



Miki Braniște

Temps d'Image Cluj
<http://www.tempsdimages.ro/ro/>

Presenter Interview プレゼンター・インタビュー

Festival Temps d'Image Cluj Highlighting New Romanian Drama

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A “Post Transition Period” generation of young artists emerged in Romania in the tumultuous transition period of the 1990s, following the revolution of 1989 that overthrew the country’s communist regime. Among them are theater-makers of what has come to be known as New Romanian Drama, and the festival that highlights their work is the Temps d’Images Cluj festival, held in the city of the same name 480 km outside of Romania’s capital, Bucharest, with a population just under 400,000. It’s Director, Miki Braniște, talks with us about the festival with its cross-genre program and particular prominence of political documentary type theater.

Kyoko Iwaki, Journalist

In 2002, Temps d’Images was founded by the broadcasting company ARTE (launched in 1991 with German and French investments) and La Ferme du Buisson: Scène National of Marne-la-Vallée, which opened in 1990. It is an international network of performing and moving image arts, consisted of multiple agents across Europe. Within the network, different cities have hosted the festival every year. To begin with, can you explain how you were initially involved in this network?

After obtaining a MA in Cultural Policies and Management from Lumiere University of Lyon 2, I returned to Romania. From 2006 to 2008, I worked as the project coordinator of the French Institute Bucharest. However, apart from the regular office work, I was also in charge of numerous activities that were conducted through Artlink: the non-government organization that I founded in 2005 with other young and enthusiastic cultural operators. Through this NGO, I had organized t contemporary dance festival such as eXplore Dance Festival in Bucharest, produced dance works, and organized workshops. Around the same time, the coordinator from ARTE, contacted me, as she was flying to Bucharest to search a new partner for Temps d’Images Romania.

While she was in Bucharest, I introduced to her numerous important performing arts professionals. In addition, I also proposed to the members of my NGO that we should meet her. Since the members agreed in doing so, one day, I’ve arranged a meeting where my colleagues sat together with her to have a chat. In the end, it turned out that among countless professionals that she has met in Bucharest, we were the most willing people to collaborate. We were young and were without much experience, but we had the vitality to take on the task. So, in the end, we were selected as the partner

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of Temps d'Images Romania. In 2008, we had our initial festival in Bucharest; and, from the next year onwards, the festival has been organized in Cluj-Napoca. However, one thing to note is that this network is no longer functioning. Now, it is more like each organization are running different festivals across Europe.

Why did you decide to move the festival from Bucharest to Cluj-Napoca?

I wanted to challenge the centralization of Romanian culture scene, as almost everything happened in the capital. By moving from Bucharest to Cluj, I wanted to initiate a new art wave from a small city with around 400,000 residents. In order to do so, in 2010, I founded together with my colleagues a new non-government organization called Collective A. I was also excited with the whole host of promising visual artists and performing art practitioners who were emerging from Cluj (and sometimes referred to as the Cluj wave). Another huge factor was that my new colleagues in Cluj informed me that we might be able to rent Fabrica de Pensule, which is now our home and is where most performances are presented in the festival. Currently, in Fabrica, there are two performing arts studios, four galleries, and a library.

Indeed, there now is a wave formed by playwrights and directors born between 1977-1987. Many of them are graduates of the National University of Theatre and Cinematography, Bucharest, and from Cluj University and are also regular collaborators of your festival. Do you think that through the past nine editions of Temps d'Images you have succeeded in developing a new theatre scene in Cluj?

I was talking to one artist last year, and realized, for the first time, how much influential our festival is over the local artists. Until now, I didn't know, I was just doing things quite intuitively. But by talking with that artist, I noticed that our visions have a significant influence over the local independent theatre scene. To be more specific, the annual topics of each edition of festival, and the Romanian Platform – a platform focusing on young talents from Romania, which we launched in 2011 – were both becoming quite important to the artist's aesthetic and thematic decisions. For me this is both honour and responsibility, because whenever we chose a performance that has a certain type of aesthetics, young artists sometimes choose the same aesthetics because they want to be selected to our program. At the end of the day, this can end up in mannerism. That is one of the reasons why together with the co-curator of the festival, Iulia Popovici (performing arts critic), we stopped organizing the Romanian Platform for a while and decided to focus on workshops. Also, I deliberately started to work with young artists (25-33 years old), to encourage different visions and tastes.

Gianina Cărbunariu (b. 1977, playwright and director, in 2014 she was invited to Festival d'Avignon), David Schwartz (b. 1985, director), Bogdan Georgescu (b. 1984, playwright, director, activist), Mihaela Michailov (b. 1977, playwright, critic), Peca Ștefan (b. 1982, playwright), Ioana Păun (b. 1984, director, film director) are some of the artists considered as the first generation of 'post-transition' artists.

Yes. Romanians consider the 1990s as the 'transition' period from communism to capitalism. And these artists started to develop their artworks when the drastic transition started to wither. With solidarity and responsibility, we have stood together to develop an art scene starting in the mid-2000s (the so-called 'post-transition' period).

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Before the collapse of the Communist Regime in 1989, there was only a single formal narrative in Romania: a story of a hero that revered Nicolae Ceaușescu and the great Romanian nation. The artists born around the 1980s, however, challenged the legacy of this monolithic narrative and tried to develop multiple counter-histories, in order to introduce marginalized voices and unheard stories of ordinary people. They were politically very bold and courageous. Having said that, I now also feel the necessity to work together with the younger generation of artists who try to find their own artistic approaches.

When I visited Temps d'Images Cluj in 2011, I saw Gianina's *X Centimeters out of Y Kilometers*. It was a documentary theatre that used the recently discovered papers of 'Securitate', a secret police agency of the communist regime, as the play text. In satirical manner, the performance revealed the suppressed narratives of Romanian history. Could you say that these kinds of political theatre productions, which shed light on the unknown history is a specific tendency of the first generation of post-transition theatre makers?

Yes, you could say that an important part of artists from that generation are more or less political. For instance, in 2010, a production called *Roșia Montană – on physical and political line* was produced in Cluj. It was a collaborative production developed by Gianina, with the theater directors Andreea Vălean and Radu Apostol, the founders of dramAcum group. Although it was not well known, in a mountainous village 80 kilometers away from Cluj, there exists the biggest deposit of gold in Europe exploited even before de Romans arrived on the actual territory of Romania. As the Canadian mining Gabriel Resources wanted to extract 300 tons of gold from the mine by constructing the largest open-pit mine in the area and a big lake over the villages around the actual mine, starting from 2000, the company bought a lot of land around the region from the villagers. Surprisingly, about eighty percent of the residents supported the project of the new mine, even though some of them were relocated to a city, which changed their lifestyle forever. Gabriel Resources promised the locals many jobs, and started to portray themselves as a savior of the town and of the Romanian economy. Little by little, they also controlled the narratives of the village: from the day they arrived in town, they bought the locals kiosks to sell newspapers that only accommodated their activities. Afterwards, the Romanian press followed the same path and printed information that only supported the activities at the mine, and eradicated all information that opposed the project. The company was cooperating very well with the locals as well as the Romanian government, which designated the area as a mono-industrial region: an area in which you could work only as miners. Gianina and her collaborators interviewed several workers and peasants in the region, and developed a fictional theatre inspired by real-life stories.

However, in 2011, after they opened their show in the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, a significant number of empty seats were increasingly spotted in the auditorium. It seems as though, after the premiere, Gabriel Resources started to buy a bulk of tickets of the performances preventing the public access to the performance.

It's appalling to know that after the collapse of the communist regime in 1989, Romania subsequently fell prey to the global capitalism.

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Global conglomerates started to exploit our land and resources in an appalling speed. In the 1990s, a lot of people lost their jobs and thus around 17% of the population was forced to go out of the country to earn their living. As a corollary of this migration process, many children of the migrant workers have only met their parents for few times, mostly communicating through Skype or phone. Naturally, these children suffer from a lack of affection, which will influence their adult life in the future. In fact, the aforementioned director Radu Apostol has created a documentary theatre about the life of these children called *Family offline* in 2013. In 2000, he also developed a theatre production called *Home*, in which he worked together with the orphans who were living in the underground sewerage tunnels. It was presented at Ion Creangă Theatre in Bucharest.

Both Gianina and Radu could be considered as the leading figures of first generation of Post-Transition artists. How are the second generation of theatre makers different from them?

Apart from the two, there are a handful of theatre makers a few years younger than them, who work in similar aesthetics: such as Ioana Păun, Bogdan Georgescu and David Schwartz. The next generation of theatre makers are also political, but their approaches are not that direct. If the first generation of theatre makers tends to be more direct, clear and provocative, the generation after them adopts a softer political approach. For instance, in 2016, we invited Farid Fairuz as our Associate Artist. Farid Fairuz is an alter ego of artist Mihai Mihalcea, who has actively worked in the field of contemporary dance. And in our festival last year, Farid presented a production titled *That Panda Over There, Wearing Pants, is a Holobiont!* The performance was completely different from his previous works as well as other works in the independent scene. Have you ever heard of the term called 'holobiont'? The word suggests an assemblage of different species that cohabit to form a singular ecological unit. By tapping into this biological concept, Farid proposed to the audience that perhaps humans should also adopt the same philosophy. That is, even though people are now divided to so many different strands of political standpoints, and although mutual understandings are becoming increasingly difficult, others are necessary for us to survive in society. And thus, Farid suggested that we should live like a holobiont. It's a very interesting proposal.

Your festival is known for its multi-disciplinary programming, which includes theatre, film, dance and visual art. Were you always interested in multiple fields of art?

When I was a student of philosophy at the Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj, I was mostly interested in visual arts and photography. After going to France, my vision started to expand towards performing arts. When I was studying at the Lumiere University of Lyon 2, I was really frustrated by the biased vision of some of the French colleagues towards the Romanians. I felt as if we were all considered as thieves, because the international press was delivering only negative news when speaking about Romanians! Of course there are Romanians as such, but to expand this image to a whole migrant population is nothing less than a stigmatization. Some of the French did not even understand the difference between the Romanians and the Romas (I felt sad, but later understood that I had the same kind of thought towards

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others which bears fruit to racism). In order to change the image of Romania around students in Lyon, I launched a multi-disciplinary art project called *Voir, entendre la roumanie* together with Romanian university colleagues. I have always believed that introducing contemporary artworks is the best way to redress the outdated image of a nation. In order to do so, we had projected films, organized concerts, and provided lectures from different fields. Through the event, I wanted my colleagues in Lyon to understand contemporary Romania. By the way, when we organized this event, Lyon Dance Biennale was going on. So in the city, there were many electric poles with the advertisement banner of the Biennale on the one side and the banner of our event on the other side. I remember being really happy when I saw those poles [laughs].

Were you always interested in politics and social issues from your childhood?

No. But I think that the civic action that I took with my sister, when I was eighteen, had a great impact on my life afterwards. I am originally from a historic city called Alba Iulia, located 100 km out of Cluj. And within that ancient city, there still remain a big fortresses constructed in the seventeenth century. Despite the oldness of this building, which had the possibility of crumbling down anytime soon, the mayor of the city announced that cars could go through the gate of this fortress. So whenever a military truck went through the gate, it trembled and was damaged. Having seen the situation, my sister, who is six years older, and myself decided to take action under the guidance of our stepfather. That is, we created a rope that tied Romanian flags, went to the gate with that rope and blocked the gate. It's a very elementary way of protesting, but, you know what, it worked! And, days afterwards, the mayor accepted our voice and abandoned cars from going through the gate. From this incident, I realized that the world could be changed by your individual will and resilience.

This February, there was a massive ant-corruption protest in Romania, which was said to be the biggest demonstration after the 1989 revolution. Having observed the protest, do you think that, like you, many more Romanians believe that they could change the world through their own will?

Maybe there are more people who think like that and it is a good thing. I also did attend the protest several times, but, afterwards, I felt uncomfortable about the message that they were chanting and stopped going to these assemblies. Young people who attended the protest did not see the bigger picture. That is, protesting under a single slogan of 'anti-government' reminded me of the past when people were bound under the single myth of communism. In reality, however, it is not only the ruling party but also the opposition parties, which are corrupted - except one new party that was formed last year. So the reality is, it is not the ruling party but all parties that are stealing money in rotation. Even if the on-going government collapses, a party no less worse than the incumbent ruling party will be ruling the country. In a similar manner, the young people who attended the protest did not see the bigger picture. A huge number of these young people are working in global companies, and they think that these companies have saved Romania as they could now earn more money. However, in the long run, these companies are earning more than they are giving to the Romanians. I think that people should know more, before demanding change as citizens. Believing in a simplified myth is easy, but reality tends to be more complicated

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and nuanced.

In your festival, you chose a topic each year that reflects the socio-political issues in the local region.

Yes, but it is not like the theme is decided, unilaterally, by the programming team. Indeed, the theatre critic Iulia Popovic and myself decide the initial idea of the topic. However, that decision always reflects the thoughts and concerns of the artists and the audience. And I think this is why we have been successful in selecting topics that are very relevant to the people of Cluj and the wider Romanian audience. For instance, in 2016, one of our Associate Artists came up with a topic called 'Post-Bankruptcy': it was a topic that focused on the future of Romania after educational, relational, moral and economical bankruptcies. In 2015, we raised the topic of 'Common Body' and argued which of the two options is better when trying to change the status quo: namely, come up with a collective, or common, voice, or to develop a strong individual narrative. In 2014, our annual topic was 'What Feeds Us'. And, through the question, we introduced artworks that challenges the topic of what feeds our inspirations as well as what literally feeds our body. In that year, Gianina was our Associate Artist, and she developed a project that focused on the issue of so-called 'land-grabbing': another exigency in Romania. By developing a documentary theatre, she revealed that because farms and lands are sold to global companies, the old farmers in respective regions are now suffering from poverty. And since we wanted to connect with people that are outside the art industry, in two vegetable markets in Cluj, we screened films that showed lives of contemporary farmers and how they are affected by the climate change.

After the collapse of the communist regime, censorship was abandoned in Romania. Nevertheless, I believe that it is still significantly difficult to get sufficient funding for these politically charged theatre productions.

Yes, it is difficult! There is no private funding for such productions, and the public funding is very limited. As for the budget of our festival, for the first three years, the Temps d'Images network funded within the framework of their European Project. Then, from 2012 to 2014, ARTE TV has provided us 6000 euros annually. It is not much, so we cannot run a festival only with this money. Another financial resource, and a crucial one, is Romania National Cultural Fund (AFCN), which we have been successful in gaining some money every year from 2008. But the amount varies from year to year between 11,000 euros and 16,660 euros, and the total amount from AFCN only covers 45% of the entire budget. Apart from these resources, we always apply to international co-production funds for individual productions.

Apart from running the festival, the Collective A has also conducted a community project in a neighbourhood of Cluj called Mănăştur: a densely populated neighborhood with around 80,000 residents. Can you tell me a little bit about this project?

Ceauşescu carried out a national urban planning project called 'Systemization' from 1974, through which he attempted to rebuild the economy during the communist regime. For the sake of higher industrial productivity, he demolished villages all around Romania, and relocated the farmers in cities where they worked in factories. It should

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be stressed that in Transylvania, many of these farmers were Hungarian minorities. Mănăştur is one of those villages, which fell victim to this urban planning project. For this reason, there is still a gigantic space left at the periphery of the town, in which buildings were demolished during the communist era to develop a park. Now it has become a vacant lot used by residents because there are not parks in the region. The community project La Terenuri – Mănăştur coordinated by my colleagues Lala Panait (anthropologist) and Silviu Medeşan (architect) began by proposing different activities to people in the area. Through educational, cultural, and environmental projects, little by little, people started to notice that the vacant lot in fact could become a park by the will of the local people. In the initial years of the project, we invited artists to organize concerts and workshops. For example, we have arranged a mini urban gardening project for the elderly, and also we have organized a hip-hop concert for the teenagers. Now after four years, however, we are not the one's who are always in charge. We acknowledge local non-government organizations to initiate their own activities. All in all, there is a single agenda that underpins all this: that is, we try to reclaim the public space, which was once deprived by the state.

Whether a community project committed to the local area, or an art project included in a multi-disciplinary festival, I feel that you are interested in organizing projects, which national and municipal institutions cannot do.

Yes, that is correct, at least for now. But I am also thinking of working together with municipality in the future, in order to encourage grass-root initiatives. When you work in national institutions, there are certain agendas that you have to meet. And, so, I think it will be more difficult for me to be involved in the politically-charged projects. On that note, I remember one local journalist asking me a question: 'Why do you prefer to promote political projects?' This question shocked me, because, for me, becoming political is not a matter of preference but is the *de facto* standard in contemporary Romania. If you want to live your life conscientiously, by not ignore things in front of you, you inevitably become political. Of course, continually up-dating your political standpoint is not easy. It is of course much more easy, if you only do classic repertoire in your theatre.

Lastly, can you tell us the festival topic of 2017, which will celebrate the festival's 10th anniversary?

Themes and subjects will be arranged around 'discourse and reality'. And, yes, it is again very political [laughs]. Romania is a very young country, which was born in 1918, just after the First World War. In order to bind together a young country, which is consisted of people coming from different ethnic backgrounds, we had to propagate a certain discourse to unite the State. We had to smoothly assimilate Transylvania (which was a part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) with the Romanian United Principalities (Wallachia and Moldavia), which existed from 1859. Romania has a very dynamic and complex history. And because of that, historic myths, which were propagated through children's books and history books, helped us retain a singular historic narrative.

However, in our next festival, we are going to challenge the singular discourse, and, will alternatively try to introduce multiple narratives. As a part of our program, we will

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be organizing a workshop with a lawyer, in which we will decode the constitution of Romania. Also, we will question the discourse of all socially-engaged art being *a priori* a good thing. Perhaps, they only work in theory and not in practice. We will also shed light on the issue of contemporary slavery, which will be developed into a performance. Fixed discourses are only biased visions, which hinder us from seeing reality. In the next festival, we will replace those biased myths with various visions, and will construct narratives that correctly respond to the ongoing reality.