy was prevailing in the state theatres, resulting in the under-usage of these theatrical infrastructures. Here is Oleg Efremov in a dialogue with Iuri Liubimov after their comeback to Russia about the atmosphere reigning in Moscow's famous theatres:

We are public servants, public servants employed by the state. An absurd attitude toward art. [...] At us, instead of work, ambitions reign. The energy is spent on everything and nothing. But not on work." Iuri Liubimov: "I have been away for six years. I came back. What do I find at Taganka?"³³ First of all – the old age. And not because of the passage of time, but because of the laxity. (Sianu, transl, 1991, # 1-2:84)

But even if they lacked the motivation and energy to fill the spaces they possessed, especially during the first years after 1990, the state theatres did not become cultural centres open to other organizations' work through project competitions.³⁴ The other infrastructures (communications, transport, etc.) were gradually opening, but the theatrical one is still waiting to be placed at the disposal of those that can generate valid artistic projects; its permanent "ghettoization" cannot be justified anymore (and it should never be) in a more and more open society.

Because transparent programs to fund, support and integrate independent theatrical initiatives do not exist during the nineties, the only method for an organization to survive is to depend entirely on the personal connections of its leader. Although no state theatre has an official program to coproduce or present independent theatre performances, such a thing is made possible mainly through personal connections. But too much dependence of a company's activity on the personal relations of its director generates multiple problems: a bigger fragility, too much weight placed on an arbitrary context (where people benevolent to the cause are placed, or not, in key social or political positions), a premature tiredness of the leader, the development of a sense of ownership over the organization (generated by the enormous personal involvement) that can block ideas or practices that the leader does not encourage and the tendency of such a leadership to become permanent and never abandon his/her "baby" organization. All of these can erode an independent organization, transforming it into a fragile and, paradoxically, closed structure. Staying open demands effort and generosity. But even more than that, it also demands some forms of organization and protection.

To compensate for such fragilities, a network of independent theatre organizations is definitely necessary. The networks become a serious presence in the European cultural field: "The networks of the 80s and 90s – the period marked by the expansion of trans-national, and particularly of vocational networks in the field of culture – were led by the principle "to be present and to establish contacts." These are primarily information-communication networks whose projects background exists for purposes of enhancement of informational capital, as well as advocacy capital of individual innovative initiatives and schemes of collaboration." Eventually, these networks will evolve into "horizontal project collaborative platforms of operational types. Only project collaboration ensures the survival within the network for individual members. This is how they become stronger, thus recognizing cultural and socio-cultural developmental micro-impulses as their dominant frame of reference for activities." (Dragojević in Vidović, edit, 2007:7-8). The project as a base for collaboration is the most democratic formula, as it establishes partnerships among equal members, thus ensuring everybody's survival in a context where surviving alone would be problematic. Not understanding the importance of this collaborative formula and trying too hard to succeed through themselves - but being often blocked by the lack of access to the infrastructure and the impossibility to guarantee any

form of continuity for their partners, especially the foreign ones – many independent companies exhausted themselves prematurely and did not get over the phase of the “beginnings”.

Emil Cioran considers the beginning as eternal in the Romanian culture, the lack of the “culture of the precedence” (Dumitru , 2007) being a national trait conceptualized as “the Romanian Adamism”:

Any man who wants or is called to play a prophetic role in Romania’s life must be convinced that in this country every gesture, every action, every attitude is an absolute beginning, that there are no continuations, replays, lines or directives. For what must be done no one precedes us, no one urges on us and no one helps us.[...] Everyone of us is in Adam’s situation. Or perhaps our condition is even worse, for we don’t have anything behind to regret. Everything must be begun, absolutely everything. We have only the future to work with. The Adamism in culture means only that every spiritual, historical and political problem springs for the first time, that everything we live is determined in a new world of values, in an unparalleled order and style. The Romanian culture is an Adamitic culture, because everything that is born in it is unprecedented. (Cioran, 1990:39-40)

What is certain is that we can talk about many more “beginnings” during the nineties in the Romanian independent theatre than “continuations” or “developments”. Somehow, as trust, openness and the necessary changes in the working legislation and cultural policies (allowing access for independents to public funds and theatrical infrastructure) were missing, what we have are more or less different artists as “lonely wolves”³⁵ striving for “artistic excellence”. This culture of the success, the relentless pursue of the masterpiece, which might be a (hidden or open) drive for every artist, limits drastically the quest for partners of new theatre companies founded mostly by young artists, who are inherently in a “dilettante” phase.

Such innovative “dilettantism” [...] is usually accepted only on the territory of the alternative theatre. Here, via negativa, we see the limitations of the repertory theatres vis-à-vis contemporary drama: they cannot afford the risk neither of ephemeral nor “raw” productions, and they cannot afford “dilettantism”. It does not only limit them in their choice of the plays, but in fact also in the choice of the modes of their production. (Yakubova, 2009)

The fear to “fail” is given a theoretical justification by the aesthetician Victor Ernest Masek, manager on Nottara Theatre immediately after 1989:

[...] a failed performance implies, besides the irrecoverable material losses, the embarrassing situation of the public recognition of a fiasco. That is why, under normal circumstances, the creators of a performance (we do not take here into consideration the experimental dramaturgy) are usually leaning toward conformism, toward sure, previously-verified solutions, toward formulae already accepted by the audience and having thus a predictable acceptance. From here a more rigorous critical censorship on new ideas, questioned and often considered not viable before having a chance to materialize and so to be confirmed or infirmed as artistic facts. (Mašek, 1990, #7-8:54)

There is, as Victor Ernest Mašek openly states, a fear of the audience immediately after 1989, when theatre seem to have lost its power. The fragmentation of the audience into “audiences” appear to many state theatre managers as a calamity that they have to fight, by stubbornly looking for the lost formula of unanimous success that “was validated” by the audience before 1989.

It is useless to ask ourselves: is the Romanian contemporary theatre transferring a sociable model into the mentality of its spectators, a model capable of counterbalancing those furnished by the American film industry and the aggressive televisions’ imagery? Is the Romanian theatre a provocative behavioural counter model to the media show? No. For the option is not really between television and theatre. The option is legitimized when it is made between several, enough forms of performance, between different modes to represent – through drama – the reality. (Popa, 2000, #1(21):47)

The new companies are often treated with condescendence by the theatre critique, even when they come from abroad and are selected through very official channels; after describing the companies taking part in the “British season” organized by The British Council, companies that the regular Romanian audience is very likely to be unfamiliar with – Opera Circus, Told By An Idiot, Empty Space and Volcano – Margareta Bărbuță, director of the Romanian centre of the International Theatre Institute, concludes her review in a national theatre magazine with “I miss the great British theatre!” (Bărbuță, 1997, # 4-5:51)

Another cause for the delay in the development of independent theatre is the actors’ fear to give up the permanent employment in a state theatre ensemble: only Mircea Diaconu³⁶ and Ștefan Iordache, followed later by Marcel Iureș (in sign of protest for the dismissal of Alexandru Dabija from

the helm of Odeon Theatre) have chosen to become “free-lance” among the very well-known actors. Because the number of well-known actors that have left the system is so low, they do not change the rules of the game, moreover, they regret sometimes the path taken – “Not only that I am worse now, I am much worse” declares Mircea Diaconu. (Dumitrescu, 1991, #9-10:20).

The free-lance actors do not initiate a professional organization to defend their rights, like almost everywhere in the world. The only professional unions that include theatre practitioners are those formed inside state theatres, where actors, directors, designers and technicians are thrown together in the same union belonging to a particular state institution, and not to a particular professional category. These unions are part of the big centralized unions that the state negotiate with, leaving the free-lance artists outside.

To conclude

Stepping on the territory of a new type of civic and artistic initiative, the independent theatre organizations of the nineties become, most of the time without wanting it, testing instruments of the Romanian society's weaknesses - reflected both in the general context and in their own methods and decisions. By refusing to accept the idea that the only valid institutional model is the one inherited – the state subsidized repertory theatre – the artists who try the independent path have the courage of wanting to decide by themselves the type of exchange with the society they want to engage in; they want to take advantage of the chance to reinvent themselves as social actors and, implicitly, as artists.³⁷

The short life of many of these independent initiatives does not mean that they have failed, but that they have lived according to different rules, mainly accepting the ephemerality and the short term of their projections as signs of normalcy.

The ultimate purpose of all independent artists during the nineties was to redefine their inter-dependence links with the other participants in the big social game, by placing themselves, as a Slovene artist plastically expresses, “in the empty space between ideology and structure”.³⁸

Despite its tremendous efforts, the independent sector does not develop to a spectacular level during the nineties. But it imposes its presence as a sign of normalcy, eventually starting a genealogy.

NOTES

- 1 "[...] the discourse is exalted, hot-headed, ultimatum-like. It does not express rational thoughts, but moods. [...] In short, after the totalitarian freezing, we are melting in dissolution of emotions, reacting with love or hate when all is needed is our clear judgment." (Pleșu, 1993, #1).
- 2 www.recensamant.ro.
- 3 Nicolae Popa (deputy), interpellation recorded at the Chamber of deputies with # 603B/20 oct. 1999.
- 4 A term coined by Miruna Runca, defining the dominant model of the subsidized repertory institution in the Romanian theatre system.
- 5 If a translator is not indicated, it means the text has been translated to English by me throughout this paper.
- 6 That means having a permanent ensemble of artists and technicians and presenting the performances (preserved in a "repertory") alternatively.
- 7 "The art theatre" is not a matter of rebellion, but one of transformation. It has to do with working daily and moving slowly forward. It is linked with growing old, not with exploding." (Banu, 2010:30).
- 8 "The passage from "phase one" to "phase two", the transformations of the "art theatre" into "state theatre" – like it happened in Russia – means the transformation of a mortal theatre into an immortal theatre. What the Soviet Union has produced – a powerful system of about 700 theatres and little theatres of "state art". What are the consequences? In the absence of a threat of destruction – to the individual or the company – there is neither philosophy, nor creative energy. The fear of nothingness gave birth to religions, cultures, rituals, arts. A theatre deprived of this perspective gets out of its tracks. Its muscles atrophy." (Smelianski in Banu, 2010:77-78).
- 9 "The artists can now be whatever they want, without the burden to serve the main narration. They have no duty toward art: they can now serve human needs. [...] The price they pay for this freedom, though, is that of a somehow diminished status. They do not dedicate themselves to a project bigger than themselves. [...] Today's artists are not disciples in their vocations anymore, but entrepreneurs in an artistic world and market." Julius, 2009:203).
- 10 The Moscow Art Theatre, one of the world's most famous theatre institutions.
- 11 "The fear that actor's muscles atrophy. Therefore, an axiom of a relentless "actor's work with himself", a concept deriving from the idea of art theatre. Such a life is, obviously, difficult, based on sacrifice. That is why art theatre have, by necessity, an ephemeral existence." (Smelianski in Banu, 2010:79).
- 12 Ibid., p. 78.
- 13 Ibid, p. 77.
- 14 The date this material is drafted the performance "Je m'en vais" („Mă tot duc") is part of the Metroplis Theatre's repertory.
- 15 One has to take these notions at their polemic value, as Cioran does.

- ¹⁶ A new, original play by Caryl Churchill written after and based on the Romanian experience of the group. The performance based on this play was produced in London and New York and presented on tour in Bucharest.
- ¹⁷ I was the Romanian partner for the group of the “Central School of Speech and Drama” students that collected about 5000 theatre books, transported them to Bucharest, constructed the shelves of a new library and donated everything to the National University of Theatre and Film. Later, I was the first Romanian invited to the Royal Court Summer Residency in London (Alina Nelega, Andreea Vălean, Peca Ștefan, Maria Manolescu, Gianina Cărbunariu, Mihaela Michailov, etc. will follow) and, together with Anca Bradu and Nona Ciobanu I took part in the only edition of The European Directors School in Leeds .
- ¹⁸ From an interview taken in October 2009.
- ¹⁹ In a conversation with a young critic, Claudiu Groza.
- ²⁰ Romanian title: „Logodnicele aterizează la Paris”.
- ²¹ There will be an explosion of this kind of initiatives 10-15 years later.
- ²² As considered by Ionut Corpaci, main helper of Mrs. Seciu throughout the existence of this theatre company.
- ²³ He died in 1994.
- ²⁴ “The individual initiatives face most likely pessimism; the first reaction is the mistrust and strong belief in the failure of that enterprise.” Grecu, 2000:2).
- ²⁵ Inoportun Theatre presented its first production in 1992.
- ²⁶ As expressed by Ion Caramitru, interviewed in 2010.
- ²⁷ Founder of ECUMEST, expert and consultant in the field of cultural management and European cultural policies, since 2008 director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York.
- ²⁸ See www.pekarna.org/ntnm.
- ²⁹ By Chris Torch, manager of Intercult, Stockholm.
- ³⁰ The press of the nineties presents numerous investigations in the activities of non-profit foundations whose only purpose seem to be to avoid import taxes for cars or electronic equipment.
- ³¹ The very place where the “New Times, New Models” conference took place; it will be completely transformed for Maribor, Cultural Capital of Europe 2012.
- ³² Romania has many such barracks abandoned by the army, as, according to NATO rules, it has to move outside of inhabited sites; but there is not one single case yet for a change of destination toward cultural activities of such a place.
- ³³ A famous theatre in Moscow.
- ³⁴ “The Romanian artistic community, the unions that were just getting organized, UNITER – all of these were very fresh, involved in endless discussions without producing any results. The repertory theatre could not

be re-structured and that persists until nowadays. There isn't still a functional system in place..." Corina Şuteu, in an e-mail, Jan. 2010.

³⁵ The writer Petre Barbu defined himself as a "lonely wolf", denying an invitation to collaborate with Compania Teatrala 777 in mid-nineties.

³⁶ Who confesses (in an interview I took him in 2010) that he has tried to persuade many of his colleagues to do the same, but failed.

³⁷ This is declared by almost all of the artists mentioned in this paper in different interviews taken during the last years.

³⁸ Gregor Kosi, intervention at the „New Times, New Models” conference.

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