

Theatre as a Public Service. Tendencies and Relevance

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Abstract: The article is an analysis of recent studies of non-governmental organizations (World Economic Forum) which have generated cultural strategies and which are today influencing the relationship between the society and the forms that organize and finance culture. The article also analyses the way in which the cultural strategies generated by these studies are manifesting themselves in the theatrical landscape in Romania: the polarization of the theatrical speech, the standardization of the means of expressing messages on the stage and the offensive brought by the non-governmental organizations. Starting from the context aforementioned, we need a research regarding the way ideological trends are influencing the way we represent things on the stage and are modifying the axiology of the theatre. I'm talking about notions that are necessary to establish a frame and some standards of evaluation regarding the theatrical domain: competence and relevance. How are they defined? How and who can measure them? It is also of utter importance to analyze the terms and notions that are used in the recent and most acid critic reviews of the theatre productions in Romania: independent theatre, state financed theatre, gigantic productions, alternative spaces, the under-financing of the cultural sector, management, cultural management experts, etc. Last but not least, the article mentions the way in which some of the most influent characters involved in the theatre world of the 20th century have looked to what is the problematics of researching the theatrical act: Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook. Is there innovation in a multi-millennial art? Is theatre something else than an art of the present which is serving the city? We are crossing a period of time in which, also due to the restrictions generated by the pandemics, it was debated in the public space (and the authorities have encouraged that idea) to *move* the theatre in the *on line*. Starting from the premise that the theatre without an audience stops being theatre, I will analyze, in the context described earlier, the relationship between theatre and the new trends in the Euro-Atlantic culture: progressivism and digitalization.

Keywords: theatre, audience, public, axiology, relevance, ideology

The state-subsidized repertory theatre (public theatre), as is the theatrical system in Romania and which is the root of the local and East-European theatrical environment and the goal of all national theatres which were founded when the national states have been established, as an identity element, is born from the concept

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of *théâtre, service public*, which is the essence of the famous quote by Jean Vilar: “Thank God there still are people for which the Theatre is a nourishment as essential as bread and wine. Theatre is firstly a public service, like water, gas or electricity”¹. Jean Vilar is the founder of the Avignon Festival in 1947, which he himself ran until 1971. Vilar constantly raises the problem of everybody being able to have access to culture. He is the author of the concept of *popular national theatre* and he even ran the Théâtre National Populaire (today Théâtre National de Chaillot) from 1951 to 1963. Being a partisan of a simplified, natural, hieratic directing style, of theatre performances that heighten the audience’s spirit and consciousness, Jean Vilar treasured theatre, its political and moral roles, its mission of being a public service, without forgetting its ceremonial or festive aspects. He was the first to establish in Chaillot a wide cultural policy directed towards the audience.

During a pretty tense political context – the end of the war, a really powerful communist party, the East-West tensions (USSR-USA), the Cold War, the risk of a third World War, the soviet missiles in Cuba, the assassination of JFK, the French War in Indochina, which ended with a disaster, the massacre in Diên Biên Phu (1954) and the Algerian War, which ended in 1962 with the *pieds noirs* affair – during those years and the following ones, the notion of Public Service was a fundamental one.

It is important to stress that this concept does not rule out the experiment and does not lower the quality of theatre performances, just as well as the radio or the cinema did not suffer by being popular. It’s just a matter of hierarchy: where does the experiment belong and where does the repertory belong, and the fact that one of them does not rule out the other, but are two complementary things. After more than fifty years, the subsidized sector in France prevailed over the private one, regarding the budgets, the new esthetics, the quality of images on stage, and regarding the prestige. The current Festival d’Avignon with its entire subsidizing system has its roots in this concept.

The economic crisis in 2008 brought a series of changes in the functioning of public institutions and generated a lot of perception changes regarding the role which non-governmental organizations had in establishing and financing public policies. That is how, in 2012, the World Economic Forum created the study “The Future Role of Civil Society”, a strategy of non-governmental organizations until 2030. We have

¹ Vilar Jean, *Le théâtre, service public*, Gallimard, Paris, 1986, p.173.

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to emphasize the fact that the plan described in the aforementioned study is actually a consequence of the economic crisis in 2008, which has generated a significant decrease of the funds received by the non-governmental organizations from the private sector. In 2007, the total amount of funds received by the non-governmental organizations was 310 billion dollars. In 2009, the amount was just 280 billion dollars.² As a consequence, the non-governmental organizations have reacted, have redefined their role as being of public utility and have applied a new strategy, by which the financial losses were to be covered by public funds.

The study starts with an analysis of the involvement of non-governmental organizations in different areas of the world. Different examples are mentioned, such as the Arabian Spring – 2010, Occupy Wall Street – 2011, the protests in Greece, Spain and Russia – 2012, the unions' protests in Tunisia, Egypt and Bahrain etc. Trying to demonstrate their impact in the public life, the study also mentions different statistics in highly populated areas such as India and China, where the number of non-governmental organizations rises to 3,300,000 and 460,000, respectively. One can clearly see that the premises of the study are somewhat general and analyze the role of non-governmental organizations worldwide, without analyzing the socio-cultural particularities. The general nature of the document and the juxtaposition of the aforementioned cases in Asian culture along other examples from the United States of America or Eastern Europe creates an average and an erroneous general picture.

According to the same study, the roles of the civil society are defined:

- Watchdog: holding institutions to account, promoting transparency and accountability;
- Advocate: raising awareness of societal issues and challenges and advocating for change;
- Service provider: delivering services to meet societal needs such as education, health, food and security;
- Expert: bringing unique knowledge and experience to shape public policies and strategies
- Builder: areas for education and training;
- Incubator: develops solutions which would necessitate a long hatching or reimbursement period;

² https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf p.20

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- Representativeness: empowers the voices of the marginalized or under-represented;
- Defender of the citizen: encourages the civic commitment and supporting citizen rights;
- Solidarity supporter: promoting fundamental and universal values;
- Definer of standards: creating norms that shape market and state activity;

The main subject of the study is shifting the paradigm according to which the State, the Civil Society, and the Business environment are defining their roles, by *blurring* traditional roles and redefining the state.

The way in which these tendencies manifest themselves in Romania, as we will show it, is a consequence of the superficial way in which the representatives of the civil society in Romania have related to this strategy, especially in the cultural field. The lack of competence and experience in the public administration have generated public statements never seen before, marked by a discourse devoid of coherence due to the fact that the cultural non-governmental organizations' representatives do not know the laws or they do not have academic credentials. The study made by the World Economic Forum observes some tendencies according to which the institutions of the state do not befit the present times. Members of the civil society and the business environment are declaring the decline of traditional institutions.

Another subject brought to debate in the study "The Future Role of Civil Society" is the theme of digitalization and interconnected communities. Actually, in this context, digitalization means the overall strategy dissemination tools and is essentially the way in which a lot of these subjects are discretely creeping in the collective mind with the help of the internet and the social media. All these are giving a voice to the individual are creating the impression of a debate environment, especially for the younger population. If this a reality or an illusion is very complex subject which deserves a lot of deep thinking.

According to the study, the plan of redefining the Civil Society is based on accessing public funds, on social and political influence by access to technology and by enlarging the area of citizens' involvement in the changes that take place in the society. The conclusions of the study are calling the civil society to action and extending the influence by pressuring the governments, by unconventional means.

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Last but not least, in order to fully understand the legitimacy of the framework designed by the World Economic Forum, we have to mention that the study has been realized based on some consultations which have happened under the “Chatham House Rule”, so we do not know the people or the entities which have participated. When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed. Thus, takes shape the diffuse character of this entity which imposes themes that have a major impact on citizens’ lives. It’s even a greater paradox that the theme of decision *transparency* in public administration is relentlessly repeated along the study.

We have described two approaches that look at culture as a public service from two different points of view. First, the concept by Jean Vilar – *théâtre, service public*, which is part of a French but also European tradition of a providential state, which protects the fundamental public services, water, gas, health, but also culture. The second approach, an ongoing plan to arming and consolidating the role of civil society in the governing process, in which culture is seen as a way to disseminate the new ideologic tendencies. Regarding the way in which these tendencies have manifested themselves in Romania, we will focus on two significant events: the Cultural Strategy of Bucharest created in 2016 and the offensive of artistic non-governmental organizations in 2020 and 2021.

The Cultural Strategy of Bucharest was created in 2014-2016 by a consortium of NGOs, coordinated by ARCUB – the Cultural Centre of Bucharest. Among the lead actors of the Strategy, there is the Funky Citizens Association, “an NGO at the crossroads between good governing and active citizenship”, as it is described on their own website.³ Among the documents that make up the strategic directions of the Funky Citizens Association, we can find the study “The Future Role of Civil Society”.

The Cultural Strategy of Bucharest was created as a necessity, being a condition for the candidacy of Bucharest for the title of the European Capital of Culture. Thus, the document was at the core of the application that Bucharest sent for the competition for the title of the European Capital of Culture, at the end of which Bucharest did not qualify. In the process of elaborating the strategy, people and entities have been consulted, people and entities which cannot prove any credentials or expertise, and this can be clearly seen by the empirical way the subject has been

³ <https://funky.org/despre-noi/>

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treated. Another thing worth mentioning is that the well-established institutions were not involved, nor a significant number of academically certified specialists were involved, so that the strategy would represent a broader and more objective vision, scientifically documented and with a legitimate character. Although the Strategy has not been put into practice in a concrete way, it reflects a diminishing (all the way to the disappearance) of forming free opinion, cultural tendencies, and it represents a uniformization in a field in which diversity is of such importance. The Strategy unilaterally reflects the cultural landscape in Bucharest, and, due to the fact that public budget is involved, it is imperative that a strategy reflects all the tendencies, and not to privilege certain options. The points of view presented are partial and unbalanced, the criteria are fluid and mostly calibrated on personal sympathies and antipathies, not on the entirety of the cultural landscape. The document is also lacking concreteness, using a lot of generics, and has generated many unproductive equivoques. There are a lot of quotes from promotional material of entertainment events, while important cultural actors are completely ignored (writers, musicians, painters, etc).

It is also worth to mention that most of the measures in the Strategy are oriented against public institutions and are launching false topics:

- The absence of transparency in administrating the public budget. This is contradicted by the entire bureaucratic mechanism of regulating public expenditure (Rules of organization and functioning, Administrative Code, Internal Procedures, Monthly Reports, Financial Controls, Controlling Mechanisms – Governing Body, The Court of Auditors, DNA, etc). Public institutions are being accused of lack of transparency and dialogue in relationship with “cultural professionals” and “experts”, but we are not being offered any definition regarding these terms. We are also reminding the fact that the terms and conditions of allocation of public funds are determined by legal procedures and they involve, first and foremost, the yearly budget approval by the granting authority, as well as a selection procedure of the cultural projects, based on competence and eligibility.

- Denying the role and the importance of public cultural institutions in promoting culture. The Strategy is putting out the story that NGOs are the most dynamic actors of the cultural sector. This affirmation does not rely on any concrete measurement which would confirm this fact.

- The dichotomy between public institutions and the private/independent environment is raised, as well as the existence of a discriminatory state of affairs regarding the independent sector. About that topic, it is important to mention that,

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traditionally, the public cultural sector has acted as a filter of competence. The fact that most of the independent artists have not found their place inside public cultural institutions is due to the fact that the artistic environment is a competition one, and the idea that every graduate must enter the system belongs to the communist ideology.

- The Strategy brings up the need of restructuring institutions on the model of foundations, NGOs and associations, but there is no proof that this form of organization would have a positive outcome besides the imminent disappearance of public institutions.

- Socially engaged art. The Strategy cites as significant examples only events organized by non-governmental organizations: *Ofensiva Generozității* (The Offensive of Generosity), *Gazeta de Artă Politică* (The Political Art Journal), *Replika*, *tangaProject*, etc. There is no record of public institutions and their social role.

- The collaboration between cultural actors and the correlation of the cultural offer are encouraged. It is important to mention that public cultural institutions in Bucharest traditionally have a well determined specific and there are no elements to confirm the hypothesis of overlapping activities.

The Cultural Strategy of Bucharest is essentially an acculturation, inspired by the methodology described in “The Future Role of Civil Society”. The cultural-administrative revolution it proposes is not based on an analysis of the realities the public cultural system is facing: the degradation of infrastructure, underfunding and ultra-bureaucratization. Instead, the Strategy introduces ideological topics as: measuring the multiculturalism index, socially engaged art, inclusive art, community art, civic activism through art, the integration of cultural discourses and minority or marginal practices, encouraging an integrating cultural practice, cultural digitalization, etc. We are actually not dealing with a strategy for culture, but with integrating some social measures which reflect ideological tendencies. The strategy lays the foundation of institutionalizing the civil society. The editors of the strategy limited themselves to importing models proposed worldwide through the aforementioned studies, without taking into account the cultural specifics in Romania.

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“Follow the money”⁴

Beyond the ideological side, beyond competence, it is of utmost importance to mention that in order to understand the reasons for which the traditional public cultural system in Romania is being contested today, we must return to the economic crisis in 2008 and the urgent need that private cultural entities have to face in order to respond to financial losses. The key to the whole strategy is “the flexibility of the status of public utility and reintroducing for these organizations the right to concession public services.”⁵ About the public utility, we have to mention that granting that quality must be sustained by measurable data: the impact on communities, the number of events and participants and last, but not least, the artistic relevance. Up until this moment there is no study in Romania regarding the activity and impact of independent organizations in the cultural field.

The offense of “the specialists in independent cultural management”

At the end of 2020, a group of artists, self-entitled “specialists in independent cultural management” have publicly launched and sent to the local authorities in Bucharest a series of petitions among which we have to mention “Appeal for competence in the cultural institutions answering to the Bucharest City Hall”. The editors are asking for a financing mechanism and for the discretionary allocation of over 60 million RON to a self-imposed working group, thus disregarding a series of legal provisions concerning the transparency of decisions in the public administration domain. Second, they ask for the dismantling of certain public cultural institutions or replacing the managers with the self-entitled representatives of the independent environment and “specialists in independent cultural management”. We have to mention that is the first time in the post-December history when a group of artists and self-entitled “specialists in independent cultural management” is supporting the idea of dismantling cultural institutions. This is showing the limited degree of training that the editors have, their limited capacity of understanding the importance of culture for the society and a superficial and destructive vision that is specific to countries with a lack of democracy. The solicitations they have belong to the critics to the public

⁴ “Follow the money” is a quote from the docudrama “All the President’s Men” from 1976. It’s a suggestion regarding the corruption which can be traced by analyzing financial transfers.

⁵ Strategia Culturală a Municipiului București (The Cultural Strategy of Bucharest), p.76.

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institutions that are present in the study of the World Economic Forum, “The Future Role of Civil Society”: the lack of transparency in the public cultural institutions, the ossification of institutions, etc. Last but not least, we have to mention the fact that one does not know the competence the editors who have signed that document have and there is no proof of certification of the term “specialist in independent cultural management”.

Causes

One of the causes for which a part of the independent artists are asking for institutionalization is the fact that, at least in the theatrical field, every year we have to deal with a large number of graduates relative to the number of the cultural institutions that can offer an adequate frame for their work: budget and logistics. The continuous rise of this artistic proletariat has obviously created a climate of dissatisfaction among the independent artists and groups. Their activity is constantly influenced by the lack of predictability due to the low budgets they can access. The funds destined to the activity of the independent environment have been supplemented by governmental financing programs such as the financing sessions of the National Cultural Fund Administration or the local cultural public institutions through the Ordinance no. 51/1998. But these funds do not allow the registration of cultural activity in a predictable logic (such as a repertory theatre), they just satisfy momentary needs by financing festivals, workshops and project-based performances. Thus, the dichotomy between the independent environment and the public cultural system regarding public financing.

Another cause is the absence of a legal framework to regulate the status of the independent artist in Romania. Maybe a model would be the French one, of the intermittent artist status⁶, which is granted by a governmental commission, based on papers that certify the fact that the person requesting this status proves is activity in the field, and so he can or cannot receive the intermittent status and thus benefit from social protection for a limited period of time and a budget to produce cultural projects.

⁶ <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/en/Presse/Communiqués-de-presse/Mesures-en-faveur-des-intermittents-du-spectacle-et-de-l-audiovisuel-a-compter-du-1er-septembre-2021>

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Last, but not least, at least in Bucharest, one of the main reasons the cultural offer does include too few independent artists is the deterioration of the infrastructure and spaces. The activity of cultural institutions (theatres, cultural centers, museums, libraries, etc.) needs three functions:

- a) Representation and broadcasting a multifaced cultural activity: shows, exhibitions, filming of events, etc.
- b) Rehearsals and productions of different cultural events.
- c) Storage of the heritage of sets and costumes, stage equipment; lighting and sound infrastructure, etc.

The analysis of the data forwarded by the public cultural institutions from Bucharest reflects the critical situation in which the majority of the spaces are in, regarding production or performance areas, as well as storage units. The general status of cultural locations shows that in a total number of 117 spaces which are being administrated by the public cultural institutions that answer to the General Council of Bucharest, 20 of them require consolidation works, and 49 of them require repairing works (façade, plumbing, painting, designing, etc.).

Conclusions

In the last years, the theatrical system in Romania is facing two fundamental issues. First of all, the legislative framework, which created a diffuse and excessively bureaucratized climate regarding the level of the accountability of the governing parts. The Ordinance no. 189/2008 establishes that appointing the managers of performing arts institutions is no longer under the public authority, but under the authority of commissions of which decisions cannot be contested but procedurally. And, secondly, the underfunding of the theatres that led to the institutions' deterioration, regarding the repertory, as well as logistics or spaces of artistic expression. Besides these two major issues, the ideological currents of neo-Marxist origin which have appeared during the last years, especially from the independent area (inclusion, civic commitment, multiculturalism, socially engaged art, civic activism through art, cultural digitalization, etc.) have atomized even more the theatrical phenomenon.

Theatre is a millennial art that has passed, throughout history, through several times in which totalitarian governments have tried to transform it, through censorship, in a propagandistic tool. Either the church, in the Middle Ages, either the recent

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totalitarian regimes, especially in the communist era, have confiscated the theatre and used it as an education method based on their own values, have standardized expression on stage, have altered axiology and have imposed expression patterns, thus transforming language in a sterile language. These are the times in which history of theatre does not register works of art. The periods in the theatrical art was reborn are marked by being close to the city, the freedom of speech, the fight for human rights, rejecting ideologies, affirming the community spirit and, last but not least, a constant support from the society, either as patronage, or as subsidies from a providential state.

Some of the most prolific and influent theatre people in the 20th century, Ariane Mnouchkine and Peter Brook, have looked to what is the problematics of researching the theatrical act by going back to the antic or oriental values and understood theatre as an art of the present being at the service of the city, in which theatre has an educational, social and political role. But they firstly treated theatre as a craft, not as a thesis.

Theatre is, not in the least, an instrument of measuring the level of development of a civilization and a democracy. “It is notorious that we are good for mental health, that we are preventing delinquency and violence, that we are efficient against ignorance, bearers of an honorable image of France across borders, we are, therefore, indispensable to the Ministry of Health, of Justice, of Internal Affairs, of National Education, of Tourism and of External Affairs, not forgetting the Ministry of Youth and Sport, nor the Ministry of Social Affairs. But I am also saying that, as far as we are concerned, it’s not enough to pretend you’re an artist to be one, that this formidable title must be demonstrated and must be earned every day, every year, for all of our lives.”⁷

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⁷ Picon-Vallin Beatrice, *Ariane Mnouchkine, Introducere, selecție și prezentare*, București, Cheiron Publishing House, 2010, p. 106.

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