

Severed Green: a Pandemic-Born Structure

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Abstract: An open letter signed by a large group of Romanian cultural NGOs and published in *Scena.ro* review (no. 49 (3)/2020) signaled the danger of disappearance of the entire independent cultural sector. The authors reported the authorities' lack of involvement concerning this sector's support during the pandemic crisis, the inability of those in a decisional position to understand how it functions or the fact that the artists working here are the innovators that the culture urgently needs. Indeed, the Coronavirus pandemic has hit hard the independent cultural sector, as well as the one formed by entrepreneurs, small or medium-sized businesses. The prolongation of the state of emergency, the new regulations concerning the functioning of performance halls at the capacity of 30-50-70% depending on the evolution of the pandemic have brought the cultural organizations at the brink of bankruptcy. The uncertainty of living and project continuity has existed in our society even under what we now call "normal conditions", but in the last two years, this uncertainty increased dramatically. That is why the condition of the Romanian independent artist draws near to the *precariat class* - a concept widely theorized by the economist Guy Standing - who calls it a dangerous class by the authorities' tendency to ignore it, pushing it into the trap of insecurity, debt and humiliation. Most of the time, however, the freedom of creation is born of external constraints. Independent artists were once again forced to take risks and give birth to hybrid artistic experiments - new forms that renegotiate the relationship with the spectators, space and even their own bodies. This presentation aims to analyze the manner in which the work on the show *Severed Green* (produced by Pro Theatre Association, Zalău, 2020) managed to propose a new dramaturgical direction, which the artistic team named it *documented theatre*. Situated at the congruence of documentary and classical forms, documented theatre represented a liberating discovery for the practitioners.

Keywords: documented theatre, precariat, independent theatre, pandemic, critical thinking

I. Context

In the first dramatic writing classes, students learn that the characters are brought into action, triggering or facing the conflict out of two major needs – two basic needs, which in fact, can also summarize the situations from real life, that we, ourselves, can encounter at one moment or another: *the need for affection* and *the need*

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for survival. As a practitioner, I've always considered that the creative impulse mandatory for conceiving a theatre performance (or, in fact, any other artistic form that involves a live act and more) is born from a desire of (auto)communication, (auto)revealing, a desire of an energetical and emotional exchange between stage and audience. All of the above can be subordinated to the general category of *the need for affection*. With the onset of SARS CoV-2 pandemic in March 2020, an essential element changed in the artists' collective mindset: the need for survival outweighed the need for affection. By eliminating such a defining element of the performative act – its irreversible spirit – we are now trying to re-evaluate it in this unique context we are living today. The theatre critic Marian Popescu affirms in an article published in no. 48(2)/2020 of *Scena.ro* review that it is difficult to characterize the current state of performing arts in the pandemic conditions; because it not only about what changed in the artists-spectators relationship, but about a new state of being, which is divided between live and virtual.¹ Until March 2020, our existence was clearly separated between the intimate ego and the social ego. We redefined this matter completely as well as the manner of expectations related to an artistic act, which we contemplate without the usual ritual we used to have. Regarding the processes of theatrical communication, Erika Fischer-Lichte states:

Processes of theatrical communication must be thought of as constituting a special category of aesthetic communication. For signs are generated on stage in order to constitute meaning, signs to which the audience in turn attributes meaning that are in part those intended by the producers and in part different from these.²

Along with the temporary transition of the artistic act in the online environment, the communication between stage and audience is completely annulled. From a semiotic point of view, the signs that are created simultaneously on stage and which constitute the theatrical code are transmitted to a single receptor: the camera. This, in order to build a transmissible visual coherence will choose to use zoom in or zoom out, general frame, cuts, etc. Therefore, the online spectator is being deprived both of the freedom to formulate their own way of interpreting the artistic act and the emotion of a real communication. What has been gained instead was a virtual globalization of the online event: audiences from different continents can participate in the same time at the same

¹ Marian Popescu, #PubliculTeatruluiOnline, Revista „Scena.ro”, nr. 48(2)/2020, p. 34, orig. quot.” Situația artelor spectacolului în dramaticele condiții de restricție la vremea nouă a pandemiei e dificil de caracterizat. Nu e numai despre artiști și public, e vorba despre un *mod de a fi*, perturbat nu se știe până când. [...] Sunt două lumi diferite: să fii spectator pe *viu, acolo*, sau să fii spectator al *ecranului, la tine*.”

² Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Semiotics of Theatre*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 137.

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manifestations representing a common interest. Even after overcoming the lockdown period, a large number of cultural organizations, institutions and festivals had kept a virtual and all-encompassing dimension. Also, platforms like Stage Russia³ or Scena Digitală/Digital Stage⁴ have gained much more visibility among culture consumers.

However, an essential problem arises, pointed out by Marian Popescu in the article quoted above: the concept of presence and its redefinition in this unprecedented context we are experiencing today. *To be or not to be* has acquired extremely varied meanings ; by paraphrasing Declan Donnellan, who in a podcast⁵ affirms that humans being are just some animals born with the doubt that they exist, we can acknowledge the fact that today, this doubt has deepened dramatically, creating an immense confusion between what is real and true and what is a mirage of an universe built on various algorithms. Everyone creates his or her own reality more or less faithful to the state of being, which has led to profound differences between us, as humanity, making communication more and more problematic. The health crisis we are going through has dramatically divided the social classes, emphasizing the differences between individuals. American journalist Fareed Zakaria states that we will always be surrendered by inequality, with death and taxes being the only certain things in the world⁶.

II. Precarity, precariat and the independent cultural sector

As for the Romanian independent artists category, the existential terror has overcome the purely philosophic matter and has moved forward to an everyday survival. The status of independent artist in Romania represents an unknown issue for the officials in charge. This fact was signaled long before the pandemic, but no minister of Culture since the '90s to present had the interest to acknowledge and to regulate the issue. Therefore, independent cultural sector has tried to create its continuity over time, despite the social uncertainty, the frequent changes of ministers with or without vision or the lack of cultural policies, the huge bureaucracy that accompanies every application or drastic cuts in the cultural budget. With the entrance into the lockdown period, any activity carried in front of an audience was forbidden,

³ The platform can be accessed at the following link:<https://www.stagerussia.com/>

⁴ The platform can be accessed at the following link: <https://scena-digitala.ro/>

⁵ *Not True, But Useful* podcast can be accessed at the company Cheek By Jowl's official website: at the following link: <https://www.cheekbyjowl.com/podcast/>

⁶ Fareed Zakaria, *10 Lecții pentru o lume postpandemică* (original title: *Ten Lessons for a Post-Pandemic World*), Iași: Polirom, 2021, pp. 149-150

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and the work of thousands of artists interrupted, without providing additional financial support. This has arrived a few months later, but the manner in which it was administered and the entire selection process highlighted once again, the authorities' incapacity of understanding how this category actually operates. The dramaturg Mihaela Michailov states in an article published in the same issue of *Scena.ro* review the fact that pandemic managed to accentuate what we already knew: that in times of crisis, those who are vulnerable became even more vulnerable and uncertainty breaks friable frames. The state allowance finally offered was a life-saving solution⁷. But, I might add, it arrived with pluses and minuses: from the allowance's total amount (75% from medium salary per economy, representing approximately 4072 lei) a cumulation of 41,5% was taxed, consisting of social and health contributions. Also, any contract (regardless of its value) signed during this period of time could create an obstacle in maintaining the state's financial support, as well as the absence of a contract in the first three months of 2020. Therefore, a large part of artists from independent cultural sector did not qualify according to the official methodology. In 2021, those who managed to start their activities in the state of emergency were offered a state aid of 1300 lei/month. Given the conditions in which the administrative and the maintenance costs of an ordinary theatre studio far exceed the revenues from performances, to which the access is permitted only with 30-50-70% capacity depending the pandemic evolution, this state aid acquires only a symbolic status.

The condition of independent artist is increasingly moving towards what the economist Guy Standing calls the *precariat class* – a neologism created from combining the terms *precarious* and *proletariat*.⁸

All the great movements throughout history have been class based, for better or for worse. One group interest (or several) has fought against another, the latter having exploited and oppressed the former. [...] The precariat, for all its rich tapestry, seemed to lack a clear idea of what those assets were. Their intellectual heroes included Pierre Bourdieu (1998), who articulated precarity, Michel Foucault, Jürgen Habermas, and Michael Hardt and Tony Negri (2000), whose *Empire* was a seminal text, with Hannah Arendt (1958) in the background.⁹

Understood by philosophers and analysts as a focal point of the capitalist "explosion" and of social exclusion, precarity became one of the main causes of discontent and

⁷ Mihaela Michailov, *Prezaritate de cursă lungă sau Teatrul independent nu contează!*, revista „Scena.ro”, nr. 48 (2)/2020, p. 35

⁸ Guy Standing, *The Precariat. The new dangerous class*, London: Bloomsbury Revelations, 2020, p.8, orig. quote.: "[...] the precariat could be described as a neologism that combines an adjective 'precarious' and a related noun 'proletariat'."

⁹ Ibid., p.2

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political strife. Both *precarity* as a philosophical concept and *precariat* as a social category were born as an effect of the globalization era. The sometimes absurd demands of the employers and their abuse and greed have made almost a quarter of the global adult population to accept temporary and uncertain jobs. All of these were translated in behavioral psychology through individuals' incapacity of developing sense of self or of creating life plans of a longer period of time. In short, the precariat might be defined as the social class in which human beings are finding difficult, almost impossible to be the master of their own destiny. In the era of a consumerism that passes through an unprecedented medical crisis, the famous question of *to be or not to be* is being replaced with Erich Fromm's question: *to have or to be?*

The passion for having must lead to never-ending class war. The pretense of the communists that their system will end class struggle by abolishing classes is fiction, for their system is based on the principle of unlimited consumption as the goal of living. As long as everybody wants to have more, there must be formations of classes, there must be class war, and in global terms, there must be international war. Greed and peace preclude each other.¹⁰

As long as the global distribution of the anti-covid vaccines are made preferential and, therefore, unequal, we will not overcome the situations we are living. The economic crisis triggered by the medical one will divide societies, communities and families – in a more brutal manner than it has done so far, making us vulnerable as a nation and as individuals.

III. *Severed Green* – starting points

This was the context in which, in 2020 at the invitation of Pro Theatre Association from Zalău I started working on the script for *Severed Green* show, a production made in collaboration with the director Adina Lazăr, with the support of National Cultural Fund Administration (AFCN). *Severed Green* was the second cultural project¹¹ we developed in Zalău - a city in which cultural avidity is inversely

¹⁰ Erich Fromm, *To have or to be*, London: Continuum, 1976, p.5

¹¹ The first project we developed in Zalău was a performance based on the personal stories of the former employees at Armătura factory. This project took place in 2019, under the name of *Factories and Plants* and was produced by Center for the Study of Modernity and the Rural World in partnership with Museum of Art and History Zalău, cofinanced by AFCN. More details can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.scena9.ro/article/fabrici-uzine-teatru-documentar-zalau>

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proportional to the needed infrastructure¹². Cultural NGOs and institutions, like Center for the Study of Modernity and the Rural World, Museum of Art and History Zalău, Pro Theatre Association have managed through their programs, interventions and cultural events to rise the population's interest concerning artistic consumption. Founded in 2018 by actor and manager Darius Prodan, the Pro Theatre Association proposed from the start a direction of intervention and cultural rejuvenation in the city. In a very short time, The Artists' Yard (the main open air venue of the events organized by the association) came to be supported by an impressive volunteer community (over 100 members representing the youth of Zalău). *Severed Green* was the first show to be entirely produced by Pro Theatre and its nomination for the UNITER awards led to the local authorities' offer to donate a decommissioned thermal point in the management of the association. In the near future, it will be transformed into a functional theatre studio built for the community's benefit.

At first, *Severed Green* was commissioned as a documentary theatre production. The starting point of the play was the tragic event of October 2019, when a forester from Maramureș County was killed while he was trying to stop an illegal wood transport. Until the launching of our show project (March 2020) the real case had not been resolved. The pandemic situation which I described above has completely affected the conditions we needed in order to develop such a project. The restricted mobility due to the lockdown months prevented a field research. Therefore, along with the director Adina Lazăr we started to rethink the entire production's concept, starting from the raw material source. Statistics on the Greenpeace Romania's site about *current state of forests*¹³, *the annual reports* from the Ministry of Environment, Waters and Forests official website¹⁴, the extremely well-documented reportages about how the wood mafia works, the effects of forest disappearance on the ecosystem and on our daily lives, which were published on *Pressone* or *Recorder* websites – all of these had a purely informative role for our artistic team. Given the central event around which we were building the script – committing a murder and covering up the whole situation – we decided to focus on the human factor of the story and not on offering some statistics which can be consulted at any time on public platforms. We

¹² More details about the Cultural Consumption Barometer can be accessed for free on Cultura la Dubă platform, at the following link: <https://www.culturadata.ro/barometrul-de-consum-cultural-2015-preferinte-practici-tendinte/>

¹³ Romania's forest area is drastically declining – from 75% which it occupied in the past to 26% nowadays For further information visit the site: <https://www.greenpeace.org/romania/>

¹⁴ For further information visit the site: <http://www.mmediu.ro/categorie/paduri/25>

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made this decision by mutual agreement, believing that the large amount of information from what is called the "raw material" could not have been presented in its complexity in a theatrical script and, in addition, would have overshadowed the core of the story.

During the research I conducted trying to follow step by step the case of forester Liviu Pop, I found out that during a period of five years (between 2014-2019) there were at least 185 situations of aggression and violence against foresters and their close relatives reported in different areas of Romania¹⁵. Thus, the defence of the common good has become a matter of life and death and a delicate subject to discuss by the public opinion, that fears its own security. The authorities do nothing to prevent this. On the contrary, the entire mechanism is being silenced as it hides the massive corruption that often involves these authorities. An example in this matter is the investigation carried out by *Recorder* journalists Alex Nedeia și David Muntean¹⁶, which shows that the logging company owned by the close relatives of the mayor from Moldovița is the perpetrator of illegal deforestation in the local forest district. Therefore, from the position of a playwright I considered to be necessary that the story I was about to create to illustrate an entire phenomenon and not a particular case. In this sense, our team appealed to the *emotional* reception of the spectators, not the *rational* one. In the same time, we considered the verifiable and realistic facts of the context we are living. As an artist rather familiar with the monologue structure and characters who are addressing directly to the spectators, I found the approach in 'reconstructing' the fourth wall as extremely challenging. By creating fictional characters and introducing them within a network of relations with a powerful conflict, I aimed to describe such a real and scandalous state of Romanian society. My dramaturgical goal was to rethink *empathy* as a basic element in the stage-audience relationship, or rather in the individual-community relationship. Day after day we are overwhelmed by shocking news from mass-media to such extent that our psyche begun to return to a form of banality of the evil – an Arendtian concept still valid in the XXIst century. The most viable solution to achieving this goal was to change the conflict's perspective and to challenge the readers/spectators to follow the events through the eyes of the widow of a murdered forester – a collateral victim who is not offered justice. This character is a symbol for the great mass of the population. Thus, it was deliberately crafted as part of the society's middle class and belonging to the typology of citizens that still believe in laws and authority, no matter how disappointed

¹⁵ For further information visit the link: <https://www.bursa.ro/regia-nationala-a-padurilor-185-de-cazuri-de-agresiune-impotriva-silvicultorilor-inregistre-din-2014-pana-in-prezent-05202830>

¹⁶ The investigation can be watched at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sb4FCyRiuro>

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they may be. Any of us may one day wake up in a similar situation and be treated with the same condescension and superficiality by those who should protect us. The only salvation against the absolute loneliness is the force of solidarity – a solidarity born of empathy. Robert McKee states in his famous manual, *Story*, that our appetite for stories is the reflection of the humans' profound need to extract the patterns of life, not as an intellectual exercise, but as a personal and emotional experience¹⁷. Starting from the conviction that the global population is being alienated by the intrusion of the virtual in all aspects of existence and everyone risks living in a self-referential universe – projects like *Severed Green* are impetuously necessary actions.

As a result of this need, we imagined a new dramaturgical form, that Adina Lazăr named it *documented theatre*. A simple definition of this term could be: a hybrid form that combines the raw material specific to documentary theatre with "traditional" playwriting means (character, conflict, climax, tension, etc). Being situated at the congruence of fiction and reality, documented theatre is a beneficial release from the strict rigors of documentary theatre technique, without the artists giving up the ethics or responsibility they ought to have for the accuracy with which they choose to illustrate a fact inspired by reality. In this manner, the commentary on society, the artists' approach to the subjects they feel to treat in a show is more visible in the artistic choices they have during the creative process. I start from the fact that the artist is neither a journalist, nor a historic, nor a political analyst, nor an anthropologist, nor any other specialist except his own field – thus, in his work he cannot assume all these roles without having the feeling of imposture. The raw material on which he intervenes by searching the theatrical potential, his decisions to present a fact or another from the reality – all of these are giving the privilege to "shape" the world according to his own vision (even if the artist in question assumes the realization of a pure form of documentary). For this reason I believe that an artist should assume the fact that a performance does not represent a reality but his own commentary on reality. From this point of view, documented theatre form is close to the beliefs of David Hare as he states them in his book, *Obedience, Struggle and Revolt*:

Theatre, I insisted earlier, is not journalism. The mistake is to imagine that simply because it can sometimes incorporate real-life material, so it can be judged by similar criteria. It is certainly true that the recent much publicised flush of British drama on factual subjects is taken by many to be a response to the failures of the press. Audiences, at this time of global unease, urgently feel the need for a place where things can be put under sustained and serious scrutiny. They want the facts, but also they want the chance to look at the facts together, and in some depth. Everyone is aware that television and newspapers have

¹⁷ Robert McKee, *Story. Conținut, structură, metodă și principii scenaristice*, Cluj-Napoca: Asociația Filmtett, 2011, p.10

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decisively disillusioned us, in a way which seems beyond repair, by their trivial and partial coverage of seismic issues of war and peace¹⁸

This is what Hare's playwriting succeeded in the 70s. As the author himself states in a preliminary interview of his first volume of collected plays which contains titles like: *Slag*, *Teeth'n'Smiles*, *Plenty*, *Licking Hitler*, the source of creativity was constituted by some sort of scorn that he felt in his youth for a collapsing society which was stubborn to cling on obsolete values¹⁹. Our team's creative impulse is similar to the one described by Hare. In this respect, I can formulate a contempt for corruption, injustice, lack of modesty or pity for individuals that we can all observe in Romanian society in the present. If Hare considers the irony as being the best manner to express his disapproving feelings of the British society in the '70s, for *Severed Green* artistic team the irony is a coping mechanism in relation with the delicate events. Another congruence can be established between documented theatre and David Edgar's plays from the same period. He defines plays like *The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs*, *Mary Barnes*, *Saigon Rose* as being social-realist:

Most of the plays in this volume can be called social-realist pieces. That is, unlike symbolist or absurdist or agitprop plays, they present what aspires to be a recognisable picture of human behavior as it is commonly observed - but, unlike naturalistic drama, they set such a picture within an overall social-historical framework.²⁰

Severed Green's conflict cannot be separated from Romanian society or the well-known context of wood mafia that led to murders and tragedies. Moreover, the drama is extremely well-anchored in the publicized case which the audience already know. The characters, although fictional, have certain correspondents in real life which only the spectators familiar enough with the local life can detect and understand in depth. The nature of the relationship that documented theatre establishes with its audience is born of the same premises as the ones of documentary: the *shared reality*. This conflict's dependence of a real, much publicized case from society I practised also in *Hang up, calls waiting/Nu mai ține linia ocupată* script (a National Theatre „Lucian

¹⁸ David Hare, *Obedience, Struggle and Revolt*, London: Faber&Faber, 2005, p.27

¹⁹ David Hare, *Plays: One. Slag. Teeth 'n' Smiles, Knuckle, Licking Hitler, Plenty*, London: Faber&Faber, 1996, p. viii, orig. quote: "In all plays I wrote in the seventies there is a powerful element of scorn. Scorn, I'd say, rather than anger, because I was impatient with an old England which had transparently collapsed, and yet the illusion of which still gripped our thinking and feeling."

²⁰ David Edgar, *Plays: 1, The Jail Diary of Albie Sachs, Mary Barnes, Saigon Rose, O Fair Jerusalem, Destiny*, London: Methuen Drama, 1997, p. viii

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Blaga” Cluj-Napca production, 2021, also directed by Adina Lazăr). From the title there is a direct reference to the murder case of the adolescent Alexandra Măceșanu, to whom an 112 operator addressed this infamous line. In the performance and implicitly in the script, the statement ”hang up, calls waiting” ends up being metaphorically interpreted as the cold and ruthless attitude that the System displays towards the victims of an abuse.

This technique is not a XXth century invention which was rethought for nowadays: it has its origins in Georg Büchner’s dramaturgy. In the preface of the most recent volume dedicated to the XIXth century author, the translator Victor Scoradeț states that the modernity of the young playwright who finished his life way too soon can only be interpreted at its fair value in our time. He supports this affirmation by arguing that a play like *Danton’s Death* can be included in documentary political theatre (a movement that was born in the seventh decade of the XXth century) or a play like *Woyzeck* as the first proletarian tragedy in universal literature.²¹

As Scoradeț further points out in the same preface, Büchner’s dramaturgical choices do not make his plays a thesis fight between good and evil. On the contrary, the good and the bad co-exist, and the conflict is being viewed from both perspectives, giving the spectators the impression that they would be free to decide whether to support one side or another. With the *Severed Green* play and performance we managed to overtook what we now call a real social experiment: the negative characters are also the ones that contain the comedy element, without ”sweetening” their impact in the conflict. However, during the post-performance discussions we carried with the spectators, they admitted the fact that in some moments during the show they felt sympathy for these characters and immediately feeling guilt for having positive thoughts. Our decision to create such characters was based on the conception that most of the time the evil intervenes imperceptibly in people’s lives taking diverse shapes (even that of comedy) and using different tricks to take stable roots. Therefore, the work of art should not give verdicts, but raise questions. The most common trap in which a practitioner in political arts field could fall is to offer solutions along with the illustrated problem. My perspective in this matter is that the key of a real

²¹ Georg Büchner, *Opere*, București: Centrul Cultural Lumina, p.22, orig. quot. ”Prin ce anume este teatrul său atât de modern? Desigur, prin acele elemente care i-au contrariat pe contemporanii lui, făcându-i să-l ignore. Prin faptul că e primul autor în ale cărui piese e folosită limba vorbită, așa-numita *Umgangssprache*, și care nu se ferește nici de elemente resimțite la acea vreme drept licențioase. Prin faptul că *Moartea lui Danton* ar putea fi inclusă în teatrul politic documentar, curent ce apare abia în deceniul șapte al secolului XX. [...] Prin faptul că mulți exegeți consideră că *Woyzeck* ar fi prima tragedie proletară din literatura universală [...]

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communication between a performer and a spectator is the ability of the first to convince the second to formulate his own uncertainties, to question his position on the problem, to reconsider his attitude, to have the ability to view the subject from other angles in order to understand it in a more profound manner. For the artistic act to become a personal experience, as Mckee puts it, a personal experience through which we learn about the world, we need to pass it through a personal filter. This cannot be done without empathy.

IV. Conclusions

The impact that *Severed Green* show had both on the theatrical community and especially in the city of Zalău, which was named in different press publications as *the city with theatre but without a theatre* – this impact would not have been as strong in non-pandemic conditions. The curiosity of cultural spectators to watch online theatre productions had a beneficial effect: the production could be watched nationally and internationally by a much larger audience than it would have done in any theatre studio. Moreover, the debates around the production regarding the treated subject and the difficult context in which it was created, had palpable results. A fundraising campaign was born for the first theatre studio in Zalău, a space that will host future local and guest productions.

The precarity, the precariat, the uncertainty, the corruption and its trivialization are the neuralgic points in nowadays society, but without this background, the creative impulse would not have been possible. The question posed by Erich Fromm, *to have or to be* is repeated under different aspects in the world in which we live and which pressed the individual to assume his destiny between the sincerity or depravity of the self – and this is a central theme of *Severed Green* play.

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