

Behind the Brain - Epilepsy.Narrative Perspectives

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Abstract: This article, essentially a book review combined with a rehearsal journal, is focused on a project that brings to the forefront a current and yet under-publicised topic within Romania. The production *Stai jos sau cazi / Sit Down or You'll Fall* by Bogdan Munteanu, along with the accompanying volume "Culisele creierului – Epilepsia. Narrative Perspectives," forms a diptych. In this, a theatrically oriented cultural work is spotlighted concurrently with its complementary publication, highlighting its debut. The two facets — the theatrical and the literary-journalistic — are part of an important endeavour to acquaint the broader audience with a neurological disorder, traditionally approached with caution.

Keywords: epilepsy, narrative medicine, educational theater, International Festival for Young Audiences Iași

Frequently, the educational component of theatre is debated, having become a common subject in discussions on various themes that sometimes intersect with the art of the stage. Undoubtedly, contemporary theatre practitioners have remembered that reaching out to a young audience, to whom current and interesting themes are presented, is beneficial for the development of tomorrow's mature spectators. What additional elements does so-called *educational theatre* have compared to what we are accustomed to? However, a clarification is necessary: the differences emerge from within the guild of artists and theatrical theorists, and for the large public, theatre encompasses many more forms of artistic expression than we might think. For those who create it, an accurate diagnosis is necessary, and as I approach the topic I am about to discuss, I will try to review a few *symptoms* of educational theatre.

Firstly, these forms of theatre focus on informing about a subject that is either neglected, forgotten, or well-known but not addressed for various reasons; or they deal with "dangerous", taboo, and still unclear themes. A second symptom is related to the fact that universality is replaced by the

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particular, so the central theme models a subject taken from the immediate, a debated issue that often concludes with a statement directed at the society in which various shortcomings are found. Under the umbrella of educational theatre, we identify various sub-genres of theatre, which we will not mention here, but almost all start from a documentary vein, later acquiring a fictional framework, donning scenic or performative attire.



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In the magazine "Observator cultural", Radu Apostol and Mihaela Michailov highlighted the major importance of research work: "We do a lot of research for a show and use different techniques and documentation strategies to approach the investigated theme from as varied and contradictory perspectives as possible. The documentation process can last from a few months to a year or even more, depending on the extent of the research. For

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'Familia Offline' we documented for a year, and for 'Limite,' we conducted interviews with teachers, educators, and educational experts over five months. In our research, we refer to written materials – studies, research, analyses, etc. –, to semi-structured interviews (in which we have a series of fixed questions and others that stem from the answers of those we interview), to observational documentation, to field research. We gather as much information as we can, which we subsequently critically filter and fictionalize."¹

Thirdly, in addition to using theatrical means such as storytelling, performative theatre, etc., which takes it out of the usual theatre setting, educational theatre becomes a community asset, not just belonging to the theatre or producing company. It often exits the theatre and is even designed outside it. Thus, the spectator is not the one who turns their attention to the theatre, but rather, it's the other way around: the theatre comes to meet the audience, offering a cultural product they need without having chosen it. Educational theatre is a necessity for the mental health and social hygiene of the contemporary person, who, in such a merged world, is somehow obliged to understand its neuralgias and contribute to their amelioration. The creators of this type of performance have the mission to make the spectator responsible, to make them aware of what is happening around them, how close they are to others, and yet how distant at the same time.

Educational theatre is simultaneously accompanied by a sort of informational campaign; it becomes a banner for bringing a subject of interest to the forefront. For this reason, sometimes, a cultural-artistic event is accompanied by a public debate, some additional informative materials, here we include promotional and awareness videos, brochures and written materials, books, courses, marches. Therefore, educational theatre engages not just the producing company, but also associations and related institutions that can support the artistic endeavor through active involvement. Furthermore, in support of a performance of this nature, not only forces from the cultural and educational spheres are involved, but also from related areas that, at a certain level, intersect with the tackled subject.

The project „Culisele creierului – Epilepsia” / ”The Brain's Backstage – Epilepsy” falls within the sphere I previously mentioned. It's a collaboration involving cultural and educational institutions, joined by artists from the fields of theatre and literature. The entire project is inspired by Bogdan Munteanu's novel ”Stai jos au cazi” / ”Sit Down or Fall Down”, which, at the initiative of Oltița Cîntec, the curator of the International Festival for Young Audiences in Iași, becomes a performance at the Luceafărul Theatre in Iași, opening the festival. The project also involves professors from the ”Gr. T. Popa”

1 <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/teatrul-educational-poate-educa-si-alina-poate-forma-oameni-mai-buni/>

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University of Medicine in Iași and researchers from the "I. I. Mironescu" Cultural Center who become co-authors of the volume "„Culisele creierului – Epilepsia. Perspective narative" / "The Brain's Backstage. Epilepsy. Narrative Perspectives" published by the university's publishing house.



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This isn't the first time a performance of educational theatre by the Luceafărul Theatre in Iași has been accompanied by a documentary material manifested in the form of a volume. This time again, the play "Stai jos au cazii" / "Sit Down or Fall Down", which I had the joy of directing, is complemented by the book that marks its appearance. The book includes chapters by several authors, all addressing the same topic – epilepsy. The volume is introduced by the rector of the "Gr. T. Popa" University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Iași, Prof. Dr. Viorel Scripcariu, noting the purpose of the volume as an integral part of the educational project that realizes the partnership between the performing institution and the higher education institution: "I consider this volume to be an important resource in medical education: for students, doctors, and society. An innovative and transdisciplinary strategy for sharing, practicing, and assessing communication and empathy skills, starting from theatre. It's a pilot project, part of a broader and unique endeavor in the Romanian academic space – 'University for the Community' – which UMF Iași and the 'I. I. Mironescu' Cultural Center will undertake in Romania, and I am pleased that 'The Brain's Backstage' will inaugurate it."²

2 Oltița Cîntec, Richard Constantinescu, Daniela Șilindean, *Culisele creierului. Epilepsia. Perspective narative*, Editura „Gr. T. Popa”, Iași, 2023, p. 10.

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The book continues with a generous chapter on performative medicine, where Oltița Cîntec mentions great playwrights who have either directed their work towards medicine, whether they had a medical background or not, or have embraced their own illness as an artistic instrument, turning it into a method of expression. Noted are writer-doctors like François Rabelais, Friedrich Schiller, Arthur Conan Doyle, or Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, as well as creators of shows such as Pippo Delbono, Romeo Castellucci, or Suzy Willson, who conduct *aesthetic research on medical foundations*. These latter artists understand medical conditions as an instrument of artistic expression, addressing trauma or illness as a means of probing the depths of the human being. Thus, not only an artistic creed is fulfilled, but also a curative purpose of art, bound to respond to a wide range of needs, capable of borrowing methods of physical or psychological healing and adopting them to an artistic approach.

Another concept of modernity that must be noted is dramatherapy – in other words, the involvement of ordinary people in theatrical activities for therapeutic purposes. "Carl Jung said about this type of therapy that it is not a treatment, but a way to develop the creative possibilities lying dormant, because nowadays they tend to become automatic. Thus, dramatherapy workshops do not aim to create actors, but to develop the individual. Their goal is to make the patient discover and valorize their qualities, teach them to be in control in crisis situations, and help them develop their imagination and creativity."³ Numerous are the examples of theater companies that have steered their activities towards this domain. Individuals with physical or psychological afflictions are involved in projects through which they transform their problems into means of artistic expression. As Daniela Șilindean mentions in the second chapter of the book, "The Story That Legitimizes": "To tell the story about one's own illness certainly involves not only finding the courage for self-exposure, especially in front of an unfamiliar audience, but also the endeavor to connect the known images of oneself with those overlapping another self. The latter is often not fully known. Therefore, the narrative also acquires the character of investigation, serving the function to systematize and order. To filter and to reach understanding."⁴

The volume continues with a story by the primary care neurologist, Ioana Mândruță – "Turnul, aici căpitanul Robert, cer permisiunea de a ateriza în sala de operație" / "Control tower, this is Captain Robert, requesting

3 Apud <https://www.medicub.ro/reviste/medic-ro/teatrul-intre-arta-si-terapie-id-620-cmsid-51>

4 Oltița Cîntec, Richard Constantinescu, Daniela Șilindean, *Culisele creierului. Epilepsia. Perspective narrative*, ed. cit., p. 34.

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permission to land in the operating room” – a title reflective of a life situation where a commercial pilot discovers after a car accident that he is suffering from epilepsy. The narrative poignantly captures how a man's existence changes following this diagnosis and, particularly, after being cured of epilepsy through surgery. Thus, the impressive life situation of a patient becomes literature, and of high quality at that, with Ioana Mândruță writing a dynamic and highly visual prose.



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One of the document's chapters is that of Professor Richard Constantinescu – ”Statele unite ale ființei. Cum a devenit Creangă epileptic” / ” United States of Being: How Creangă Became Epileptic.” In a generous, well-documented study, the author compiles information scattered across various books regarding the condition that disrupted the mature years of the author Ion Creangă, whom most of us imagine idyllically as a rustic, humor-filled, and pantagruelian storyteller. This chapter is also informative regarding the symptomatology of epilepsy and, importantly, a primer for the public on the social mechanisms in which someone suffering from this condition is

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engaged, even if they are a personality from the literary world. Ultimately, comparing an author from the end of the 19th century with one from contemporary times shows how unprepared we are to understand the issues faced by some of us.

The chapters "Confesiuni de producător" / "Confessions of a Producer", "Un coș cu mere" / "A Basket of Apples" – a story by Bogdan Munteanu, "Stai jos sau cazi – culisele unui spectacol" / "Sit Down or Fall – Behind the Scenes of a Show", "Nu-ți fie rușine când te trezești pe jos" / "Don't Be Ashamed When You Wake Up on the Ground" complete the purpose of this book, focusing on creating the play conceived following the dramatization of the novel that also gives it its title. A review of some aspects related to the literary work that the journey starts from is imperative, followed by reflections and themes addressed in creating the play I am signing.

Bogdan Munteanu sheds literary clichés, adopting an uninhibited and free style of writing, making it extremely theatrical. The dialogues are lively and easily spoken, as they belong to real people, natural and simple. Between the lines, many flaws of the Romanians shine through, but just as happens in the relationship of Ciprian, the main character, with epilepsy, they are accepted and treated with humor. In the end, the only way to move forward is to accept your vulnerability and to allow others not to understand it. Reading Bogdan provides a good opportunity to learn perhaps unknown things about epilepsy. Sometimes you wonder if you are going through the pages of a journal or intrusively entering into the memories and emotions of a person. Ciprian, his character with whom he probably sometimes confuses himself, has the generosity to allow us to do this, inviting us to discover him and his close ones.

"Stai jos sau cazi / Sit Down or Fall a title that describes one of the safety rules for those diagnosed with epilepsy, also imposed the rule of the space where the action unfolds; an environment in which involuntary collapse is safe and without consequences. The pain fades away, and the plunge into fragments of unreality is achieved gently. The final image of our show describes precisely the fall of people into a space where fragility is embraced tenderly. The invitation to solidarity is the best method through which those around Ciprian understand his life."⁵

The first to learn this rule are those around the central character, because, if he is out of control during the seizures, the others can be of help. Gradually, and seemingly against their will, the family becomes his safety net, getting used to Ciprian's needs. Frightened by what is happening to their son and adolescent nephew, the adults' first instinct is to hide his vulnerability,

5 Oltița Cîntec, Richard Constantinescu, Daniela Șilindean, *Culisele creierului. Epilepsia. Perspective narrative*, ed. cit., p. 140.

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although its signs will become permanent. Over time, however, they realize that Ciprian and his problems must become a priority. The young man acknowledges that suppressing the diagnosis and keeping it secret only serves to intensify the danger he can sometimes be in. As long as you accept your limits, you allow others to help you.

Following the convulsions, Ciprian gradually rediscovers the world, and his travels outside of his confused self-cause the past and present to intermingle. "The beings he meets, sometimes figures toppled at the boundary between reality and dreaming, are also brought to the stage in our version. Undefined images, peculiar, unnatural habits, accompanied by noises and voices that entangle obsessively, recompose the exercise through which our character explains his journey. Precisely these transitions have imposed the rhythm and style of the show, a performative approach, in which transitions between scenes are carried out knowingly and in full view."⁶

Ciprian learns to accept his weaknesses by treating them with humor. When the signs of his seizures cannot be hidden, self-irony replaces drama. Indeed, it is the most fitting way for him to accept the transformations his body undergoes and, at the same time, becomes a form of social reintegration. Assuming the critical looks of others, the spontaneous and malicious remarks of children, our character anticipates their reactions and enters into a game meant to sweeten his interpersonal relations. In the street scene, when he meets a homeless man who has fallen due to an epileptic seizure, he realizes that this man is, in fact, the only other person with the same problem he knows. Although forty years old, he still struggles to hide his condition. From this homeless man who doesn't hide his diagnosis, he learns that it's useless to disguise anymore. This is not the case in the office scene, where his colleagues swarm around him during convulsions, acting inappropriately and fussing unnecessarily. Recovering, his first instinct is to flee, to retreat from the sharp gazes of his colleagues. Acceptance is still an exercise.

Nevertheless, our character leads a normal life. Aside from the convulsive episodes which, it's true, occur with much greater frequency in our show than in real life, accompanied by key scenes from Ciprian's journey, he behaves naturally. He is a teenager with typical adolescent concerns, a student learning to temper his excesses, but often skirting the rules, an adult building his own family and enjoying like everyone else the beautiful things that happen to him. Beyond natural fears, he fills his time with the well-known routine of everyone. What seemed relevant to us is the way Ciprian learns to assimilate the illness into his daily habits and not so much the modification of his lifestyle according to the diagnosis.

⁶ Idem, p. 138.

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Bogdan Munteanu captures the comic and absurd situations in which ordinary people come into contact with epilepsy. The characters around the one having seizures are colorful and spontaneous. Not knowing how to react, they behave in an utterly hilarious manner, revealing laughable mentalities and habits, without being able to offer Ciprian first aid. From this emerges the educational purpose of both the novel and our show. We learn to react and to be helpful. In addition to this information, we came up with some technical details, medical opinions, comments based on scenes, both of Ciprian, of specialists, and of our own, intended not just to clarify a certain kind of reaction in critical moments, but also to some extent step out of the particular sphere.

If in the novel the narrator's voice is heard in the first person, in our show, the role of the reader is played by the audience. Ciprian is in constant contact with the public. His thoughts are heard, his inner voice is projected in the form of a dialogue with someone in the theater who becomes an interlocutor. The spectator is at the same time the confidant of the characters, having access not only to Ciprian's confidences but also to his memories, to the impressions of other characters in relation to epilepsy. Moreover, all actors, commentators of the dramatic situations which they also enact, address the audience in turn. This relationship of confidentiality sometimes imposes itself when the theater addresses such themes.

Equally relevant are the related themes, seemingly minimized in significance in the general context. The imperfect family and lack of communication among its members, the fear of the overwhelming society, misconceptions about illness, depersonalization, and lack of humanity of those around us are just a few topics that radiate from the main trunk. Thus, not just epilepsy, but any kind of deviation from the norm is worrisome for those accustomed to routine. Outside the templates, the precise measurements, those who are different are obliged to carry their stigma.

”Stai jos au cazii / Sit Down or You'll Fall addresses a deficiency in familiarization with a problem that is very little discussed. Although statistics indicate a high percentage of diagnosed epilepsy cases among the Romanian population, the efforts made towards raising awareness of this disease are insufficient. The show is not a bravado or a critique of our society; it is merely a form of expression, a cultural product and, implicitly, an educational material. What seems relevant to us is that it addresses any category of audience and, moreover, it is not a serious show, it does not have a sober and drastic tone, but approaches a still sensitive and cautiously tackled subject with

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humor and irony. Since Ciprian chooses to open up in a relaxed manner, we only need to allow ourselves to listen to him and become more empathetic.”⁷

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⁷ Idem, p. 140.