

# Bucharest, Iași, Cluj: Theatre festivals as reflection of Romania's Great Union Centenary

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Performances, conferences, book launches, film screenings, a photo exhibition Brigitte Lacombe, a masterclass Gabriela Carrizo. Some examples out of a total of one hundred events presented in Bucharest during the **National Theatre Festival**. From October 19 to 29 it emphasized the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Romanian modern state. No wonder that the motto chosen by artistic director Marina Constantinescu for this year's 28<sup>th</sup> edition was "100 new worlds open up to you". Six performances included in a special section entitled "Theatre and Society. Now" concentrated on relevant social issues. *In the name of the father*, an Art No More production, discusses the impact of religion on today's generation. Three powerful actors guided by director Robert Bălan deliver in a colloquial and delicate manner the text of Elena Vlădăreanu which resulted from interviews. The show for only 30 spectators performed in a house luckily avoids any suggestion. The intimate atmosphere starts with the spectators gathering in the courtyard full of flowers and ends with an informal discussion, over a glass of wine and delicious cake. It is a necessary conversation for Romania who has just overcome the recent Referendum for Constitutional Change, strongly supported by the Orthodox Church.

Quite a few plays from the Fabulamundi project were in the festival selection. Odeon Theatre Bucharest, associated partner of Fabulamundi, showed *Gardenia*. Four women, from grandmother to great-granddaughter, repeat dramatic behavioral patterns. Each of them fails especially in parenthood. Director Zoltán Balázs refines the text of Polish author Elzbieta Chowaniec by alternating between monologues and fragments from opera recordings. These are meant to metaphorically transmit the women's unhappiness. The director's experiment is carried out in a minimalist set design: a scaffolding and a ladder define parallel and broken destinies. Although the four actresses perform credible play-backs, the emotional impact of the show is lost.

The Romanian selection was completed by outstanding productions from Schaubühne am Lehniner Platz Berlin, Complicité from London, Dead Centre from Dublin and Nederlands Dans Theatre as well as by famous names such as Katie Mitchell or Simon McBurney. Gabriela Carrizo, co-founder of the Belgian company Peeping Tom, presented her newest creation *Moeder* (Mother). In a set looking like a museum, but which could also be a private exhibition place, several spaces are presented at the same time. They depict the multiplicity of mothers. Narrations overlap with stunning coreographic techniques. The

action doesn't follow a chronological course. The register changes constantly from tragic to comic. Some happenings are intensified by audio recordings like the sound of liquid through which water is introduced on stage without really being present. This process allows the spectator to zoom in and amplify certain sensations or memories.

### **Cats, clowns and an ewe lamb named Miorița**

The National Theatre Festival included also a few shows for children and youngsters, like *Mom, I've lost my arm!* by Maria Kontorovich, a production of the Youth Theatre Piatra Neamț and *Little Red Riding Hood*, an adaptation of director Felix Alexa with Țăndărică Puppet and Marionette Theatre Bucharest. However, in a scene overflowing with festivals, the **International Theatre Festival for Young Audience** lași is one of the key role players in this regard. Oltița Cîntec, theatre critic and curator of the eleventh edition succeeded to enchant the audience with extraordinary works of art. From October 4 to 11 more than 400 artists from 20 countries demonstrated their skills under the motto "Different" in a dozen venues of the easternmost Romanian city. The geographic diversity was complemented by a wide variety of theatre forms: Chinese puppets, Vietnamese water puppetry, feminist rom theatre, street circus and clowning shows, concert-like performances, non-verbal shows, an unusual sound installation and many more.

The Youth Theatre Piatra Neamț presented a delectable adaptation of *The Daydreamer*, a children's novel by British author Ian McEwan. The used stage formula is the one that consecrated singer and composer Ada Milea many years ago: a concert show. The protagonist of the story is a boy who constantly invents new worlds in order to escape from reality and to break the boundaries that adults set for kids. In his fantastic adventures he relates to several comic figures. An effective and inventive set design underlines the imaginative power of the child. A surprising set of "instruments" like grater, brushes, pot lids thrusts the spectators into a dynamic sound universe. The whole team of actors-singers delivers a remarkable performance, both poetic and funny. Another enchanting concert show was conceived by the musical group Fără Zahăr (note: without sugar) on hilarious rhymes of Bobi Dumitraș and Bobo Burlăcianu (the latter is responsible also for the direction). The artist duo imagines a parody after the *Cats* musical. Several cat-like figures closely resemble to humans. A factory owner, a politician, a mercenary and... a dog reincarnated as a cat tell their stories by using vocal and instrumental music. This production of the two-year-old "Matei Vișniec" theatre from Suceava drew large crowds to the theatre hall.

Music played a significant role also in the non-verbal performance *Miorița* of the

independent theatre collective Auăleu from Timișoara. “The Ewe Lamb” story is considered to be one of the most important pieces of Romanian folklore. The national epic, which deals with the testament of a shepherd who is threatened with robbery and who tells his animal the last will, is available in hundreds of variants. This new adaptation refrains from using folk songs, but makes use instead of contemporary black metal music. Expressive masks and some elements of shadow theatre also form part of the thrilling ballad representation.

### **From traditional to contemporary visions**

Mihai Măniuțiu, manager of the National Theatre of Cluj, and artistic director Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, took the opportunity of Romania's Centenary to host the eighth edition of the **International Meetings**. Contemporary plays as well as masterpieces of Romanian literature such as the Roma epic *Tiganiada* or the legend of Master Manole found their way onto the stage under the motto “Visions”. Andrei Măjeri's mammoth staging of *Master Manole* was particularly visionary. The founding myth of the Monastery Curtea de Argeș in Wallachia, which allegedly claimed a human sacrifice for its construction, has served as source of inspiration for many writers. The eponymous play of the philosopher and poet Lucian Blaga saw its world premiere in 1927 in Switzerland. Andrei Măjeri skilfully adapts Blaga's difficult text for the stage. The young director, who is also responsible for the background music, combines tradition and modernity in an impressive way. Therefore, it is not surprising that in the otherwise feudal world the messengers of the powerful sovereign are embodied by women with machine guns or that the immurement of Manole's wife is represented by projections of QR codes.

A visionary perspective was found also in the staging of *MoSIAnderstanding* (M.I.S.A. Părut). Fabulamundi playwright Alexa Băcanu tells the story of a girl entangled in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, a scandal fueled by the use of yoga as cover-up for illegal practices such as sexual acts with minors. Băcanu's chilling text intelligently counter-balances narrative sequences with dialogues, press excerpts and statements of political leaders. All these parts are deployed into a dynamic show directed by Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu at the “Creation and Experimental Reactor”, a venue of Cluj's Off-scene. Some simple metal frames are kept in motion by four actors dressed in hospital gowns which recall mental institutions.

With two plays in the festival programme – *Old Clown Wanted* and *The Sensation of Resilience when Treading on Dead Bodies* –, Matei Vișniec once again confirmed that he is the most frequently performed contemporary Romanian playwright. An extensive

exhibition curated by Ştefana and Ioan Pop-Curşeu entitled “Visions and Testimonies from the First World War” redeployed the viewer a hundred years back in history. The large offer presented a nuanced panorama of Romanian culture.