

The Rigors of the Present, the Promise of the Future: Perspectives on the Future of Romanian Theater

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Abstract: This article analyzes emerging views on Romanian theater from the perspective of the new generation of creators, in discussion with previous generations. It considers the differences between state and independent theater, the impact of academic training on the careers of young artists, and the ways in which they navigate a system often hostile to innovation. The study is based on personal experiences and an analysis of the contemporary cultural context, offering a vision of the challenges and opportunities in Romanian theater. This article presents two perspectives, that of an actor and that of an independent theater manager.¹ In addition to all this, this study discusses and proposes to the reader an x-ray of the present, as well as a hypothesis on the possible future of Romanian theater.

Keywords: theater, performance, future, actor-director, dialog, limits.

Introduction

Contemporary Romanian theater is at a crossroads, oscillating between tradition and innovation. On the one hand, state theaters continue to produce shows based on classic texts and established methods, while on the other hand, independent spaces are becoming a testing ground for young creators. This dynamic creates a number of challenges for theater graduates, who face major difficulties in entering the labor market. Through this study, we aim to explore

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¹ MAIDAN Creation Center, a cultural initiative dedicated to promoting contemporary theater and supporting creativity in various forms, was established 5 years ago in Cluj-Napoca (Website: <https://maidan.space/>).

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the vision of the new generation of directors and actors on the present and the future of Romanian theater, focusing on the obstacles and possible solutions to transform the theater scene into one more in tune with the contemporary world, with the general trends in the arts and more adapted to the needs of young people.

Conversations about future from today's perspective

The future of Romanian theater is not something fixed or easy to predict. The future is constantly changing, influenced by the present, by the new generations of artists, by the system they have to adapt to and by the relationship with the audience. It is not enough to analyze what is happening now, but we have to ask ourselves in which direction we can go and how we can contribute to change, to a better, more nuanced future. And certainly, as artists, we can contribute to Romanian theater today to shape it in such a way that it develops in a desired direction. We therefore consider it extremely important not to ignore the needs of the new generations, the visions of their representatives, their desires, and to work together with them to develop theater in a common direction.

It is increasingly evident that theater no longer follows traditional structures. The roles of playwright, director and actor are no longer strictly separated. Many artists are choosing to multi-function, to create collectively and experiment with new forms of expression. And this is particularly noticeable in independent theater, which has seen significant growth in Romania in the last decade. In 2015, in an interview with *Ziarul Financiar*, the director Carmen Lidia Vidu compared the independent theater of that time to a tavern, accusing the boulevard character of the productions, but

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understanding the causes: insufficient funding, activities in inadequate spaces, changes in the way the public consumes culture, etc.²

Nowadays, the independent theater environment has diversified its artistic offer by addressing contemporary and socially relevant themes, by diversifying the audience, by accessing governmental and European funds, by participating in major festivals that have contributed to its increased visibility. Thus, the establishment of the *Association of Independent Theatres* (ATI) in 2017 has led to the consolidation and development of the independent cultural sector in Romania, through cooperation between organizations and groups of independent artists, co-productions and the promotion of cultural events on a common platform³ where twenty-two independent theaters in six cities⁴ constantly present their work.

With the common goal of creating a performing arts community, the members of the association have gained visibility in recent years through the implementation of hundreds of projects, most of them co-funded by the *National Cultural Fund Administration*⁵.

Thanks to these changes, the working process becomes as important as the final performance, and collaboration and flexibility are key elements in the projects of the new generation of creators. The idea of theater space is also

² Carmen Lidia Vidu, *În România, teatrul independent înseamnă cârciumă*, Ziarul Financiarul, 2015, <https://www.zf.ro/ziarul-de-duminica/carmen-lidia-vidu-in-romania-teatrul-independent-inseamna-carciuma-de-patricia-marinescu-14564187>.

³ The platform: <https://teatruindependent.ro/>.

⁴ The cities: București, Cluj, Sibiu, Oradea, Iași și Brașov.

⁵ The Administration of the National Cultural Fund (AFCN) is an autonomous public institution, subordinated to the Ministry of Culture which, since 2005, has been the main public funder of cultural offer in Romania.

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being redefined. Today, more and more performances are being produced in industrial halls, art galleries or even public spaces. Of course, this has happened many times before in the history of theater. Artists have always used the theater as a tool for socio-political manifestation many times throughout history. Nowadays, however, it is important to understand where all these theatrical movements are heading, what are the needs of the creators and especially what are the difficulties they face in their careers, whether on an artistic, organizational or even financial level.

Today we are witnessing theater going back to the grassroots, back among the people, as it was in the beginning. One can see a trend away from the elitist environment, an almost rejection of it and a strong need to connect to current and relevant stories. This departure from the classical theater space is not only a solution to the lack of funding, but also a way for theater to reach out to different communities, testing new ways of interacting with audiences. These changes lead directly to a key theme: the differences between state and independent theater. Two realities that, although operating in distinct, parallel systems, end up influencing each other and contributing together to the future of Romanian theater.

Differences between state and independent theater

Theater "not only offers a distinctive tool for analysis, but is also a tool for transforming the society we live in."⁶ Theater has always had the power to put a mirror in front of the spectator, to criticize political or social realities, to bring a constructive criticism of the social environment. However, in recent

⁶ Janinka Greenwood et al. *Journeys into A Third Space: A study of how theatre enables us to interpret the emergent space between cultures*. (1999). <https://doi.org/10.25904/1912/2262>. (n. trad.)

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decades there have been quite few productions that have really discussed socio-political issues. Instead, nowadays we are seeing more and more productions that deal with topical and highly relevant issues for the audience.

A defining aspect of Romanian theater is the division between state institutions and independent theaters. State theaters, with stable infrastructures and state-provided budgets, offer artistic continuity, but are often limited by rigid repertoire and administrative structures. In contrast, the independent theatre functions as a creative laboratory, offering artistic freedom, but marked by financial precariousness and lack of institutional recognition.

Young directors and actors frequently choose the independent stage to develop their personal style and to experiment with new forms of expression and interdisciplinary collaboration. However, access to state theaters remains difficult, as most institutional spaces are reluctant to change and reserved towards new generations and their courageous proposals. If we do a simple analysis of last year's latest productions, 2024, we see that in state theaters most of the texts are classics, extremely few young artists or recent graduates get to stage or perform in these theaters. At the same time, collaborations between independent state theaters are very rare, we don't really see major and constant collaborations between these two mediums.

It can thus be seen that the state theater is still rigid, subject to outdated social rules and expectations, while the independent scene is effervescent and innovative, a creative space extremely malleable and open to the new, to a theater of the common man, to a political and social theater. Despite these differences, there have also been situations where these two spaces, which seem so different, have influenced each other. There have been cases where performances made in a state theater were later replicated or had a sequel in

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another performance in an independent space⁷, such as *(IN)CORECT*. There have also been situations when performances in private theaters have directly influenced the stylistics of other productions in state theaters. An example of this is the performance *Dă-te din soare*,⁸ directed by Leta Popescu. Therefore, we understand that at the level of artistic creations, there are some major differences between these two mediums, but they also overlap somewhere in the middle.

Artistic training and the reality of the job market

Another key issue is the discrepancy between academic artistic training and industry expectations. The curriculum of drama schools remains centered on traditional methods, often ignoring contemporary trends such as documentary theater, immersive performance or verbatim social theater. Thus, graduates are often unprepared for real professional challenges and are forced to adapt through self-education and independent practice. Moreover, the lack of a functional network for integrating new artists into professional life creates a climate of insecurity in the workplace. Many young creators face employment difficulties, having to accept precarious collaborations or reorient

⁷ The performance *(IN)CORECT*, directed by Leta Popescu and produced in 2020 by the independent theater *Reactor de creație și experiment* from Cluj-Napoca is part of a trilogy that started with *(IN)VIZIBIL* at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj-Napoca in February 2019 and continued with *(IN)CREDIBIL* at the National Theatre in Timișoara, in the same year.

⁸ The performance *Dă-te din soare!* (created in 2022 by *Reactor de creație și experiment*, Cluj-Napoca) is a relevant example of how independent theater reclaims its freedom of expression and opens courageous discussions about the theater system in Romania. Through a self-deprecating and critical approach, the performance sheds light on the power relations between directors, actors and state theatrical institutions, highlighting both the frustrations and the artistic limits imposed by hierarchies and administrative constraints. Thus, this performance became a source of inspiration for other independent productions that began to tackle similar themes, problematizing the position of the artist in a system dominated by authority, competition and lack of real dialogue.

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themselves to other related fields. There is a real problem in Romania with the gap between the large number of students graduating in theatre arts and the jobs available in this field.

In addition to all this, as mentioned above, there is also a big discrepancy between the types of theater productions that are made by the state and independent ones. Young director Ana-Maria Țîrlea draws attention to this: „When a spectator attends the independent theaters in Romania, he or she realizes that theater can be realized even with minimal resources. In this context, independent theaters can be seen as an amalgam between the seriousness and challenges of a state theater production and the relaxed and free atmosphere of a college exam.

These theaters are often an opportunity for early-career directors to practice their skills and learn from their mistakes, as they are not constrained by a significant budget or an established theatrical reputation. They also provide a setting in which directors collaborate with their student colleagues, with whom they are less likely to work in state theaters, which have their own companies of actors.”⁹

Independent theaters in Romania are therefore fertile ground for experimentation and innovation. Their freedom of expression and lack of institutional constraints allow directors and artists to explore new forms of expression, to experiment with non-linear structures, improvisation or even the fusion of visual theatre and performance art techniques. These companies are also more open to collaborations with other artistic fields such as music,

⁹ Ana Maria Țîrlea is a graduate director from the Faculty of Theater and Film in Cluj-Napoca. Her productions include *CTRL+Z* at Apropos Theater and *Fantoma* at the Dramatic Theater in Galati.

This excerpt is from an unpublished interview from actor Dan Boldea's personal archive, conducted in 2024.

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dance, visual art or even technology, leading to the creation of multi-faceted performances that attract a diverse and younger audience.

In addition to all this, independent theaters are responding to an increasingly evident cultural need: the need to address current, relevant issues and to create a space where social, political and psychological issues can be discussed in a direct and provocative manner. While not having the same resources as state theaters, independent artists compensate with originality and commitment, bringing to the fore stories and perspectives often ignored by traditional forms of theater. This closeness to everyday reality, as well as to the needs of contemporary audiences, means that independent theaters are seen as a dynamic environment, open to change and new forms of social engagement.

New theater-makers tend to move towards innovative, increasingly collaborative forms that explore concepts such as collective creation or working directly with the playwright to develop the set text. These trends are gradually moving away from classical theatrical models, which are considered outdated and sometimes boring in today's fast-paced and information-rich world. However, these creators do not abandon the essential features of traditional theater, such as emotional intensity, the psychological complexity of the characters or the realism of the stage situations. Rather, they combine these elements in an innovative way, using advanced technologies and responding to the needs of a 21st century audience. In this sense, independent theaters become a bridge between tradition and innovation, between the past and the future of theater.

Therefore, we understand that the artists of the new wave are moving towards more collaborative forms, towards non-institutionalized spaces, spaces that give them the opportunity of an artistic freedom that they are unlikely to find in state theatres. As director and researcher Imeda Manu-Jipa

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points out, today's theatre „ is completely reconfigured, cleaned of everything that does not contain a genuine payload.”¹⁰ From this we can also deduce that the new generations, not only from the local area, are looking for this authentic charge, this type of original and truthful performance. Based on the experiences accumulated so far, each of us has tried to identify and systematize some of the new perspectives of Romanian theatre.

The major directions identified include:

- 1. Exploring new theatrical forms:** Young directors have interdisciplinary approaches, including multimedia and interactive elements to attract new audiences. Most of them want to push the boundaries of current theater.
- 2. Redefining the status of the artist:** a generation of creators is emerging who are refusing conformity and seeking new models of sustainable artistic production. On top of this, many artists are trying to find new funding, more efficient ways to produce their shows without relying on the state or the cultural budget.
- 3. Alternative arts education:** More and more independent training initiatives, workshops, masterclasses, courses and creative labs are springing up that aim to compensate for the gaps in the traditional academic curriculum. Many directing or acting teachers of the present generation are opening up new opportunities for students, trying to make them understand different forms of theater and, above all, helping them to explore possible scenarios or methods that they may encounter later on in their careers. In this sense, at the **Faculty of Theatre and Film** in Cluj-Napoca, there are

¹⁰ Imelda Manu-Jipa, *Myth Carrying Matter and Its Scenographic Potential. The New Sacrality of Immediate Reality*, Revista Concept, nr. 1, vol. 24, București, 2022, p. 27.

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teachers such as Filip Odangiu or Raluca Lupan, open to new approaches to learning theater. At the same time, there are other faculties in the country, such as the **University of Arts** in Târgu Mureș or the theater department of the **Faculty of Letters** in Sibiu, which have a similar curriculum promoted by teachers such as Alina Nelega or Ofelia Popii.

The above directions suggest that Romanian theater is about to undergo a radical transformation as new generations redefine the boundaries of stage expression. Independent productions are bringing more and more audiences to the theater, even more than in the past years, due to the fact that the artistic offer is different from the state-run theaters, both in terms of style and content. While in state theaters we have classical performances and only a few that really discuss current issues, in independent theater most, if not all, performances are based on documentary techniques and move into a social area, bringing relevant issues to the audience.

For example, at MAIDAN in Cluj-Napoca, a series of performances¹¹, part of projects funded mainly by the AFCN, were realized after a sustained research on communities facing various problems that offer opportunities for artistic exploration. Things now seem to be moving in a promising direction, but at a very slow pace and the road is strewn with obstacles. A major overhaul of the theater system is needed, but this entails many risks for all parties involved in the theater. A radical change of mentality is probably needed to

¹¹ The performance *DISNEILEND* (2022) was carried out in cooperation with Aiud penitentiary; *Ieși din UMBRĂ* (2022) & *0 grade cu SOARE* (2023) had a research part, carried out over several months within the deaf communities in Cluj-Napoca and Timișoara; *HEBLU* (2024) was born as a result of close collaboration with the *Romanian Association of the Blind*.

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make a difference, and that can only happen over a long period of time. So how we act now is extremely important to start seeing change.

A radiography of obstacles in the Romanian theater environment

Among the most difficult obstacles is limited access to jobs. Young actors in Romania face an extremely tight job market, characterized by a very small number of permanent places in state theatres or cultural institutions. In a context where most of the jobs are already filled by experienced actors, young graduates often have to accept working in precarious conditions, unsatisfactory performance reviews, temporary engagements in smaller projects that do not provide them with long-term financial or professional stability. The rehabilitation of Romanian theatre has to start somewhere, and perhaps a first step would be to reduce the number of places in theatre faculties, whether state or private, as the inflation of actors cannot be stopped while universities are annually releasing more than 180 places in the specialization of Actor's Studies.

On the other hand, another significant obstacle is the under-financing of culture, the extremely low budget allocated to the cultural sector by the Romanian state. This means that state institutions, such as theaters or cultural centers, do not have the necessary resources to hire new talent or to support large-scale productions that could include young actors. It also creates a high dependency on private funding or externally funded projects, which are often insufficient or inefficiently distributed. Because of these economic and professional constraints, many young actors choose to seek work opportunities in the cultural environment abroad. And this unfortunately has been and is still being discussed in several specialized studies, emigration from Romania due

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to lack of jobs is a major problem.¹² This exodus of talent leads to an erosion of the human capital in the field and a loss of Romania's artistic potential, which is thus forced to rely more and more on established actors, while young talent is significantly restricted access to the national stage.

In the absence of stable jobs in public institutions, young actors can find development opportunities in independent theaters or emerging cultural projects. However, these initiatives are not always financially sustainable, and most of them lack the necessary support to grow and provide adequate working conditions. Low salaries or on-contract work, combined with a lack of policies to support and protect artists, lead to constant uncertainty among young talents. As acting is in most cases not a profession that can financially support a young person, artists are forced to supplement their income through other activities, often foregoing the time needed for professional development.

Although a network of theater professionals exists, young artists do not benefit from a coherent system of mentoring or professional integration. In the absence of dedicated programs to ensure a smooth transition from drama school to the job market, they are in a vulnerable situation, having to make their own way in a highly competitive and often insecure environment. Theatre in Romania is not always appreciated and respected by the general public or the authorities. It is not always seen as a vital sector of society and the constant prioritization of other areas means that cultural budgets are constantly being cut. Of course, corruption is another key element when it comes to the budget allocated to culture. In this context, young actors face not only a lack of opportunities, but also a superficial understanding of the role that theater plays

¹² Gonzague Gonis Isirabahenda, *Underemployment of Graduates from Romanian Higher Education Institutions: A Conceptual Understanding*, *Tendențe ale cunoașterii și dezvoltării sociale în secolul 21*, Babeș-Bolyai Press, 2019. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3909729>.

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in the education and development of a society. The working conditions for young actors are often below the expectations of a European level cultural industry. The lack of a stable schedule, the impossibility to work in the right conditions or to benefit from management that supports work-life balance, contribute to the continuous stress and burnout risks for young artists.

Despite these difficulties, Romanian theater has a major potential for artistic regeneration and innovation, but this process depends on a profound change in the public and authorities' perception of culture. Providing real employment opportunities and support for young artists could revitalize the sector and help keep Romanian theatre alive and relevant in the international cultural landscape.

Conclusion

We can identify some of the challenges facing young Romanian theater creators at a simple overview of the cultural market. Although the current cultural system has many obstacles, emerging trends suggest a promising future, made possible by bold and innovative artistic visions.

More and more artists are moving towards a free, contemporary theater, a theater of the common man. In spite of the obstacles, more and more artists are choosing to improve and find solutions to further their craft. Reforming academic theater education, creating professional support networks and exploring new forms of artistic expression are essential for a viable and relevant theater, and these needs are increasingly expressed by new generations. The active involvement of young artists and the openness of institutions to change can ensure a sustainable development framework for Romanian theater.

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