

## The limits of freedom: *Eu sunt! Și?* case

Sorin-Dan BOLDEA\*

**Abstract:** In 2019, in Romania, there has been an active debate about the limits of theatre expression in the Eastern European cultural space. It is acknowledged that documentary and political theatre have a strong influence on the cultural scene in Eastern Europe, especially after the emergence and appreciation of new techniques such as *Verbatim* or *Devised Theatre* among theatre makers. Notwithstanding the fact that these forms of theatre, which have an extremely strong social and critical voice, have appeared in the European space for decades and have started to become more and more widespread, in 2018, in Cluj-Napoca, the premiere of the performance *Eu sunt! Și?*, directed by Loran Betty, for which I wrote the text. This performance was performed for a year all around Romania, and in 2019 it was proposed for censorship and amendment by the *Romanian Orthodox Church*. This was one of the first cases of its kind after the exit from the Romanian communist regime, one of the first, or even the first, to be fined by the *National Council for Combating Discrimination* in Romania, for discriminating against people of faith. Therefore, it is important to understand the context in which this event occurred, as well as the history of performances with similar concerns after Communism, and of course, the opinion of the authors of this performance. In addition to all this, we will also analyze performances that addressed similar themes in the Romanian space and discuss the limits and freedoms of theatre in the Romanian cultural space.

**Keywords:** theatre, performance, social theatre, dramaturgy, actor-director relationship, censorship, limits.

### Introduction

The power of theater lies in its ability to provoke thought, challenge norms, and spark conversations on important societal issues. and more than that, to engage and stimulate the audience to engage in deep and meaningful debates about life, society, politics, religion, and other important aspects of

---

\* Sorin-Dan Boldea: Ph.D. student & researcher at the *Lucian Blaga* University of Sibiu, Romania - Department of *Theatre Arts* - Faculty of Letters

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

life in general. Whatever the outcome, as long as it changes something in the audience, the theater has accomplished its purpose - or at least that's what they teach us in the early years of education in Romania.

Nevertheless, the theatre scene can sometimes become a battleground against both censorship and intimidation, especially in Eastern Europe. In this article, we review a particularly publicized case involving the performance *Eu sunt! Și?*, a performance staged in Cluj-Napoca in 2018, to highlight the wider issue of censorship and intimidation faced by other artists in the region, particularly from religious or political institutions. In the Romanian theatre institutions, especially in the Transylvanian area, there are many avant-garde art professors who instill in their students a desire to discover new aspects of their profession, about art and life in general, and more than that, they inspire them with the lesson of courage and assumption through art. Both myself and my fellow generation of artists have learned these lessons and we have not lost sight of them to this day. All of us consider that our authentic artistic visions can really make a difference in the immediate society, only if we are sincere through our art and if the selected topics for our artistic debates are real, personal, and directly related to us.

Along with my professional colleague, director Lorán Betty, in the summer of 2018, we created a performance, more precisely our graduation performance. At the time, I was graduating with my first degree, in dramaturgy, and Betty was graduating with a degree in directing. We decided to conclude this chapter of our professional journey with a performance that addresses an ongoing concern for both of us, namely the oppression of homosexual men in Chechnya. In addition to this theme, of course, we also addressed a multitude of other themes, including the validity or morality and discriminatory aspects of religion and many others. Most of these themes came

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

secondarily, either from the staging or from small collage-like passages of text. However, the main focus of the performance itself was strictly on what we have called the *gay concentration camps* of 2018's Chechnya.

Both of us aimed to prove our authenticity and direct concern towards the subject we have chosen to address through our performance. However, only a year after the premiere of the performance, a whole wave of discrimination and ideological aggression from the *Romanian Orthodox Church* came. Over time, it became clear that we are not a singular case within Romania, and over time there have been other cases where various forms of art have been suppressed by some managers, politicians, or church representatives.

As stipulated by other theatre researchers, „censorship has been a problem for theatre throughout history, with various factors influencing its control and regulation, such as political and financial factors.”<sup>1</sup> Although censorship has always existed in the background, and although it is not something we encounter every day now, it exists as a threat to theatrical freedom. The freedom of the arts is absolutely necessary in our times, it is a conventional form of debate and discourse that must be protected and preserved.

This case was an important one in the recent theatre history of Romania, perhaps because of the mass media coverage of the case itself, however, it was one of the first such incidents after Romania's exit from communism, a concrete case of aggression and indirect censorship.

---

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Jackson et al., „Alison Forsyth and Chris Megson, ed. *Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present* Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.” *New Theatre Quarterly*, 26, 2010, p. 90 - 91. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000114>.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Recently there appeared an article in Romania that is all over the internet, an extremely valuable article that discusses fifteen recent moments in which the Romanian Orthodox Church got furious over the arts.<sup>2</sup> The aforementioned performance is of course also discussed, but also other extremely relevant moments in the extremely recent history, which will help to understand in which direction the Romanian cultural landscape is moving. Amidst other performances or films that have been banned or intimidated, there are also discussions about sculptures or paintings that had the same path, leading to the realization that the scenery may not look very propitious.

The influence of the church in Romania has always been at high levels, and this could be observed already after communism. The Romanian Orthodox Church played a considerable key role in the post-communist democracy, influencing educational programs, LGBTQ+ rights, and the restitution of property.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the church has always had a strong presence both socially and politically in Romania. Since the collapse of communism in 1989, the Romanian Orthodox Church has experienced a surge toward nationalism, conservatism, homophobia, and religious bigotry.<sup>4</sup>

It is important not to forget the actual context in which Romanian society is at the moment, particularly its recent past. Until 2001, therefore very recently, homosexuality was punishable by law, through the Penal Code 200. That article stipulated explicitly that sexual relations between people of the

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.scena9.ro/article/arta-furie-controversa-religie-biserica-ortodoxa-bor>, accessed on 01.11.2023.

<sup>3</sup> Lavinia Stan, Lucian Turcescu. „The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-communist Democratisation.” *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 8, 2000, pp. 1467-1488.

<sup>4</sup> Turcescu Lucian, Lavinia Stan. “Conservative orthodoxy in Romania.”, *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe*, 2019, pp. 41–51.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

same sex, committed in public or if they caused a public scandal, were punishable by imprisonment from one to five years. However, many cases of intimidation or brutalization and imprisonment of LGBTQ+ people took place under the excuse of this penal code, even though many people were not engaging in intercourse in public, but in their own privacy. However, this article was certainly an article that limited the freedom of individuals and human rights, but on top of that, it was also abusively and erroneously applied. The shadow of this article can still be found today in Romania, from the collective mentality to the emergence of the new extremist and extremely nationalistic parties in parliament, to the clear attitude of the church towards this subject.

Evidently, the history of the Romanian Orthodox Church is extremely complex, from the communist era to the present. However, what is important to understand is that the church is a rather strong power in the state, even though it is not a VAT payer, and is not subject to the same rules as every institution that is subsidized by the state or that spends public funds, thus it does not have to justify them. It receives a large annual budget from the state for building churches, refurbishing them, or other expenses, but these do not have to be justified. As Mirel Bănica and Vintilă Mihăilescu point out in the book *Why is Romania like this?*, from 1990 until now, an average of 200 churches have been built per year in Romania, and this indicates that this institution has a large annual budget, and it does not pay taxes and can manage public funds on its own as an institution, and above all, it tells us that the influence of the church is still very influential both in politics and in society.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

### *Eu sunt! Și* – background narrative

*Eu sunt! Și?*<sup>5</sup> was a thought-provoking performance that explored the complex issue of sexual identity through an ironic and self-deprecating lens. Inspired by the Chechnya *concentration camps* for queer individuals, also called the *gay purge* by Amnesty International<sup>6</sup>, the play aimed to expose local and national perspectives on this controversial topic. As the dramaturg of the performance, I and my colleagues embarked on a year-long tour across several cities in Romania, bringing comfort and raising awareness through artistic expression.

Through the presentation of this performance to the Romanian audience, we tried to raise awareness of the issue of discrimination and hatred towards those who are *different*, in this case towards the queer community – but let's not forget that this plague of hatred spreads just like an *epidemic* and can end up affecting the society itself and divide it, and it is only a small step to spread hatred from the queer community to other social categories. The desire of the artists' team was first and foremost to bring an overview to this issue, and beyond that, to debate whether or not religion and politics drive us to discriminate.<sup>7</sup>

The narrative of the performance actually followed the stories extracted from the actual reality within Chechnya, in relation to the

---

<sup>5</sup> The title of the performance translates into English as *I am! So?* - and it refers to one's sexual identity. *I am queer, so?* – Asking somewhat rhetorically what is the dilemma regarding one's sexuality, why should this be relevant in the judgment of a person.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/russia-one-year-after-gay-purge-in-chechnya-still-no-justice-for-victims/>, accessed on 01.11.2023.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.scena9.ro/article/artistii-care-au-suparat-patriarhia-romana>, accessed on 01.11.2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

*concentration camps* mentioned above, and paraphrased stories of the victims and of the political and religious leaders in the area - all of which were gathered and put together through the technique of documentary theatre, in order to present to the audience an image as close as possible to the cruel reality that people experienced over there. It is well known that „documentary theatre attempts to address misrepresentations and omissions or to reframe known incidents and images in a manner that exposes perspectives and voices that otherwise would be silenced.”<sup>8</sup> And this was precisely the reason why we chose to work on this technique and choose this topic.

Beyond these stories, the whole performance was a sort of collage of texts, ideas, and images that moved or touched us in the creative team, it also contained visions and discourses similar to those in Chechnya, but which occurred in Romania or Moldova. Near but far from Chechnya, similar ideas were being circulated in the public space, and for this reason, we wanted to include these similar ideas in the discourse of our performance.

Among these ideas or discourses that we took from the online sphere and integrated into the performance, there was a Romanian website that proposed curing homosexuality and vehemently condemned it. These ideas were stipulated in a scene in which the actors in the performance were dressed in their underwear, but with sacerdotal beads on their heads – precisely to suggest the medium and source from which this information came, and more than that, to indicate that these preachers are in fact also ordinary people, living and thinking, just like us, but choosing to discriminate and promote a discourse of hate – which actually contradicts the core values of religion, love and

---

<sup>8</sup> Julia Henderson et al. „Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film Edited by Valerie Barnes Lipscomb and Leni Marshall (review).” *Theatre Journal*, 66 (2014): 307 - 308. <https://doi.org/10.1353/TJ.2014.0037>.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

compassion. This scene we created was not one of either hatred or discrimination, it was a humble scene where we wanted to demonstrate that each one of us is basically human and that it is, in fact, possible to forget about positions, vestments, and ideologies, and simply advocate for compassion and empathy in a world that is already operating on the wrong foot.

The performance premiered in Cluj-Napoca in 2018, at *Reactor de Creație și Experiment* Theatre, and then we toured this production in several cities in Romania. In all the cities there were different opinions and reactions to our performance, but nothing drastic happened anywhere, more than someone choosing to leave the auditorium. This all took a serious turn when, in 2019, when we performed this performance at the *Cluj Pride*, back in Cluj-Napoca, Transylvania. Then, just a few hours after some photos from the show were posted on Facebook, some of the users who viewed the photos massively distributed these images claiming they were blasphemous.

Ironically, none of the people who shared these pictures were at the performance. They were taken out of context, and they associated these photos with the actors partially unclothed and with an icon in their hands and pasted into the Pride context. Immediately afterwards a wave of mass hatred and discrimination followed – setting up pro and con camps both in the mass media and online.

The international press reported extensively on how a theatre performance was being proposed for censorship<sup>9</sup>. All these actions led to the Pride organizer being sanctioned by the *CNCD*<sup>10</sup> board, because we as a troupe

---

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/schauspieler-hacken-zwiebeln-auf-christusbild-geldstrafe>, accessed on 01.11.2023.

<sup>10</sup> Translated from Romanian - *National Council for Combating Discrimination*.



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

did not hold a legal identity, for discrimination, with the amount of 2.000 RON.<sup>11</sup> Obviously, after a long process of more than a year, we were all called to defend our art.

In the immediate period that followed, more and more messages of support began to appear from people in the theatre field both from home and abroad, emphasizing the importance of artistic freedom, especially in a country with antecedents in this regard. A country where this practice is known to have been completely normal under the communist regime.

This intimidation and proposed censorship, which occurred in 2019 in Romania, may bring to memory the same tactic used in 1930s Britain to censor over five plays that were accused of lesbianism by the Lord Chamberlain.<sup>12</sup> Similarities in these discriminatory attitudes can still be seen in these years in countries like Romania, which was under communist rule for many years and which immediately afterward relied overwhelmingly on the church. Only in 2023, according to a national survey, the percentage of trust in the church institution was over 60%. These statistics could explain quite a lot about the current state and influence of the church in Romania.

It is important to note that this event occurred in the context of the 2018 family referendum which failed because not enough people turned out to vote. In 2018, a religiously supported organization proposed that the definition of family be changed in the Romanian constitution. Therefore, it is even more understandable the frustration and tension of the church in this context in

---

<sup>11</sup> That modest amount, approximately 400 euros, was the amount decided for the intimidation and prosecution of our performance determined by the judges and the council against discrimination.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Freshwater. „Theatre Censorship in Britain”. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 49-52.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

which they failed to carry out their agenda to change the constitution, and immediately afterward, during the Pride festival, a performance appeared that blatantly discussed homophobia. The Church had a major influence in this referendum, campaigning for traditional family rights and going door to door to urge people to come out and support the referendum. There are clear indications that the influence of the church on these issues can be a major one, as in the United States where religious differences and the influence of religion can influence citizens' decisions on gay marriage bans for example, rather than a single political culture.<sup>13</sup>

### **Similar cases: the case 98% decizia corectă**

The Orthodox Church has the same attitude not only in Romania but in several countries around the EU. Orthodox Churches in Central and Eastern Europe are known to influence mass opinions about homosexuality, and more importantly, to have an influence on politics and the rise of extremist parties, and it is precisely for this reason that homophobic events that affect the population or the arts are on the rise.<sup>14</sup>

Both in Romania and in other surrounding countries, there have been similar cases which, even if not proposed for censorship, were at least harshly judged by some political or clerical voices, and had to endure a backlash of hatred or intimidation. Some of these performances include *Kora.Boska*, from

---

<sup>13</sup> William Salka, Raymond C. Burnett. „Determinants of Electoral Support for Anti-Gay Marriage Constitutional Amendments: An Examination of Ballot Issues in California and Florida.” *Sexuality & Culture*, no. 16, 2012, pp. 59-75.

<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Spina. „The Religious Authority of the Orthodox Church and Tolerance Toward Homosexuality.” *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2016, pp. 37-49.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Poland, or *Evangheliștii*, and *98% decizia corectă*, both from Romania. Both cases are relevant to what it means to be boycotted or intimidated by other institutions or individuals who hold different viewpoints. Certainly, there are other relevant cases in the European space, but I have chosen to discuss these two cases briefly in order to get to the most recent case in Romania. In addition, other theorists tend to point out that censorship is a complex issue, and artists and scholars need nuanced analyses to understand its meaning and potential extenuating circumstances.<sup>15</sup> And it is precisely with this in mind that I would like to point out that we are discussing a topic of major importance that deserves to be researched and examined on all sides in order to be fully understood. Meanwhile, every local or international analysis on this subject is important, every event in the world that has faced such hostilities must be debated and exposed.

*Kora.Boska* is a case known in Poland as being a boycotted performance for the message and the manner in which the authors chose to express their artistic outlook. This performance premiered at *Teatr Nowy* in 2021 and was authored by the artists Katarzyna Chlebny, Łukasz Błażejewski, Paweł Harańczyk, Karol Miękina and Artur Świetny. This performance was based on the story of Kora, who after her death stands at the gates of heaven, where the Three Saint Marys are waiting for her – Lady of Czestochowa, Lady of Fatima, and Lady of Guadalupe. The three Marys symbolize three different attitudes and visions of the Poland society. Lady of Czestochowa represents faith, Lady of Fatima represents love and purity, and Lady of Guadalupe represents love.<sup>16</sup> The production itself to some degree goes overboard,

---

<sup>15</sup> Janelle G. Reinelt et al. „The Limits of Censorship I.” *Theatre Research International*, 32 (2007): 3 - 15. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883306002471>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://teatrnowy.com.pl/repertoire/kora-boska/>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

breaking many conventions and, more specifically, audaciously trifling with the Christian view of the Final Judgement. It portrays to some degree different instances of life and death, of what that means, and pokes fun at fundamental ideas - whether Christian or pagan, and makes one question whether or not the world around us really is what it appears to be.

This particular performance has been boycotted in the recent past on the grounds that Fatima was played by a transgender. This boycott followed the decision of some right-wing, conservative organizations to disrupt and intimidate this performance. Obviously, immediately after this event, there emerged pro and con voices in the Polish and international theatre community.

*Evangheliștii* was staged at Iasi Theatre, Romania, in 2005, and it was directed by Benoit Vitse, based on a text written by Alina Mungiu Pippidi. The play itself in some way addresses religiosity and brings all the evangelists to the saddle who at the end of the play, besides other scenes suggesting homosexuality or even sex, constitute a reinterpreted *Last Supper* where all the characters die poisoned by St. Paul who even kills his Prophet. The production has been harshly criticized by the Orthodox and Catholic Church in Romania and has been labeled a blasphemous play.<sup>17</sup>

Although this event occurred more than fifteen years ago, it is extremely important in the Romanian sphere because it was the first one immediately after the fall of communism in which an attempt was made to intimidate an artistic collective. Compared to the play *Eu sunt! Și?*, which also received a fine in addition to intimidation and a proposal of censorship, the

---

<sup>17</sup> [https://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2005/12/051204\\_scandal\\_teatru\\_iasi.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2005/12/051204_scandal_teatru_iasi.shtml), accessed on 02.11.2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

play *Evangelistii* was only severely criticized by religious institutions.<sup>18</sup> But nevertheless, it was the first notorious case of a dangerous and obstructive path for Romanian artists.<sup>19</sup>

Similar cases have also occurred, in fact, in other countries in Eastern and Central Europe, even in the film sector, namely in 2012 in Dubrovnik, Croatia, where a film was banned for its homosexual and controversial nature. Co-produced by Serbia and Croatia and featuring actors from the two countries, *The Parade*, directed by Srdan Dragojevic, told the story of a retired Serbian army soldier who enlists former adversaries from Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo to protect Belgrade's Gay Pride march that was threatened by nationalist hooligans.<sup>20</sup> It can therefore be clearly observed that all these cases, in various countries in the vicinity of Romania, but also in Romania, are not generally isolated cases, but cases that have opened a dangerous path that attacks artistic freedom, both in the sphere of film and theatre.

The independence and liberty of art are advocated all over Europe, even in countries like Turkey and other countries that are not part of the European Union, with many artists arguing about the risk that intimidation from state institutions has on self-censorship and how important the autonomy of art is.<sup>21</sup> At the same time, there are some researchers who highlight that such cases are extremely problematic, especially if they are happening

---

<sup>18</sup> <https://adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/piesa-evangelistii-un-kitsch-sfidator-care-a-1335051.html>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.lucianrigore.ro/viewpoint/evangelistii-pippidei>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

<sup>20</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/croatia-movie-idUSL6E8EK82M20120321>, accessed on 02.11.2023.

<sup>21</sup> Banu Karaka. „Images Delegitimized and Discouraged: Explicitly Political Art and the Arbitrariness of the Unspeakable.” *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45, 2011, pp. 155-83.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

nowadays and society and art in general is still attacked according to some outdated and worrying patterns.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, it is essential to recognize that these events often attract other similar incidents and encourage further intimidation. For instance, after the *Eu sunt! Și?* case, in 2020, a similar case occurred in Romania, in the city of Piatra Neamț, at the local Theatre. At that time the play *98% decizia corectă* was staged, under the direction of Elena Morar, based on a written piece by Andreea Tănase.<sup>23</sup>

The performance is an invitation for reflection on Romanian society, where the subject of teenage pregnancy is still taboo in families and at school, while statistics rank Romania in first place in the European Union for the number of unwanted pregnancies among minors. During the performance, discussions are held about the reality around us, about how sex, abortion, and other taboo subjects are rarely discussed in Romanian public society. Nevertheless, following the performance of this play, a group of parents and political representatives of the local municipality shelled the local theatre with letters, threats, and various intimidations, demanding that the theatre no longer perform this play. They were deeply disturbed by the reality of the lines which are certainly not cosmeticized, and most likely by a neon womb on the main wall, framed by broken glass - an image within the performance.<sup>24</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Henri Beunders et al. „The end of arrogance, the advent of persuasion. Public Art in a Multicultural Society. ” *Social Analysis*, 51, 2007, pp. 42-57.

<sup>23</sup> [https://www.teatrultineretului.ro/?page\\_id=21151](https://www.teatrultineretului.ro/?page_id=21151), accessed on 03.11.2023.

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.comisarul.ro/articol/se-vede-in-ochii-tai-ca-ti-place-pula-stii-bine-sa\\_1160967.html?fbclid=IwAR0jppqZqObJe4qz90zhofAGlcaPKKFGVxOYIya40zxHG71EGMC8kd0-LoWM](https://www.comisarul.ro/articol/se-vede-in-ochii-tai-ca-ti-place-pula-stii-bine-sa_1160967.html?fbclid=IwAR0jppqZqObJe4qz90zhofAGlcaPKKFGVxOYIya40zxHG71EGMC8kd0-LoWM), accessed on 03.11.2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

The outrage has become a notable one since less than two years after the previous controversy in Cluj, this one too assaults freedom of creation. In this regard, I succeeded in interviewing the playwright of this performance, Andreea Tănase, who wanted to express her personal impressions of this event.

In February 2020 I won a playwriting competition organized by the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamt with the play *98% decizia corectă*. In November 2020, shortly before the premiere of the performance directed by Elena Morar, everybody freaked out. In short, and from a purely subjective perspective, because, to be honest, I've read diagonally most of the press material that appeared at the time, things went something like this: someone leaked some pages of text to a local publication. The local publication got very inflamed and wrote a mega-sentimentalist-bombshell headline article about the porno performance that was going to be staged on the theater stage and how it was totally wrong and that's not art. Of course, the lines were taken out of context and the outrageous scene was taken out of context. Snowball effect. Everyone erupted in strong reactions and opinions, some pertinent, some not at all, some for, some against. A proper scandal. Even the mayor of Piatra Neamt took a stand and expressed his opinion on the performance that was in the making, an opinion of a true politician: without context, without documentation, drawing conclusions without any kind of information (he didn't even read the text), but inviting people to be united in the fight against vulgarity, subculture, and superficiality. Rehearsals were over, the video editing of the performance was completed, and the premiere took place virtually because we were still in the middle of the pandemic. The video was available to the public for 3 days during which over 8000 people from all over the country watched the controversial performance. And (perhaps to the disappointment of some) they didn't see any porn. It's hard to say how it felt. Actually, it's not hard, just uncomfortable. I was in Bucharest at the time, I should have been in Piatra with the whole team, but I couldn't go because - of the pandemic. I felt very lonely and completely isolated from everything and anything (effects of the pandemic too, not just the scandal). And, worst of all, I was completely taken by the premiere. I went into a kind of black hole where I didn't want to hear or read anything about the scandal, but worst of all, I was completely unable to enjoy even a few moments of the fact that, hey, the performance is coming out. The performance I worked on (mostly remotely) with some women I admire and respect enormously both as artists and as people: Elena Morar - the director, Diana Miroşu and Ileana Zirra - the set

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

designers, Ana Cărlan - video designer, plus the whole great, professional team of actors, teen volunteers and other people who contributed to its construction. It was a great premise for joy and a cool moment to celebrate that together we created something cool. *Magic! Fuck. No. It's fail* - that's a line from Iza, the main character in the play, which happens to be very appropriate for this context.

Anyway, in short, it was bad, the scandal got to me, and the reaction from then on was to isolate myself with these unpleasant feelings and thoughts: that people don't understand and that I don't understand why they don't understand and why they so easily jump to judge and accuse without first trying to see and discover what they are judging or accusing. I have no problem with you having a different opinion, not liking or disagreeing with what I write or do, artistically speaking. I'm not here to convince you of anything, impose anything, or lecture you, I'm here to tell you a story. What you do next with it, what your reactions are, how you feel, and what you think, is strictly your business. But be human, meet me halfway, and at least have the decency to try to understand the context (this is because we're still talking about vulgarity). On the subject of change, I'd like to have more hope that things will change and people will be more open. But since I've started writing theatre, almost every performance that's ever been staged I've come up against the idea of censorship, which I find brain-blowing, especially since it's an artistic area. I still continue to marvel, and there will probably be a thousand more situations where I will marvel at people working in theatres who come to me (or the director working on my text) and tell me to censor lines or words, but at the same time, they want those characters to be authentic and lifelike. I'm going to make a disclaimer that normally I wouldn't even feel the need to make, but I've never before written something vulgar just for the sake of being vulgar. Maybe I should do that and see what comes out, at least as an exercise. How outrageous can people get? Because we are still scared to talk openly about important topics, we have the pretense that we know how things should be and what is better for others, what is and isn't allowed as behavior in society, and we have such a hard time trying to understand what is different from us and our way of perceiving the world. I don't think everyone is like that, but I think that mostly speaking, in Romania, we still have a lot to learn, first of all about being human with others, kind and with common sense, especially when the other seems to fundamentally attack your belief about life. Because everyone is in their own bubble, just as I was and am in my own bubble in which I still can't believe the idea of artistic censorship still exists in 2023. I think it's much easier for us to judge than to understand because that takes effort, but I refuse to believe that we



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

don't have the capacity to make that effort to be at least a little better together.<sup>25</sup>

The playwright's experience of the controversy swirling around her play provides insight into the ongoing challenges artists face, particularly in the context of potential censorship and public backlash in Eastern European countries. The account of the incident underscores the tendency of individuals and institutions to judge without fully comprehending the context of creative works. The playwright expresses her frustration with the disconnect between the intent of her work and the public's perception, emphasizing the importance of empathy and a willingness to understand differing perspectives. The playwright's experience of the controversy swirling around her play provides insight into the ongoing challenges artists face, particularly in the context of potential censorship and public backlash in Eastern European countries. The account of the incident underscores the tendency of individuals and institutions to judge without fully comprehending the context of creative works. The playwright expresses her frustration with the disconnect between the intent of her work and the public's perception, emphasizing the importance of empathy and a willingness to understand differing perspectives. Accepting the playwright's sentiment is to acknowledge the need for a more open and nuanced approach to art in general, to acknowledge the complexity of creative expression, and to plead for a society that values understanding over-hasty judgment. Advocating for increased inclusiveness and a willingness to engage with diverse viewpoints responds to the broader idea that encouraging

---

<sup>25</sup> Unpublished interview conducted in August 2023 with playwright Andreea Tănase on the topic of censorship in theatre and her personal experience as a playwright in the performance *98% decizia corectă*.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

empathy and open communication can contribute to a more inclusive and enlightened society.

As we understand, these cases are unfortunately not isolated and are being felt across Europe, especially in Eastern Europe. However, it is essential that these events do not happen any further. A few arguments in this regard would be the suppression of creativity, as such attitudes could limit the diversity and enrichment of artistic expression, which would be undesirable in a liberal Europe. These attitudes from institutions undermine the democratic principle of freedom of expression that we promote in a healthy democracy, a cornerstone of a healthy and open-functioning society.

Therefore, it can be observed that in both cases, both in *Eu sunt! Și?* and *98% decizia corectă* we are dealing with images and text fragments being taken out of context. What is even more worrying in the Neamț case is that the play was not even completed when the incident occurred. Judging in unawareness of the facts, taking performances out of context, or judging artistic works according to religion and politics are a few of the noxious aspects that artists in Romania, and certainly in other cultural environments, still face today. With fewer words, intimidation, and direct or indirect censorship, are obvious offenses towards artistic freedom.

On the other hand, avoiding these situations is key to promoting a more inclusive cultural outlook that embraces a diversity of voices and perspectives and genuinely recognizes the entire social mosaic. On top of all this, the playwright mentions that she has faced a form of censorship in the theatre industry, and that raises concerns about potential obstacles to artistic progress in Romania. When artists are forced to conform to societal expectations or avoid certain subjects in their work, this impedes the evolution of artistic

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

expression as a tool for stretching boundaries, questioning norms, and fostering critical thinking.

### *Note personelle of the *Eu sunt! Şi?* event*

The whole incident involving *Eu sunt! Şi?* is a representative example of the ongoing struggle faced by Eastern European theatre artists for their own freedom of expression. Although these matters should be totally separate. One is an artistic convention, another is a public manifestation involving the population. In recent years, there have been numerous cases where theatrical performances have been subject to public backlash, petitions, and sometimes even legal consequences. And this is something I find alarming.

This model of censorship and intimidation suppresses artistic freedom, impedes creativity, and impedes open dialogue on urgent social issues, most of which really need debate and a sustained artistic discourse. Artists are torn between their willingness to articulate themselves and their fear of retaliation from powerful entities. This tendency has a frightening effect on the theatre community, restricting the range of artistic expression and preventing artistic and social progress. Encouraging diversity of voices, promoting cross-cultural exchange, and giving platforms to marginalized groups can contribute to offsetting the prevailing environment of censorship and intimidation. It is important to fight for the freedom of expression and our own voices in the arts.

Returning to the Cluj event, I would first like to mention that, this performance was extremely important for me, for the director Lorán Betty, and for the whole team of actors. It was our first step into the world of theatre, it was our first attempt to express ourselves honestly and freely, and we chose to address a subject that interested us all equally. With this performance we

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

timidly stuck our heads out of the window to see the world outside exactly as it is, and tried to encompass all our work of more than six months into a performance that was more than just a performance, it was also our degree thesis also, as I mentioned above. The performance approached the issue of sexual identity through the prism of both sides (pro/con) in an ironic and almost self-deprecating way. The performance was a collage of ideas, the result of individual and collective introspection. Taking as its starting point the situation of Chechnya's *concentration camps* for queers, the performance exposed the local and national perspectives on this controversial topic. Containing elements of performance, it tended towards an enhanced expression of our ideas about the condition of the LGBTQ+ community. The performance itself was a test of honesty and courage for both the team and the audience.

Although the complaints to the *CNCD* were made in relation to the performance, the ones who were fined were members of the *Pride Romania* organization, who had no affiliation with our artistic team. I think that this was to some extent a way of aiming at a double whammy: fining *Pride* and intimidating our artistic team in order to stop us from presenting the performance ever again. After spending months in the law courts contesting this fine and arguing our case in front of the judges, the fine was officially given to the organizer of *Pride* and they had to pay it. We all regretted the public outrage that was caused by the performance, but it was not intended to cause dissension and tension of this nature. The central idea of the performance was to promote tolerance, acceptance, and love, values that are also supported by the *Romanian Orthodox Church*, and at the same time to raise awareness of the harsh realities of the world.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

The initial impetus of the show was given by the need to understand homophobia and its presence in social reality, from both pro and anti-gay perspectives. We all wanted to emphasize that the objects used in the performance did not fall into the category of *cult* objects, being improvisations, with non-canonical representations, and the scene that produced the reactions in the public space was, in fact, a warm-ironic commentary on *religious shopping*, a phenomenon that has taken hold nationwide. It was also not our intention to attack people's deeply held beliefs, to publicly defame or offend religious symbols.

Last but not least, out of a desire to underline the fact that sexual orientation is not a defining element nor a cause of discrimination or division, or at least it should not be, our performance is and remains an invitation to open dialogue about accepting and understanding otherness. Precisely for this reason, in an official press release that we left in the Romanian press, we invited people to see the performance in order to create a personal opinion on all these issues, and after the performance, we pointed out that we are open to dialogue with our audience.

After all this episode, where in the first part we started to feel afraid and isolated ourselves in our own homes, both Betty and I decided to perform it for the last time, precisely to find a balance between all these opinions born online. We invited people officially to our last performance to really understand each other and the purpose of the performance itself.

However, there were extremely few people from the opposing camp at our last performance, the venue was full of supportive people and the press, and at the end, there was an oppressive silence where people seemed to try to stand with us, and from this silence came an abundance of applause that felt like an embrace. Then we all felt that our goal had been achieved. Although it

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

was sanctioned and we were encouraged not to play it again, we wanted to play it one last time, precisely because we wanted to prove to ourselves that love and the support of the people around us prevails, and besides, we wanted to have the last call! We wanted to convey to young artists that courage in art is essential – standing up for your beliefs is probably the most valuable thing in this profession.

Art cannot be banned, art cannot be fined, art is an exercise of imagination through which every artist must be free, and through which everyone can express themselves in a safe space, in a *conventional* space, in a space where people choose to come or not to come. Art doesn't barge into your house, you choose to see one performance or another and you choose to buy one song or another, one painting or another. I believe that artistic diversity and supporting artists to be open and sincere with their art is the only way we can all take a step forward together in Romanian art. With these words, I want to share my own experience and that of my colleagues and I want to encourage all those who are now at the beginning of their journey to continue to be real and sincere in their craft.

There is nothing nobler than speaking truths through the art you make. In this sense, no institution should have power over artistic freedom, especially an institution like the Church. Freedom in art is essential and each of us should stand up for it. It is the duty of every artist to give tomorrow's theatre even more assurance, even more freedom, and even more compassion. Freedom enables our existence - and theatre is there because of us. This is the chain that must be preserved.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that more and more productions over the last twenty years, both in Eastern Europe and the rest of Europe, have encountered various forms of censorship or intimidation. In the case of *Eu sunt! Şi?* it was unprecedented, the amendment of an artist's act and intimidation from public institutions. These cases deserve all the necessary focus, because of the blunt assault they bring on creative freedom. Each case has an important and intriguing story behind it that deserves to be heard. Perhaps people in this guild must defend freedom, and in many situations, there is solidarity and empathy when it comes to censorship in the theatre, and that is an honorable fact.

It can be observed that most of the outrages or intimidations that have taken place in recent years in European countries, especially in Eastern European countries, are circumstances influenced by religious and political outlooks, which have shaped the thinking or attitudes on certain subjects that normally should not be taboo in a liberal and accepting society, subjects such as homosexuality.

Ultimately, avoiding unfounded controversy, intimidation or any form of censorship over artistic expression is crucial for preserving freedom of expression, encouraging creativity, and promoting a more inclusive and pluralistic society, something that is crucially essential in any European society. Accepting a variety of perspectives and engaging in constructive dialogue allows for an enriched cultural tapestry and a greater collective understanding.

# THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

## Bibliography

"98% DECIZIA CORECTĂ." Teatrul Tineretului, 6 Nov. 2021, [www.teatrultineretului.ro/?page\\_id=21151](http://www.teatrultineretului.ro/?page_id=21151).

"Armata și Biserica rămân instituțiile în care românii au cea mai mare încredere. Guvernul și Parlamentul, pe ultimele locuri (Sondaj)." *Digi 24*, 14 Nov. 2023, [www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/armata-si-biserica-raman-institutiile-in-care-romanii-au-cea-mai-mare-incredere-guvernul-si-parlamentul-pe-ultimele-locuri-sondaj-2578485](http://www.digi24.ro/stiri/actualitate/social/armata-si-biserica-raman-institutiile-in-care-romanii-au-cea-mai-mare-incredere-guvernul-si-parlamentul-pe-ultimele-locuri-sondaj-2578485).

"Balkans Gay Box-office Hit Banned in Dubrovnik." *Reuters*, 21 Mar. 2012, [www.reuters.com/article/croatia-movie-idUSL6E8EK82M20120321/](http://www.reuters.com/article/croatia-movie-idUSL6E8EK82M20120321/).

Beunders, Henri et al. "The end of arrogance, the advent of persuasion. Public Art in a Multicultural Society." *Social Analysis*, 51 (2007): 42-57. <https://doi.org/10.3167/SA.2007.510104>.

Cohen, Selma J. "Annual Meeting of the American Society for Theatre Research and the Theatre Library Association: Culture and Performance (New Orleans, Louisiana, 11-14 November 1993)." *Dance Research Journal*, vol. 26, no. 1, 1994, pp. 53-54, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0149767700012493>.

Dimulescu, Venera. "Artiștii care au supărat Patriarhia Română." *Scena 9*, 5 Jul. 2019, [www.scena9.ro/article/artistii-care-au-suparat-patriarhia-romana](http://www.scena9.ro/article/artistii-care-au-suparat-patriarhia-romana).

Filip, Oana M., et al. "15 Momente Românești când Biserica s-a înfuriat pe arte & științe." *Scena 9*, 18 Oct. 2023. <https://www.scena9.ro/article/arta-furie-controversa-religie-biserica-ortodoxa-bor>.

Forsyth, Alison, and Chris Megson. "Get Real: Documentary Theatre Past and Present." Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X10000114>. pp. 90-91.

Freshwater, Helen. *Theatre Censorship in Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230237018\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230237018_4). pp. 49-52.

Grigore, Lucian. "EVANGHELIȘTII - PIPPIDEI." *Lucian Grigore*, 24 Nov. 2006, [www.luciangrigore.ro/viewpoint/evanghelistii-pippidei](http://www.luciangrigore.ro/viewpoint/evanghelistii-pippidei).

Henderson, Julia, et al. "Staging Age: The Performance of Age in Theatre, Dance, and Film." *Theatre Journal*, vol. 2, no. 66, 2014, pp. 307-308, <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2014.0037>.

Karaca, Banu. "Images Delegitimized and Discouraged: Explicitly Political Art and the Arbitrariness of the Unspeakable." *New Perspectives on Turkey* 45 (2011): 155-83. Print.

"Kora Boska." *Teatr Nowy*, 3 May 2023, [www.teatrnowy.com.pl/repertoire/kora-boska/](http://www.teatrnowy.com.pl/repertoire/kora-boska/).



## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

---

Mihăilescu, Vintilă, and Mirel Bănică. De ce Este România astfel?. Polirom, 2017. pp. 149-150.

"Piesa Evanghelistii, un kitsch sfidător care a scandalizat biserica și lumea teatrului." *Adevărul*, 16 Dec. 2005, [www.adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/piesa-evanghelistii-un-kitsch-sfidator-care-a-1335051.html](http://www.adevarul.ro/stil-de-viata/cultura/piesa-evanghelistii-un-kitsch-sfidator-care-a-1335051.html).

"Piesa 'Evangheliștii' condamnată de Biserică." *BBC Romanian*, 4 Dec. 2005, [www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2005/12/051204\\_scandal\\_teatru\\_iasi.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/romanian/news/story/2005/12/051204_scandal_teatru_iasi.shtml).

Reinelt, Janelle. "The Limits of Censorship." *Theatre Research International*, vol. 1, no. 32, 2007, pp. 3-15, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883306002471>.

"Replici porno într-o piesă de teatru pentru liceeni." *Comisarul*, 14 Nov. 2020, [www.comisarul.ro/articol/se-vede-in-ochii-tai-ca-ti-place-pula-stii-bine-sa\\_1160967.html?fbclid=IwAR0jppqZqObJe4qz90zhofAGlcaPKKFGVxOYIya40zxHG71EGMC8kd0-LoWM](http://www.comisarul.ro/articol/se-vede-in-ochii-tai-ca-ti-place-pula-stii-bine-sa_1160967.html?fbclid=IwAR0jppqZqObJe4qz90zhofAGlcaPKKFGVxOYIya40zxHG71EGMC8kd0-LoWM).

"Russia: One Year After 'Gay Purge' in Chechnya, Still No Justice for Victims." *Amnesty*, 4 Apr. 2018, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/russia-one-year-after-gay-purge-in-chechnya-still-no-justice-for-victims/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2018/04/russia-one-year-after-gay-purge-in-chechnya-still-no-justice-for-victims/).

Salka, William M., and Raymond C. Burnett. "Determinants of Electoral Support for Anti-Gay Marriage Constitutional Amendments: An Examination of Ballot Issues in California and Florida." *Sexuality & Culture*, no. 16, 2012, pp. 59-75, <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12119-011-9099-9>.

Spina, Nicholas. "The Religious Authority of the Orthodox Church and Tolerance Toward Homosexuality." *Problems of Post-Communism*, vol. 63, no. 1, 2016, pp. 37-49, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2015.1057038>.

Stan, Lavinia, and Lucian Turcescu. "The Romanian Orthodox Church and Post-communist Democratisation." *Europe-Asia Studies*, vol. 52, no. 8, 2000, pp. 1467-1488, <https://doi.org/10.1080/713663138>.

"Theaterstück in Bukarest." *Monopol Magazin*, 13 Dec. 2019, [www.monopol-magazin.de/schauspieler-hacken-zwiebeln-auf-christusbild-geldstrafe](http://www.monopol-magazin.de/schauspieler-hacken-zwiebeln-auf-christusbild-geldstrafe).

Turcescu, Lucian, and Lavinia Stan. "Conservative orthodoxy in Romania." *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe*, 2019, pp. 41-51, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24139-1\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-24139-1_3).