

Queer Performances in Public Theatres in Romania Today. Perspectives of Young Theatre Directors: Catinca Drăgănescu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Leta Popescu

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Abstract: Romanian theatre directors of the young generation (between 30-40 years old) are proposing more and more, queer themes and topics in the public theatres where they create and work. We aim to analyse the motivations, working methods and values of three representatives of this generation in relation to their approach to this type of issue. For Eugen Jebeleanu (*Fight and Metamorphosis* (2024), *La Ronde* (2023), *I Had an Orchard* (2023)) queer representations represent a political and programmatic statement, while Leta Popescu (*Bujor*, 2023) makes them for reasons of empathy towards the lgbqia+ community in Romania. Finally, Catinca Drăgănescu's queer representations (*Let them die stupid*, 2023) appear when she takes on the theme of identity and identity quests as part of her wider artistic research. This diversity of perspectives we believe, enriches and establishes queer culture as part of Romanian culture, including enriching queer studies in the area of Theatre and performing arts.

Keywords: theatre, public theatres, queer, lgbtqia+, Romania

This article aims to analyse some of the most recent queer representations in Romanian public theatre, in order to contribute to the coverage of this topic in academic research in the field of Theatre and performing arts in Romania.

Queer themes, topics and characters seem to be increasingly present in the artistic creation of some theatre directors who work in subsidized theatres in our country. We will detail below the motivations of three of them to

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THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

propose themes from this area in their performances created in public theatres in Romania. These motivations are meant to reveal and demonstrate the variety of working methods, artistic beliefs, values, of some representatives of the Romanian theatre direction, in their fourth decade of life, respectively in their second decade of professional activity. As a particular note, we note that the three directors have publicly declared their gender identity and sexual orientation. While all three identify themselves as cisgender, the female directors declare themselves as heterosexual, while Jebeleanu declared his gay orientation.

We propose to start by presenting the research methodology, defining the terms used, a review of previous queer representations in Romanian public theatre through some directors and their creations, and then focus on the analysis of the three perspectives discussed in this article.

The research methods included both documentation and a series of three semi-structured interviews with the three selected directors. Documentation involved live viewing of performances, accessing and analysing press materials, official presentations of performances, written and video interviews, and theatre reviews. In addition, we add as research methods, observation and self-reflection, through the lens of the actor's role in one of the performances analysed (*Let them die stupid*, 2023), as recorded in the rehearsal diary. In addition to this, we consulted the literature available in Romanian and English, which provided the general framework for defining the terms with which we operate. We use the spelling "-x", which is currently emerging as an experiment in the Romanian public space, to draw attention to and be inclusive of people who identify on the broader non-binary spectrum, as a neutral form not necessarily associated with the male gender (applicable in the Romanian version of the article).

The literature focused on the study of queer phenomena in society and culture in our country has been growing in recent years. Ramona Dima's *Queer Culture in Romania 1920-2018* (2023) and *Queer. Critical Thinking, Political Consciousness and Cultural Practices in Romania* (2020), coordinated by researchers Valentina Iancu and Ovidiu Anemţoaicei, are two substantial contributions in this regard. These works rather focus on performing arts creations made in theatres *other than those subsidised by the state budget* or produced by a very particular institution such as the *National Dance Centre (CNDB)*, without exploring much the attempts or acknowledging the progress made by public theatres in terms of queer representations. If we are to look at

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

the titles mentioned in the two papers, we will notice that those performances are at the intersection of theatre and performance, and the performers use self-representation or publicly define themselves as LGBTQIA+¹. These aspects are less obvious in the case of public theatres in Romania. These institutions are overwhelmingly repertory theatres with artistic collectives of actors employed under individual employment contracts, where their artistic choices and beliefs are likely to be less articulated, freely expressed and valued by management. In addition to the two volumes, we can complete for the deepening study of queer phenomena in art and culture in Romania, with the four dossiers made by Valentina Iancu between 2017 and 2023, for the magazine *Arta – Queer Culture in Romania*². In addition, a notable resource of performance titles (at the same time queer characters) is represented by the *Special Dossier: Queer representation in theatre and audiovisual made in Romania*³ (coord. George-Albert Costea and Cristina Modreanu) - included in issue 59(1)/2023 of the performing arts magazine *Scena.ro*. It focuses on the perspectives of professional actors (or those following a formal vocational education) in Romania, belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community, on queer representations in both public and so-called *independent* theatre.

The aforementioned works provide us, on the other hand, with the necessary support to understand, define, respectively frame the research of some Romanian theatre artists. They reveal possibilities of interpretation that are admittedly subject to change as knowledge and understanding of these concepts evolve. Rather than a non-unambiguous framing of the artistic searches, we consider that it is more important to record them in order to contextualise them within the broader framework of contemporary Romanian theatre creation. Moreover, researchers in the field of queer and gender studies

¹ If the volume *Queer. Critical thinking...* retains the forms of artistic expression of Paula Dunker, alter ego of choreographer and dancer Paul Dunca (*Queer Choreographies (nocturne) and Paula's Body*), R. Dima's volume focuses on four performances, namely *Parallel* (2013, producer Colectiv A), *After Traian and Decebal. Fragments from the history of gay history in Romania (2012, AFCN)*, respectively *Institute of Change (2014)* and *At the Institute of Change (2016)*, both produced by the National Dance Centre.

² Available online at: <https://revistaarta.ro/ro/column/author/valentina/>, accessed 08.05.2024

³ Available online at: <https://revistascena.ro/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Scena.ro-dosar-queer-2023.pdf>, accessed 08.05.2024

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

invite the opening of communication channels between related fields, in order to bring more value to the sphere of research and academic studies:

there is a need for perpetual conceptual and activist dialogue on a continuum that goes beyond the theory/practice dichotomy (where somehow theory is hierarchically superior by some, and practice by others), and that highlights the need for permanent communication and mutual influence between critical thinking and practical political expression⁴.

These studies have focused on the theory that heteronormativity is perceived as the norm, desirable, which automatically leads to rights and privileges - such as marriage, inheritance, adoption: "queer theory has begun to examine the power structures that institutionalise and legitimise certain sexual and gender forms and expressions at the expense of others"⁵. Although the term queer was used in the 1950s and 1960s in a pejorative sense, literally meaning *weird*, *odd*, later embraced and promoted by LGBTQIA+ communities in the struggle for visibility and civil rights in Western societies in the 1970s, today its definition has greatly expanded. We consider, including for our approach, the broad definition of this term that encompasses both practices and ways of thinking and behaving that are opposed to prevailing models, precisely to signal and make publicly accepted human richness in all its forms:

Queer can refer when only to minority sexualities, expressions, practices and sexual identities, when to a broader mode of identity thinking and practice that goes beyond sexuality and takes into account intersectional and highly critical capitalism, racism, sexism, etc., through multiple other forms of critique and resistance to the current prevailing economic and socio-political configuration. Queer can also be a simple umbrella term as resistance to any kind of labeling, identification or categorization as instruments of power and normativization as produced and reproduced in the current cultural, economic and socio-political matrix.

⁴ Ovidiu, Anemțoaicei, *Introducere în Queer. Gândire critică, conștiință politică și practici culturale în România*, (Edits.) Valentina Iancu & Ovidiu Anemțoaicei, Ed. Hecate, București, 2020, p. 5, aut. trans.

⁵ Idem n. 5

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

In short, queer seems to be simultaneously identity and practice, critical thinking, but also non-identity⁶.

Performances produced by public theatres with themes related to the LGBTQIA+ community or containing queer representations seem to be multiplying in recent theatre seasons. This is the contribution of directors from younger generations, such as Vlad Cristache, Catinca Drăgănescu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Andrei Măjeri, Leta Popescu. The extent to which queer themes appear in their work is naturally different, ranging from artistic commitments (Jebeleanu) to more specific contexts (Cristache). We also acknowledge the contributions to queer performance in Romania of artists such as Bogdan Georgescu, Mihaela Drăgan or Paul Dunca/Paula Dunker. However, their creations have been made more in the sphere of the so-called *independent* theatre, and it remains to be seen to what extent they will collaborate in the future with public theatres addressing queer issues.

Nevertheless, gay performances in state theatres have existed since the late 1990s - early 2000s, although they were not based on Romanian dramatic texts. Perhaps the two best known examples of this are Cristian Theodor Popescu's staging of *Angels in America (A Gay Feud on National Themes)* by Tony Kushner⁷ at the "C.I. Nottara" Theatre in Bucharest and *Bent* by Martin Sherman at the "Lucia Sturdza Bulandra" Theatre in Bucharest. Both seem to have been created to function as agents provocateurs for both audience and performers. C. Th. Popescu staged at the Nottara Theatre, in 1998, "Approaching the Millennium", the first part of the American author's diptych ("Perestroika" being the title of the second part)⁸. C.Th. Popescu evokes the political and social context of those years, when the threat of new Mineriades was still present and student associations at the University of Bucharest

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ *Angels in America (Part I: End of the Millennium)* translated by Anca and Lucian Giurchescu, directed by Cristian Theodor Popescu, set design by Andu Dumitrescu, costumes by Ioana Albaiu, choreography by Florin Fieroiu, co-produced by the 777 Theatre Company and the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest, with the support of the Soros Foundation for an Open Society - Romania and UNITER's Kaleidoscope programme, 1998.

⁸ Only in 2012, *Angels in America* will be staged in full version (The end of the world is near, respectively Perestroika) by Victor Ioan Frunză, at the "Metropolis" Theatre in Bucharest, the two plays being performed in two consecutive evenings, under the name of "serial theatre"

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

wanted to establish an Orthodox chapel inside the university. He was aware of the provocative character that the staging of such text could have, trying to bring theatre from the boulevard to an *uncomfortable outside*. The intentions proved to have backlash, as the show's posters were ripped down, the theatre's windows smashed, the ticket seller threatened, and the first performances of the show played out with police at the entrance:

In this context, we felt that a show openly debating the issue of homosexuality could contribute to bringing the theatre back into the consciousness of contemporary society as a place for social debate, forcing the audience to face up to truths they are not necessarily ready to accept⁹.

The play *Bent*, based on Martin Sherman's text, staged by Elie Malka on the Izvor stage of the Bulandra Theatre, brought to the public's attention in 2002 a homosexual love story set in the Dachau concentration camp. The theatre's general director, Alexandru Darie, anticipated that this performance would be a theatrical event with polemical potential: "...a performance that I think will stir up the spirits"¹⁰. The official presentation of the show contains the same intention of the producer regarding the staging with *Bent*:

A show of contrasts [...], dignity and brutality of a society that rejects minorities, through which the director of the Union of European Theatres challenges the Romanian public¹¹.

We consider it is useful and necessary to recall the socio-political context of Romania at that time years, regarding the situation of LGBTQIA+ people. The two shows mentioned above were produced shortly before, i.e. just after Romania removed the articles criminalizing homosexual relations from the Penal Code. This measure, which was not without opposition among political decision-makers at the time, was imperative, as a result of the political

⁹ C.Th., Popescu, *Surplus of people, surplus of ideas, Pioneers of the independent movement in Romanian theatre after 1989*, Ed. Liternet, 2014, pp. 64-68, .pdf version available at: <https://editura.liternet.ro/descarcare/312/pdf/Theodor-Cristian-Popescu/Surplus-de-oameni-sau-surplus-de-idei-Pionierii-miscarii-independente-in-teatrul-romanesc-post-1989.html>, accesat 03.04.2024

¹⁰ bulandra.ro/bent, accesat 04.04.2024

¹¹ Idem

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

commitments made by our country with a view to integration into North Atlantic (NATO) and European (European Union) structures¹².

Subsequently, directors such as Radu Afrim or Răzvan Mazilu have made the exploration of these subjects or the inclusion of queer characters in their productions part of their own directorial discourse. They have enriched the spectrum of queer images with sometimes flamboyant, colourful, eccentric characters, experimenting with procedures such as *cross-dressing* or *drag*. Historian Cristina Modreanu dedicates an entire chapter to Afrim in her work on Romanian theatre in its evolution from communism to capitalism. Subtitled *A queer look of life*, the chapter gives an overview of Afrim's work, focusing on the director's propensity to stage plays in which the heroes are defined by a lack of power, vulnerability and lability, part of narratives frequently set in scenic universes that alter the line between the real and the fantastic or dreamlike. These qualities give the characters queer characteristics, in the sense of being marginal, unheard, out of the norm. Modreanu welcomes, at the same time, Afrim's frequent challenges to bring cross-dressing and drag to the stages of public theatres:

Afrim was the first artist to bring spectacular drag queens to Romanian stages, back when the definition of the term was still a mystery in this culture, and he is still today one of the few who do it, certainly the only one who does it on the main stages of the National Theatres in this country, a true statement that deserves applause¹³.

Theatre/dance critic Iulia Popovici also notes Afrim's merits in *pushing* queer characters and themes onto the stages of public theatres. However, she qualifies Afrim's drag representations as part of the zone of conventional theatrical representation, as opposed to personal choices, performative self-representation, as a political statement of the performers¹⁴. Răzvan Mazilu,

¹² This is Article 200 of the Penal Code, eliminated by Ordinance no. 137/2000 of the Chamber of Deputies, the law having been promulgated by the President of the country on 14.02.2002. For a better contextualization, see Florin, Buhuceanu, *Homoistorii*, Ed. Humanitas, Bucharest, 2022, pp. 233-238

¹³ Cristina, Modreanu, *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism. Children of a Restless Time*, Routledge, 2021, p. 63

¹⁴ Iulia, Popovici, *We are all born naked, and the rest is "drag"'. Transvestites, "drag" and gender representation (I)*, in Cultural Observatory no. 1022 of 17.07.2020, available online

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

previously known as a dancer and choreographer, has diversified his artistic interests in the last decade by becoming a director of musical performances. The conventional framework in which this type of performance takes place, through the use of live song and dance, allows Mazilu to introduce queer characters, including through the burlesque, carnivalesque character he gives to his proposals. *Cabaret*¹⁵ at the Odeon Theatre Bucharest (2021) and *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*¹⁶ at the Metropolis Theatre Bucharest (2023) are two of Mazilu's most recent creations in which queer themes are reinforced by spectacular depictions of cross-dressing and attempts at drag.

After this brief overview of a few directors and theatre performances, in which we have been able to identify queer representations as they have been profiled in the history of Romanian theatre in the first two decades of the new millennium, let us now move on to the analysis of the three directorial perspectives proposed for this article.

Eugen Jebeleanu (b. 1989, Timișoara) considers that he transforms his most recent projects in public theatre into political manifestos, by bringing queer issues to the public's attention. He is, in fact, assuming an artistic direction that began with the show *Ogres* (2017)¹⁷, produced by Compagnie des Ogres, which he owns with French playwright Yann Verburgh. In an interview with theatre critic Cristina Rusiecki in 2019, Jebeleanu affirmed this

at: <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/toti-ne-nastem-goi-iar-restul-e-drag-travesti-drag-si-reprezentarea-de-gen-i/>, accessed 05.05.2024

¹⁵ *Cabaret* libretto by JOE MASTEROFF, based on the play by John Van Druten and stories by Christopher Isherwood, Music JOHN KANDER, Lyrics FRED EBB, directed by Răzvan Mazilu, production of Odeon Theatre Bucharest, Premiere 23.10.2021, more details at: <https://teatrul-odeon.ro/spectacol/cabaret/>, accessed 07.05.2024

¹⁶ *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* text by John Cameron Mitchell, music and lyrics by Stephen Task

Directed, choreographed and costumed by Răzvan Mazilu, Production of the "Stela Popescu" Theatre Bucharest, Opening: 21.05.2023, more details at: <https://teatrulstelapopescu.ro/spectacol/hedwig-2023-06-08/>, accessed 04.05.2024

¹⁷ *Ogres* text and dramaturgy Yann Verburgh, directed by Eugen Jebeleanu, production of Compagnie des Ogres, 2017

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

credo, stating that "we [he and Verburgh, n.aut.] aim to talk about the marginalised, about minorities, about people who are different from the norm"¹⁸. The director understands, however, that state theatre can be the platform for these issues to reach a wider audience, one that is not just made up of members of the LGBTQIA+ community or their allies. This is the case of his first performance at the "Lucian Blaga" National Theatre in Cluj Napoca, *Petra von Kant's Bitter Tears (2022)*¹⁹. On the main stage of the Cluj National Romanian Theatre, Jebeleanu brings to the forefront an inner conflict caused by a lesbian relationship between a famous fashion designer past her prime (Petra von Kant, played by Ramona Dumitrean) and a young aspirant (Karim Thimm, played by Sânziana Tarța). However, this is not a story of explicit homophobia, but rather an induced or internalised one, driven by the unfavourable social context. The acceptance of different sexual orientation at an older age is today, as it was 50 years ago (when the text was written), a theme that seems not to have become obsolete, at least in the Romanian context.

In the production of A.P. Chekhov's *The Seagull (2022)* at the Ion Caramitru Hall of the "I.L. Caragiale" National Theatre in Bucharest (TNB), Jebeleanu explores unusual areas of relationship between characters and proposes a possible unfulfilled love of the character Medvedenko (played by Ciprian Nicula) for Trepnev (played by Niko Becker, a possible alter ego of the director himself)²⁰. The moment of the kiss between the two men in the

¹⁸ Cristina, Rusiecki, *Despre marginalizați, ciudați și excluși*, in B.Critic, available online at: <https://www.b-critic.ro/spectacol/teatru/despre-marginalizati-ciudati-si-exclusi/>, accessed 03.05.2024

¹⁹ *The Bitter Tears of Petra von Kant* by Rainer Werner Fassbinder, translation by Victor Scoradeț, directed by Eugen Jebeleanu, production of the Lucian Blaga National Theatre in Cluj Napoca, premiere: 09.07.2022, more details at: <https://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/piesa-727/lacrimile-amare-ale-petrei-von-kant/>, accessed 08.05.2024

²⁰ "When I received the invitation to stage at the TNB, I thought of *The Seagull* because it seemed to me that it brought into question the struggle or, in any case, the imbalance between two ways of seeing theatre and I connected to what happened to me in theatre, that is to say to the fact that I started as an independent, that I was in an area of militant, social, political theatre and that I ended up staging at the National Theatre, in the Sala Mare. And that's when I said to myself that I had to talk about myself, about the artist that I am, about

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

vast, generous space of the TNB's main stage (set design by Velica Panduru) remains iconic (and provocative). The intention was to create an ambiguous relationship between the two characters and the inspiration for this relationship was, according to the director, found in the original text. In the final scene, Medvedenko is the only absent character, under the pretext of returning home to take care of the child, but no other details are known. This seemed plausible because the director's intention was not to make Treplev a hero in the classical sense of the word, a profile that would exclude any non-normative sexual orientation from the outset. At the same time, he built an inner conflict in Medvedenko's character that could have been caused both by the frustration that Masha (played by Ada Galeş) doesn't pay the attention she devotes to Treplev, but also by the non-assumption of a sexual orientation, possibly homosexual:

For me, in any text, I'm interested to see if there is a possibility of queer reading, bringing representations, stories, concern with less visible, non-obvious subjects.

A more recent direction Jebeleanu has experimented with is the ambiguity of character genders. This is part of an increasingly pronounced trend to challenge, or cancel, the gender binary in the performances he creates. These choices represent, at the same time, forms of challenging the supremacy of one gender over the other, a norm strongly present in the Romanian collective mind. In *Am avut o livadă* (*We used to have an orchard*, 2023)²¹, at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest, the director chooses to have the characters played by women or men, regardless of the gender identity assigned by the playwright. For example, the character of Lopahin is played by actress Ruxandra Maniu without transforming the character into a female role, with the intention of disregarding the character's gender identity:

the struggle that has taken place within me. All this is reflected in Treplev, through it I wanted to explore as much as possible of what I already had, of my search” Eugen Jebeleanu, in <https://fictiunea.ro/2023/189/art3/>, accessed 08.05.2024

²¹ *We used to have an orchard* text by Yann Verburgh after A.P Chekhov, directed by Eugen Jebeleanu, production of Odeon Theatre Bucharest, premiere: 20.10.2023. more details at: <https://teatrul-odeon.ro/spectacol/am-avut-o-livada/>, accessed 07.05.2024

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

we aimed to change something at the level of perception in the spectator when a reading of the dramatic text of this kind is proposed to him. [...]I try to make abstraction that a story of a male character is told by a female actress or vice versa. I no longer attach importance to the gender binary²².

A similar process is used in the performance *Fights and Metamorphosis (Lupte și metamorfoze, 2024)* in which the narrator's voice is alternately played by the three actors (Măriuca Bosnea, Șerban Ghilvaci, Niko Becker). The director's intention in this case was to make it possible for both the actors and the audience to rally around and identify beyond gender with the issues raised by Édouard Louis, the author of the two auto-biographical novels (*The Struggles and Metamorphoses of a Woman* and *Who Killed My Father?*) which form the basis of the dramatic text of the performance. The general framework of the two novels is rendered as a function of the political regimes in contemporary France, in which various political leaders²³ have perpetuated a state of vulnerability of social categories condemned to precariousness, poverty, lack of education, through the absence of effective social policies. These deprivations lead to domestic violence and alcoholism, aspects that do not seem foreign to the realities of today's Romania either. The main character (the author's alter ego) is part of a deeply *macho* world, where being gay is a serious matter and a source of social stigma and shame. Being gay-fem (a man with feminine gestures) can create the conditions for risking physical attacks and rejection by the whole community, including one's own family. As a directorial device, Jebeleanu uses superimposed narrative (through the voice of one of the three actors) over which he superimposes moving images created by the other two, sometimes in antithesis to the intention of the text, sometimes reinforcing its suggestion. However, we note

²² Extract from the interview with Eugen Jebeleanu; starting from here, a very interesting perspective of research on the representations in Silviu Purcărete's spectacology through perspective of queer theories can be opened. Purcărete often uses, and not since yesterday, the ambiguous play between masculine and feminine, including the use of cross-dressing and the casting of cisgender actors in opposite gender roles: Sorin Leoveanu in the role of Miranda, respectively Romanița Ionescu, in the role of Ferdinand, both in *A Storm* at the Marin Sorescu National Theatre in Craiova (2012), being two examples *on the surface* of Purcărete's creation.

²³ Manuel Valls, former Minister of the Internal Affairs, Xavier Bertrand, minister in several cabinets, Emmanuel Macron, Nicolas Sarkozy, Jacques Chirac, presidents of the French Republic, among others, are mentioned.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

that the scenes of intimacy (exposure of several sexual positions through a slow-motion transition) and erotic-poetic (the action suggesting the cleaning/washing with a golden powder of one nude character by another) are the responsibility of the two cisgender male actors.

In *La Ronde*(2023)²⁴, non-heteronormative relationships (gay, lesbian, polyamorous), sexual practices considered (still) non-conforming (e.g. bondage, BDSM) are brought to the fore, which at the same time, cancel social statuses and destabilize power relations. In addition, Jebeleanu, together with playwright Yann Verburch, explores gender transgression. In the final scene of the show, whose dramaturgical structure follows Arnold Schnitzler's play from which it draws its inspiration, we witness a post-coitus scene between two transgender characters (trans woman and trans man) whose transition process had been hinted at in the previous scenes. Jebeleanu is not indifferent to the subject of the right to self-representation. At the same time, he acknowledges its limits in the context of collaboration with public theatres, admitting that if this had been possible, he would have opted for casting transgender actors in the two roles mentioned above. At the same time, including under the influence of the direct collaboration with Louis for the dramaturgy of the show *Fights....* , Jebeleanu has the vision of overcoming the model of self-representation in contemporary theatre as a determining factor of verisimilitude and veracity:

On the other hand, it is important to set aside gender stereotypes, to allow a wider space for expression - my story is not only mine. The personal story, perceived as property, capitalist model, that only I am allowed to represent, because I am the only legitimate one, able to do so. Therefore, hierarchies emerge that make the decision between those who are allowed to tell the story and those who are not²⁵.

Leta Popescu (b.1989, Galati) is a theatre director who has consistently pursued, throughout the first ten years of her career, the representation of

²⁴ *La Ronde* text by Yann Verburch inspired by Arthur Schnitzler's *Hour of Love*, production of the "Andrei Mureșanu" Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe, premiere 2023, more details at: <https://www.tam.ro/laronde>, accessed 08.05.2024

²⁵ Extract from the interview with Eugen Jebeleanu

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

marginalised social groups, especially gay, lesbian and men who have sex with men, in the shows she has created. Popescu also made her directorial debut with *Parallel*²⁶, a show in which, according to critics, we find one of the few (if not the only, at least until 2020) representations of the male drag type in Romanian theatre²⁷. In public theatre, she continued with *My Father, the Priest* on the dramatic text by Gabriel Sandu. The story combines the coming out of a young man towards his parents, with the moment of the campaign to collect signatures needed to organize the so-called *Referendum for the family*, in which both the father priest and the mother were actively involved²⁸.

The attraction to these themes, according to the director, is due to personal motivations. She does not intend to portray her artistic pursuits as political or militant, but rather, they are related to the empathy she feels towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Romania today. She is aware of the social problems of the representatives of this community and believes that introducing these topics in public theatres can contribute to a greater acceptance of LGBTQIA+ people in society:

I have a lot of gay friends that I know and to whom I occasionally dedicate a show or an image from a show. I know their lack of representation, their suffering, I know their stories involving discrimination or bully-ing and I suffer with them when their stories go

²⁶ *Parallel*, devised theatre, directed by Ferenk Sinkó and Leta Popescu, Fabrica de Pensule Cluj Napoca, produced by GroundFloor Group, Premiere: 5 December 2013, more details at: <https://letapopescu.ro/portfolio/parallel/>, accessed 03.04.2024

²⁷ Iulia, Popovici, *We are all born naked, and the rest is "drag"'. Travesti, "drag" and gender representation (I)*, in Observator cultural no. 1022 of 17.07.2020: "*Parallel* is the only one, apart from *Lalele, lalele*, [n.aut. coordinator Bogdan Georgescu, MacazTeatruCoop, Bucharest, 2018] that assumes the direct performance of personnel, questioning their own experiences of gender identity fluidity and using drag as a vehicle to confront patriarchal stereotypes", available online at: <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/toti-ne-nastem-goi-iar-restul-e-drag-travesti-drag-si-reprezentarea-de-gen-i/>, accessed 05.05.2024

²⁸ *My Father, the Priest*, directed by Leta Popescu, text Gabriel Sandu, production of the National Theatre Târgu Mureş, Liviu Rebreanu Company, premiere 24.11.2017 (n.n. The referendum was to be held a year later!), more details at: <https://letapopescu.ro/portfolio/tatal-meu-preotul/>, accessed 05.05.2024

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

into the family area. I know stories where grown men have disowned their children for being gay. I find that appalling [...]²⁹.

The most recent project in which Popescu tackles queer themes is *Bujor*, from The Fani Tardini Dramatic Theatre in Galați. The dramatic text was written by Doru Vătavului, based on personal stories, press articles, collected by the author, the resulting material being adapted during rehearsals with the director and actors. These stories focused on the debates in contemporary Romanian society related to the introduction of sex education classes (sometimes called ...*for health*) in the pre-university education system. Moreover, they focused on the need to address in these hypothetical classes, topics related to sexual orientations other than heterosexual or non-heteronormative relationships.

Set in the early 2000s, the drama centres on teacher Bujor, who is forced to hold a meeting with the parents of the fourth grade after two of his male students are involved in a sexual incident in the school toilet. The incident is an opportunity for the teacher to recall his past as a teenager, confused about his own sexual orientation and lacking the means at the time to define his otherness.

The show premiered in September 2023, and is in all likelihood the first show produced by the theatre în Galați to deal with gay issues, including suggestions of homosexual sexual acts. These were transposed on stage through metaphor-images that are part of the means of scenic expression used by Popescu in her most recent shows (*Dual, a performance about friendship* (Teatrelli, Bucharest, 2022), *Vrabia* (Fani Tardini Dramatic Theatre, Galati, 2022), *People you no longer love* (Ioan Slavici Classical Theatre, Arad, 2022), *Unspoken Things* (National Theatre of Targu Mures, 2021)). Moreover, the monochrome costumes of the actors (set and costumes Bogdan Spătaru) may refer to the colours of the flag and the LGBTQIA+ colour universe³⁰. The sexual act is suggested by two male characters simultaneously trying to put on/take off the same pieces of clothing (a t-shirt and a pair of trousers), while they are "at the beach" in swimsuits, one of them observing a fly on the other's

²⁹ Extract from the interview with Leta Popescu

³⁰ Velicu Panduru's use of visual motifs that define the queer universe becomes a real statement. The set design of the show *Fight and Metamorphosis* features a curtain in the colours of the lgbt+ flag that completely covers one of the walls of the venue of Teatrelli, Bucharest.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

shoulder, describing this moment in detail. The whole setting thus takes on erotic overtones. It is about the interaction between the teacher Bujor and the homophobic parent, incidentally his best friend. This is precisely why, by operating with duality, in Popescu, the sexual act simultaneously becomes a physical altercation between two male characters. This results in dynamic compositions that quote and evoke the works of visual artists such as Erwin Wurm or Csilla Klenyanszki, who make use of the ephemerality of physical interactions between people and objects, often translated into installations in unstable balances.

From a dramaturgical point of view, Popescu chooses to interrupt the narrative thread, by introducing a moment in which the audience is invited by the actors to answer, by raising their hands, if they voted in the Referendum to amend Article 48 of the Romanian Constitution (2018)³¹. This moment, delimited in the performance by turning on the lights in the auditorium, seems to provoke contrary reactions from the audience in Galați, noted both by Popescu and by specialized critics:

Various reactions were aroused when listing the themes of the performance, themes such as homosexuality, masturbation, the spread of sexual information in online conversations, the unheard of pornographic categories. By and large, the audience sought comedy rather than the educational layer, preferred to laugh rather than hear and reflect on the truths the show conveyed. Overlaid with the actors' lines, the audience's innuendos came to life simultaneously, in a parallel theatricality, some even choosing to leave the auditorium in the midst of the debate of ideas³².

Unlike Jebeleanu and Popescu, Catinca Drăgănescu (b. 1984, Bucharest) seems to approach queer issues in rather particular contexts. In this regard, we note a first collaboration with the Roma feminist theatre company Giuvlipen, in the performance *Corp Urban (Urban Body, 2018)*. According to

³¹ this Referendum is known as the *Referendum for the Redefinition of the Family* or *Referendum for the Family*, was organized following a civic initiative of the *Association Coalition for the Family*, held on 6, 7 October 2018, invalidated due to the turnout below the validation threshold

³² Cezara, Ojog, *Leta Popescu and her challenges*, 15 April 2024, available online at: <https://www.7iasi.ro/leta-popescu-si-provocarile-ei/>, accessed 16.04.2024

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

the queer theories exposed above, Drăgănescu, who signs both the direction and the dramatic text, treats in *Corp Urban* the Roma female body, under-represented in Romanian culture, under aspects related to the sexual and reproductive rights of Roma women³³. More recently, the queer theme appears in the performance *Lasă-i să moară proști* (*Let them die stupid*) produced by Teatrelli Bucharest and premiered in June 2023.

In both shows, Drăgănescu was primarily interested in exploring the theme of identity and the search for identity, on top of which the queer layer was naturally superimposed. The director-dramaturg believes that to the extent that this personal interest is overlaid with the personal grind of the artists with whom she collaborates, the performance has the potential to produce an *electrifying* effect with wider implications for professional ethics:

[we learned] the responsibility of representation, the difference between the artist - artist and the artist - employee, who serves an idea, a set of values, a discourse with social and conceptual value³⁴.

In the case of *Let them die stupid*, queer references are insinuated through the dramaturgy of the performance, the casting of an openly-gay actor, coupled with the use of auto-biographical material of the actorx and the insertion of performative, improvisational moments. The performance questions the existence of the political consciousness of the generation of Romanian artists aged between 30 and 40, children and teenagers in the period of Romania's transformation from communism to neo-liberal capitalism, witnesses and participants then, as young adults, in the transformations of the Romanian society in the period of pre- and post-accession to NATO and the EU. Through what actions and attitudes would this political consciousness be translated? What is their relationship to a possible social role they could play as theatre professionals?

Torn between Western values and Eastern mentality, between civic involvement and political apathy, between big history and small histories, this transitional generation seems to have embedded in its very

³³ *Corp Urban* text and direction Catinca Drăgănescu, with Mihaela Drăgan and Zita Moldovan, Music Ardeja Fraga, Stage movement Paula Dunker, Giuvlipen production, 2018, more details available at: <https://giuvlipen.com/corp-urban/>, accessed 06.04.2024

³⁴ Extract from the interview with Catinca Drăgănescu

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

experience the essence of the transformations that have occurred in post-totalitarian Eastern European societies³⁵.

The backbone of the dramaturgy of the performance is the transcript of an interview Drăgănescu conducted with a Russian theatre director, also around the age of 35, during his exile in Bucharest. He was forced to leave the Russian Federation, according to his own words, because of public protests he took following his country's invasion of Ukraine, which began on 24 February 2022: "I built a career for 17 years, then I called the war, war, and my career no longer exists"³⁶. Passages from this interview are interpreted, in turn, by three of the five actors in the show (a procedure also found in Jebeleanu's *Fights and Metamorphosis*, as we saw above). These are stories, memories of the director from his childhood to the present. Beliefs instilled in school ("Russia has never fought wars of conquest, but has always defended itself") or in the family ("all Germans are fascists") are challenged by his own life experiences (an exchange in Germany with pupils of a close generation who do not behave like aggressors, or an unexpected encounter with a young Uzbek from a former Soviet republic who had faced discrimination in Moscow for being different). All these beliefs are shaken all the more after the outbreak of war and the loss of personal and professional life back home.

On this dramatic skeleton, two other secondary narrative threads are woven. The first of these is represented by inserts (verbatim style) of sequences taken from video-audio material available on the youtube channel. In these materials appear young Russian soldiers, apparently confused, poorly equipped, taken prisoners by the Ukrainian army, whom the playwright unites under a single identity - Private Dima. Dima also appears in the accounts of the Russian director (who had watched similar material), who perceives the young prisoner as the recipient of the messages of his future artistic creations. The director believes that his performances will have, first and foremost, a therapeutic value for treating the individual and collective wounds caused by the war: "I have to create for Dima, for Dima, about Dima, only in this way

³⁵ See the official presentation of the show on the website <https://teatrelli.com/event/lasa-i-sa-moara-prosti-premiera/>, accessed 04.04.2024

³⁶ Excerpt from Catinca Drăgănescu's interview (September 2022) with theatre director Nikita Betehtin, included in the original unpublished version of the play text. Translation Raluca Rădulescu

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

can I contribute to the healing of a trauma that is in me, in him and in all Russians. This I feel is my responsibility"³⁷.

The second secondary narrative thread consists of a series of two performative moments of the actors and a scene that calls on the actors's relationship with his own parents (present through pre-recorded voices). Placed at the very beginning of the performance, the first of the two performative moments serves as an introduction of the five actors directly to the audience. In fact, although the stage of the theatre is also used, the performance is played mainly among the audience placed on seats, in the form of alcoves, which delimit the different spaces of the performance (set and costumes Gabi Albu). In the introductory moment, created in the form of a game³⁸, the five performers introduce themselves with first and last names, name elements of identity (e.g. actor, European artist, freelance musician, etc.) and take turns naming a series of years (between 1984, the year of birth of the oldest member of the cast, and the current year). They recall moments from their real personal and professional lives, including references to historical moments, elements of musical, cinematographic and theatrical culture, characteristic of the year called out. Although practised as a game, actors invite the audience to propose a new year themselves, in order to give the moment of improvisation an added authenticity, to dispel any suspicions that the text is fixed.

In the middle of the performance, the second moment is placed, in which the actors take turns reading a news item of their choice from the online press. The chosen press article (which varies from one performance to the next) addresses a potentially revolting issue, an uneasiness about aspects of Romanian or international daily reality. The reading is coupled with personal commentary directly addressed to the audience.

Finally, the moment of the presence of parental figures, in the case of the queer actor, consists of the use of an imaginary of military elements (video montage with projected images of parade troops followed by an authentic

³⁷ Extract from the performance text

³⁸ This moment was inspired by a very similar game proposed by the German performance company She She Pop. Actors from the show benefited from a workshop with two members of this company, based on the study of working with autobiographical material in the specific creation of the performing arts, in April 2023, at Teatrelli's headquarters.

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

video recording of Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenski as a vogue dancer from his days as an actor), the recorded voice of actor's own father (a former career military man, singing a soldier's song), overlaid with live voices listing elements of military costume, club lights, dance (with vogue-inspired moves). All this leads to the almost erotic fetishisation of the military universe, characterised by rigour, sobriety, the impossibility of challenging authority, or the suggestion of constructing a queer identity that challenges patriarchal hierarchical models, sometimes positioning itself in conflict or opposition to the values and principles of life of previous generations.

In Catinca Drăgănescu, the queer theme is therefore insinuated during the performance through the moderation of the theme by the queer actor (providing information from personal or professional life related to the theme, reading press articles related to the subject). The suggestions, the previous signs become concrete at the end of the performance. A post by the Russian director (subsequent to the interview) on the social network facebook.com is taken as a performance text. Through this post he publicly acknowledges and assumes his gay identity (in the meantime, having acquired the status of political asylum seeker, ironically, in Germany), while expressing solidarity with the community he belongs to, in the context of the declaration of the LGBTQIA+ movement as an extremist movement in the Russian Federation³⁹.

A believer in operating with non-linear narratives, Drăgănescu is interested in the performance being deciphered, decoded by the spectator. The scenes are arranged like puzzle pieces, the director-dramaturg's intention being that the audience understand the story through associative, rather than deductive reasoning, in a cognitive process she calls *gamification of experience*. The performance is intended to result in the mind of each spectator at the intersection of their own sensibilities, cultural landmarks, sensations and performative material:

³⁹ On 17 April 2023 the Russian Federal Service for Supervision of Communications, Information Technology and Mass Media approved the criteria for defining "LGBT propaganda", then on 30 November 2023 the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation ruled that the "international LGBT movement" is an extremist movement. For a summary of the measures taken by the Putin regime that have led to the deterioration of LGBT+ rights in the Russian Federation see also: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/11/30/russia-supreme-court-bans-lgbt-movement-extremist>, accessed 06.05.2024

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

From this perspective, the performance becomes a vehicle for co-imagining, "playing" with symbols, cultural memes, sensation triggers to create a "stream of consciousness"⁴⁰.

Using, as we have seen, the same dramaturgical structure in the case of *Let them die stupid* over which the theme of identity is superimposed, the result is a personal investigation of the identity and cultural quests of a group of artist-friends-collaborators, with the hope of finding similar concerns in the show's spectators:

Each of us there gives the audience access to a series of very intimate questionings, while addressing some frighteningly tabooed themes in contemporary Romanian society, such as the war and my generation's relationship with...what does it mean to be Romanian⁴¹.

In conclusion, whether we are talking about the assumption of an artistic mission (Jebeleanu), personal empathy for the cause of the LGBTQIA+ community (Popescu) or contextually, when overlapping with the artistic interest of investigating the theme of identity (Drăgănescu), we appreciate that any of the three directors is aware of the relevance of queer issues in theatre performances produced in public theatres, reinforcing the belief that queer culture is part of the national culture in general.

It remains to investigate the process of these directors' work in public theatres when addressing these themes, the motivations of the management for dealing with these themes, the selection of actors in the casts of the productions. From this perspective, it is also interesting to see whether the actors become allies of the causes presented in the performances or perceive the roles at a purely interpretative level. It is also of no less interest to analyse data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of public theatre employees, as a measure of alignment with European policies supporting diversity and gender equality.

We note on this occasion that two performances discussed in this article were produced by Teatrelli, Bucharest, a space belonging to the Creart Centre of the Bucharest City Hall, which is similar to the project theatre model. This type of organisation is more conducive to the creation of artistic teams (as in private/independent theatre) that are part of an artistic approach, as

⁴⁰ Extract from the interview with Catinca Drăgănescu

⁴¹ Idem

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

opposed to production teams in public theatres made up of collaborating artists or artistic collectives of employed actors.

How queer can performances produced in public theatre in Romania today be? Are there such representations in the productions of the country's small and medium-sized urban theatres? These theatres may represent for the time being, an earned redoubt of the few and privileged, without other social categories, including some queer people, having access to the production and financial resources to create and express themselves artistically, and without their stories being heard on the stages of these institutions. A protest action, which forced the performance to be interrupted for a few minutes, was the occasion to launch an unprecedented debate in the Romanian theatre world about transgender representation. It was the preview of the one-man show, *I am My Own Wife* (2024) by Doug Wright directed by Teodora Petre at the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest and starring actor Gabi Costin. The performance was interrupted for a few moments by Antonella Lerca Duda, trans Roma performer and activist. She wanted to draw attention to the lack of access to self-representation in public theatres for trans people, which in her opinion is necessary for greater visibility and social acceptance of these people in today's Romania⁴². Moreover, about the need for professionalization of some people who have not had the opportunity or have not been able to pursue formal education in a vocational faculty, possibly precisely because of constraints related to sexual orientation and especially gender identity. The event at the Teatrul Mic may provide an opportunity for future management, communication officers and dramaturgy departments in public theatres to be more sensitive, to continue to inform themselves responsibly on these issues. The intention would be for public theatres to become more inclusive, to strive not to offend the sensibilities of increasingly diverse audiences. Simultaneously, the vocabulary with which we operate in public communication is expected to be enriched, moving for example, from presentations such as *one man/woman shows* to *one-person* or *one-performer shows*, depending on the gender identity of the actors.

⁴² Antonella Lerca Duda when interrupting the show: 'Fake trans! Darlings, two minutes are taking you out of this show. Sorry for my intrusion. This isn't just about Charlotte. [Charlotte von Mahlsdorf (born Lothar Berfelde) trans person whose life is at the heart of the theatre play] and about the lives of trans women. Charlotte's life is full of resilience, struggle and courage. We trans people don't have space in these theatres, we're not welcomed, we don't have accessibility like straight people do. Fake trans!'

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

At the same time, if we look at the socio-political context of 2024, when Romania is one of the last five EU countries that does not offer any legal protection to same-sex couples, ignoring final decisions of the ECHR⁴³, the Prime Minister in office (Marcel Ciolacu, PSD) declares that society is "not ready" for such measures, including in his public or private agenda pilgrimages to the monasteries of Mount Athos (Greece), or the inauguration of Orthodox chapels in the Palace of Parliament, then all these artistic creations and representations can be considered queer because they are indissoluble from *the historical context of violence*⁴⁴ (understood as stigma, denial, invisibility) in which they were made, according to the theorist and artist Renate Lorenz.

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⁴³ we refer to the decision of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) of 23.05.2023 in the case of *Buhuceanu and others vs Romania (20081/19 and 20 others)* which admits that Romania violated Article 8 of the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms thus having to provide a legislative framework that guarantees same-sex couples adequate recognition and protection of their relationships, the full text of the decision can be consulted here:

<https://hudoc.echr.coe.int/fre#%7B%22itemid%22%3A%22001-224774%22%7D>, accessed 07.05.2024

⁴⁴ Renate Lorenz, *Queer Art - A freak theory*, Verlag, 2012, p. 26, apud. V. Iancu, p. 152

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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