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KONTAKTHOF – ECHOES '78. PREMISES FOR AN ECHO-ARCHAEOLOGY...

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to be a theatrological analysis of the performance *Kontakthof - Echoes '78*, seen at Theatertreffen 2025 Berlin. Beyond the aesthetics of the performance itself, we are interested in observing a particular methodology of artistic research that underlies this project of recomposing the original version created by Pina Bausch.

KEYWORDS

Pina Bausch, Kontakthof, echo, research

There are numerous ways to restore a theatrical product. In some cases, when the object of restoration concerns matter and its concreteness, classic principles specific to museum restoration come into play: a costume, a stage prop, a poster, or even an entire set. Things become a little more complicated when we talk about restoring a performance with everything that a performance entails, in the visible and invisible realm, plus the ambition to enter into dialogue with the object of restoration itself. This operation is often likened to a *remake*, whose main purpose is absolute fidelity to what is being imitated. Because, ultimately, imitation is the dominant feature of such reconstructions. Quite a few heritage directions and choreographies are preserved in this way; however, excessive politeness towards the original form and commensurate caution when developing content mean that few of these reconstructions of performances remain in the realm of challenge, freshness, and open conversation with the present. But what happens when the reconstruction of a performance from almost 50 years ago is not limited to recreating forms, but also to recomposing the original cast? The answer to this question is provided by Meryl Tankard's courageous project,

Kontakthof – Echoes of '78, produced by Sadler's Wells, the "Tanztheater Pina Bausch" Wuppertal Foundation, in partnership with a number of other notable international cultural organizations.

Echo as a research method

Specifically, Meryl Tankard, a dancer in Pina Bausch's ensemble, revisits in a rational-emotional way one of the famous dance projects of the 1970s, *Kontakthof*, in which she was a member. She is not alone, but accompanied by eight other performers who were part of the original cast. The current team members are between 69 and 80 years old¹; they have remained the same (at least that is what Kant assures us when he tells us that something remains equal to ourselves, on a rational level, throughout our entire lives), and yet they are different, with different perspectives on the world and on art. They are all involved in a strange, astonishing "archaeology" that tries not to change the rules of the game, keeping as a visible, assumed variable the temporal gap between the object of reconstruction and the act of reconstructing. Not only useful in this case, but in general as a research methodology, I find the formula of "echo" used by Tankard & co. Equally concrete and insubstantial, the echo

¹ This is not the first time that *Kontakthof* has been performed as a remake, with a cast over 65 years old (admittedly, with amateur performers). See Ismene Brown, "Kontakthof, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch, Barbican Theatre," in Royd Climenhaga (editor), *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook. The Making of Tanztheater* (Routledge, 2013), 240-242.

simultaneously certifies a presence and a distance. Someone is there, far away, in time and space; they address us, and signs of their existence reach us through this sublime alloy of the tangible and intangible through which an echo coagulates. The echo is not only of a sonic nature; Tankard raises the stakes and works with visual echoes, atmospheric echoes, and even echoes of modified corporealities, which, however, remain essentially identical to themselves. The result is a work of remarkable finesse and fragility, which also conveys information, knowledge, communication, and... time.

Paradoxical temporalities

A series of paradoxes of time, itself distributed throughout this *Kontakthof*, are worth discussing. The first and most striking is related to the fact that the performers are simultaneously in *there* and *now*, as if “Kontakthof” (“meeting place”) has become the space² where not only people but also temporalities meet. The impression of temporal coexistence is amplified by the exemplary use of technology. There is a delicacy in the video recovery, a kind of visual gauze that interposes itself, in the first part, between

the audience and the performers, integrating the latter and delicately mirroring them in those who were half a century ago. The melodic lines, precisely locatable in the distant past—the 1930s—contribute to the immersion in *another time*. We look at the video silhouettes, then at the real bodies in space, and we feel our own presence, but everything mixes in a trans-time where succession is replaced by simultaneity, where the double and the identical overlap. The success of the reconstruction lies mainly in the symbolic cultivation and, at the same time, cancellation of this effect of temporal distance. It is a journey through time, but the travelers embark with their present intact.

Shifts in meaning...

The shifts in meaning that appear in relation to the original performance are also very interesting. As I said, “The Meeting Place” (Kontakthof) takes on much deeper meanings. While in Pina's performance the term suggested rather the space for the violent encounter between men and women, with an emphasis on the reification and subordination of the latter, in *Echoes '78* the encounter is between the present and the past, between artists who recompose

² The same as the one built in 1978 by Rolf Borzik. “The set design consists of a ballroom with a high ceiling that makes the performers seem very short. Along the sides are chairs that the performers can retire to, there is a piano and a microphone (...) At the start of the piece the dancers come to the front of the stage and present themselves (...)” Marion Meyer, *Pina Bausch. The Biography*, translated by Penny Black (Oberon Books, 2017), 54.

artistic experiences that have marked their lives, but also, on another level, between the individual and the self, between the awareness of a corporality... and feelings that feel as young as they did half a century ago. More than just a cultural exercise, Meryl Tankard and her team's project is, from this point of view, an existential project. After all, most of Pina Bausch's great choreographies are preserved and honored through performances by new and new generations of dancers. However, the authenticity of the reconstruction is never as intense as when the original appears on stage.

Another shift in meaning has to do with a certain dissolution of Beckettianism in the original work... The influences and confluences between Beckett and Pina Bausch have been admirably demonstrated by Lucy Weir³. Well, they fade significantly in the new *Kontakthof*, with situations somewhat relevant to the theater of the absurd now taking on new meanings. For example, the quotation of a line of "absurd" movement no longer places us in the absurd, but in a carefully constructed cultural equation; similarly, situations or relationships that would have

allowed us to invoke Beckett are now decipherable with the help of other codes: the observation of one's own corporality subject to the erosion of time, the tenderness of recording an absence, the whisper of ontological loneliness, and so on.

The abrasive polarities of masculine and feminine are then modified, a theme frequently brought to the fore in Pina Bausch's creations and marked emphatically in *Kontakthof* by the savagery of rituals observed in the animal world⁴. Tankard only tangentially draws on the traditional conflict, disguising it in some rather tender (vaguely reminiscent of Pina Bausch's "aggressive tenderness") or, at most, affectionate-ironic teasing. The tension of the old disputes between genders is now treated with humour, as in the memorable sequence in which the group of women and the group of men engage in a linguistic duel, naming different parts of the body; the average age of the performers makes the moment seem more like something from the sphere of "health care" and less like an actual duel.

About absence, as if...

In the profound phenomenology of

³ Lucy Weir, *Pina Bausch's Dance Theatre: Tracing the Evolution of Tanztheater* (Edinburgh University Press, 2018). The author's clear and well-argued demonstrations prove the existence of a vigorous vein of Beckettianism running through the entire work of the Wuppertal's choreography.

⁴ "What might otherwise appear as tender moments are grossly distorted in this scene into what feels more like video footage of wild animals' savage mating rituals. This is no doubt the point Pina Bausch is trying to make in this piece: that all social ritual contains elements of supreme savagery". Telory R. Arendell, *Pina Bausch's Aggressive Tenderness. Repurposing Theater Through Dance* (Routledge, 2020), 63.

visual echoes proposed by *Echoes* '78, absence is not treated as a lack, but as a different kind of presence. The empty chairs outnumber the nine performers, and the spaces between them, when they sit down, are painful and speak of disappearance, of leaving the stage of existence, of irreplaceable artists whose places are preserved in a very moving symbolism. In many situations, the performers behave as if their former partners are not missing, but simply cannot be seen with the naked eye. The duets, for example, are punctuated, even if only by the concrete actions of one of the partners, the one who survived. The void is filled with meaning, a very delicate theme of memory and remembrance, which gradually becomes more and more palpable. Only at the end does the absence translate into desolate loneliness. In the background, on a video projection, we see Meryl Tankard at the end of the 1978 performance. She is surrounded by men who touch her, test her, sniff her, turn her into a toy. Now Tankard is alone, unable to recreate the moment no matter how much she wants to. She has the set, she has the costume, she has the right attitude, but the absence of the others blocks her and makes it impossible to continue the scene. All she can do is leave her role as a performer and become a spectator: she turns her back to the audience and watches the film, herself absent

from her own role. It is as if everything we have seen was not just a reunion, but also a farewell...

Although not explicitly indicated, the absence-presence of Pina Bausch herself is intense and accompanies, like a psychological constant, both the act of (re)creation and that of reception. Her evocation is discreet, allusive, as in that tender metaphor of lost motherhood. Like the ducklings in the original video, the dancers still follow her through the waters of memory or the history that Pina created.

The spectral effect

One of the dominant features of the first part is a very carefully crafted spectral effect. It emerges from the very first sequences of the show, especially in the way the video projections are designed. A somewhat dematerialized landscape places us in a liminal space between reality and unreality, somewhat Chekhovian, if we think, for example, of the atmosphere of the first act of *The Cherry Orchard*. It is as if we are invited to step into a vanished world from which only echoes remain, remnants of meaning, remnants of humanity, remnants of lost definitions of art. The empty chairs, the pointing out of absences, the melodic lines and the way these sounds are perceived by a 21st-century audience complete the ghostly aesthetic of the first part. Along the way, the "ghosts" leave room for expression

to the concrete bodies with which they enter into a relationship. The entire performance can be “read” as a dialogue between ghosts and flesh-and-blood people. Added to this are the inner ghosts that each performer carries with them, either through memory or through the network of emotions that they individually feel. At the end of the first part, standing in a line in front of the audience, the performers address us: name, age, and some other personal information. The spectral retreats definitively, we are here and now, but we carry within us echoes of something indefinable, like a kind of filter through which we will perceive everything that is yet to happen on stage.

Eroticism and intimacy

The eroticism of the 1978 performance, so consistent and, in general, so specific to Pina Bausch's work, remains on stage, even when the performers, self-ironically, seek to blur it, quoting it rather than exercising it. But eroticism is not conveyed only by bodies, but also by attitudes, and these are perfectly functional. The movement itself bears the imprint of energies from the past, as if the movement were autonomous or even driving the bodies that execute it. You follow these maps of movement, feel their force, their intense vibrations, and understand that, at this high level of art, the age of a body is absolutely irrelevant.

Empty arms, heels, personal charm, personality, density of presence, femininity, flirtation, poeticism, impeccable relationships, strength, and the ability to create intimacy—all these not only make it possible to perpetuate the type of eroticism that is Pina Bausch's signature, but also bring new nuances, special tones, and an added cultural dimension that give it complexity and refinement. Far from becoming an impediment, the body subject to time has its advantages, especially through a very special poeticism and a dignified, natural symbiosis with its own old age. Not to mention the almost incredible technical performances and the alert rhythms that you would not have thought possible...

Humor

An essential ingredient in *Echoes '78* is humor. Coupled with irony and self-irony, this humor is warm and full of humanity. More than laughter, it provokes an empathetic smile, becoming, alongside Time, another “character” in the show. On more than one occasion, the artists interact with the audience, maintaining Pina's concern for this aesthetic of stage-audience dialogue, whether tacit or even verbal (the sequence at the end of the first part, already mentioned, or when Elisabeth Clarke asks the audience for coins to activate the mechanical horse, which, to the audience's amazement, she climbs onto without

any inhibitions). Of course, there are also notes of situational humor, born from dialogues that highlight the technical impossibility of executing certain lines of movement (attempts at hip dancing, for example!), as well as “echoes” of the unmistakable humor of Pina Bausch herself. Among other things, the merit of humor is also relevant to the way the overall atmosphere is set: bright, serene, relaxed! At times, humor is contrasted with the seriousness and sobriety of the gestures. One of the most moving scenes is that of the photographing (with a classic camera, with flash) of the couples dancing to their feelings, in a calm-desperate attempt to save something that is about to be lost forever, to leave illusory traces in the relentless flow of time that anonymizes and suppresses.

Instead of conclusions

The value of the project lies not only in the elegance and cultural sophistication of its aesthetics. At least for me, *Kontakthof – Echoes '78* is particularly relevant from the perspective of research. This is all the more so because it thoroughly proves a truth that no official academic methodology will ever utter: all genuine research is also research into oneself. Any objective gaze focused on what is being researched is also an inner gaze. We are therefore not only faced with a very powerful performance, but also with an exemplary process of artistic research

in which we, the spectators, play a double role: we are a contemplative audience and researchers invited to observe, formulate hypotheses, and draw conclusions...

Kontakthof – Echoes '78, a production by Sadler's Wells, Pina Bausch Foundation, Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch co-produced by Amare (The Hague), LAC Lugano Arte e Cultura, Festspielhaus St. Pölten, China Shangai International Arts Festival. Artistic team: Meryl Tankard – concept, direction; Meryl Tankard – video concept; Kenny Ang – video editor; Yeast Culture – projection design; Ryan Joseph Stafford – lighting design; David McEwan – sound design; Cristian Morganti – artistic assistant to the director (creation), Bénédicte Billiet – artistic collaboration (creation); Sophia Otto – rehearsal assistant and rehearsal dancer; Scott Jennings – rehearsal director (tour); Felicitas Willems – Outside Eye (Theatertreffen). Occupation: Elisabeth Clarke, Josephine Ann Endicott, Lutz Förster, John Giffin, Ed Kortlandt, Beatrice Libonati, Anne Martin, Arthur Rosenfeld, Meryl Tankard. Performance attended as part of Theatertreffen, May 15, 2025, Berlin.

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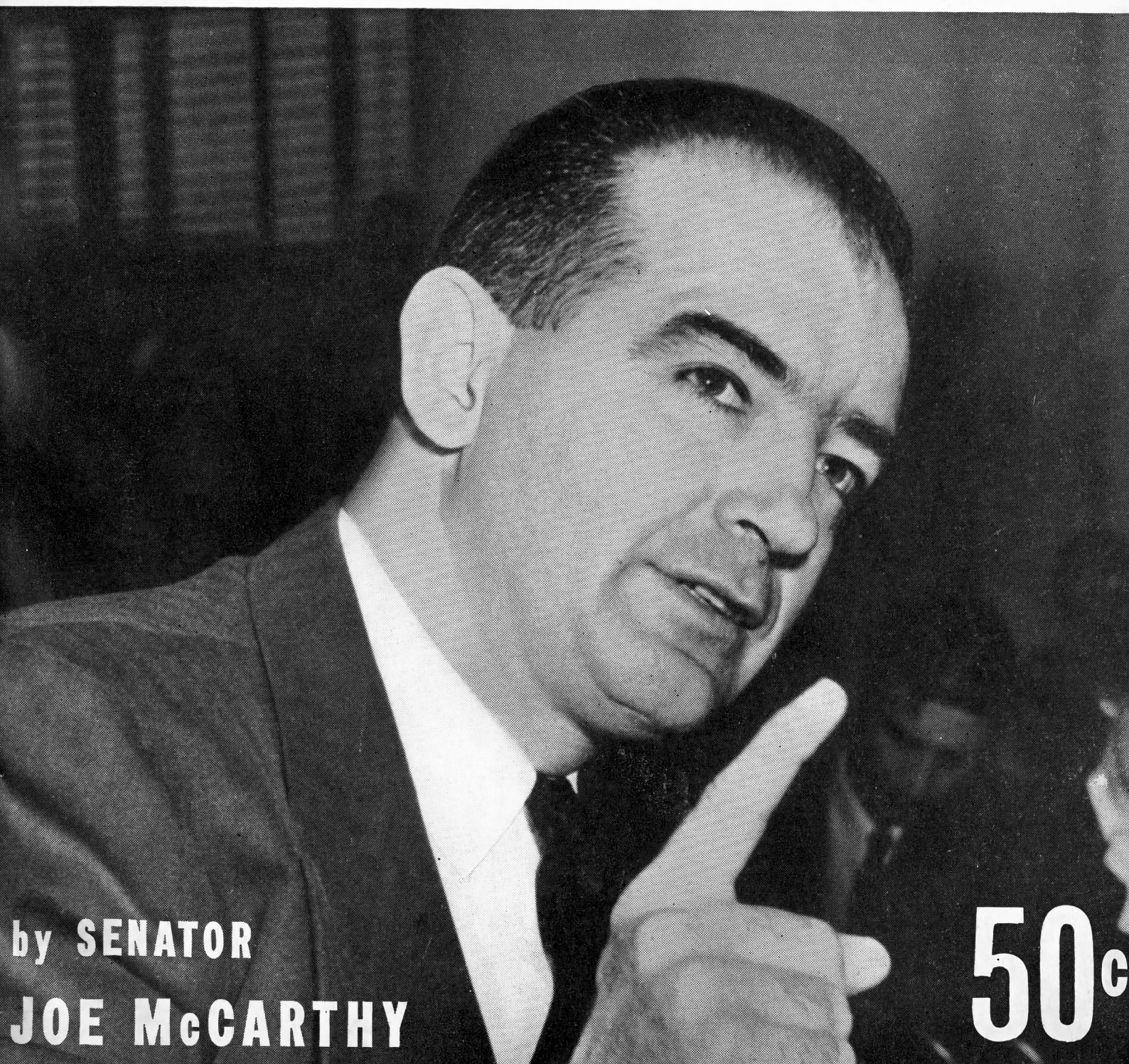
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The book cover of Senator McCarthy's exposé of the alleged spread of communism in the United States during the 1950s.

McCARTHYISM

THE FIGHT FOR AMERICA



by SENATOR
JOE McCARTHY

50c

RED SCARE, BLACK LISTS: ELIA KAZAN, THE HUAC, AND THE POLITICAL PROSECUTION OF AMERICAN ARTISTS

ION-COSMIN CHIVU

Associate Professor, Sands College of Performing Arts,
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Ion-Cosmin Chivu is a New York-based, Romanian-born theatre director and university professor. In 2020, he was appointed as the Chair of The Actors Studio Drama School MFA program at Pace University, NYC, and served for ten years as the Director of the BA in Acting and Directing, International Performance Ensemble at the Pace School of Performing Arts. Chivu has received multiple awards and nominations for his work, including a Drama League nomination in the Best Revival category and The New York Times and Time Out critic's pick. Chivu has directed over sixty professional and university productions in America, Australia, Austria, Bulgaria, England, Germany, Greece, Italy, Spain, Romania, and Thailand. He is a lifetime member of The Actors Studio, a member of the Lincoln Center Directors Lab, and an Honorary Fellow of the Institute of Arts Barcelona. Chivu has also taught at the Central School of Speech and Drama in London; NYU Tisch; the University of Hawai'i; Theatre of Changes in Athens; and Chulalongkorn University in Bangkok. He is actively involved in developing new work and translating contemporary European plays for an American audience. He holds a Masters in Theatre Directing from The Actors Studio Drama School in the U.S., and a BFA in Acting from the G. Enescu Art Academy in Romania.

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This article examines the political witch hunt of the 1950s in the United States that targeted artists and intellectuals during the McCarthy era, with a particular focus on director Elia Kazan's controversial testimony before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Drawing on primary sources and historical scholarship, this analysis traces the origins of the Red Scare, explores the mechanics of political persecution in the entertainment industry, and evaluates the complex moral dimensions of Kazan's decision to name former colleagues as Communist Party members. The study demonstrates how this historical period continues to resonate in American cultural discourse, as evidenced by the recent global audience of 7.34 million viewers for CNN's June 7th, 2025 broadcast of Good Night, and Good Luck and the politically charged atmosphere of the 2025 Tony Awards, which took place at the Radio City Music Hall the next day.

Elia Kazan, anti-communism, politics, prosecution

Echoes of the Past in Contemporary Media

On June 7th, 2025, for the first time in its 55 years of broadcasting, CNN aired *Good Night, and Good Luck*, George Clooney and Grant Heslov's Broadway production based on a movie about CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow's courageous stand against Senator Joseph McCarthy's witch hunt that targeted artists and intellectuals in the United States in the 1950s. The live broadcast reached 7.34 million viewers globally, demonstrating the unceasing public interest in this dark chapter of American history. The timing proved particularly resonant, as just one day later, the 2025 Tony Awards featured multiple references to contemporary political polarization and the dangers of ideological persecution. This convergence of past and present underscores how the McCarthy era continues to serve as a topical reference point for discussions about freedom of expression, political loyalty, and moral courage in American society. CNN's unprecedented recent decision to broadcast a Broadway play likely stems from its subject's profound resonance with contemporary media challenges under the current White House administration. By airing a production that chronicles Edward R. Murrow's fearless response to McCarthyism, CNN positioned itself

as a defender of journalistic integrity during a period of heightened political polarization, drawing a deliberate parallel between McCarthy's era and current concerns about truth in media.

From a strategic perspective, the broadcast signalled CNN's adjustment to changing media consumption patterns. As traditional news networks face declining viewership, this unconventional content decision helps the network differentiate itself while still aligning with its brand identity. By presenting high-quality cultural content with historical significance instead of expected programming, CNN likely aimed to attract viewers seeking substantive alternatives to the standard news cycle — potentially appealing to both existing audiences and new demographics interested in Broadway theatrical productions with political relevance.

The McCarthy Era — Fear, Betrayal, Revenge, Censorship, and Artistic Casualties

The blacklisting of entertainment professionals during the 1950s remains one of the most troubling episodes in American cultural history. At the centre of this controversy stands Elia Kazan — a celebrated stage and film director whose decision to cooperate with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) by naming former colleagues as members of

the Communist Party has defined his legacy as much as his artistic achievements. Kazan's testimony in April of 1952 divided the artistic community, ended friendships, and generated debates about personal integrity versus political pressure that continue to this day.

The post-World War II period marked a dramatic shift in America's relationship with the Soviet Union. The wartime alliance quickly deteriorated as ideological differences came to the forefront, and by 1947, President Harry Truman had established the doctrine of containment that would guide U.S. foreign policy for decades. As tensions escalated, domestic fear of communist infiltration grew proportionally, creating a climate of suspicion that would enable what Ellen Schrecker has referred to as "the age of McCarthyism."¹

Established in 1938, the HUAC gained significant momentum during this period. Although Senator Joseph McCarthy's name would become synonymous with the "anti-communist crusade", the HUAC's investigations preceded his infamous 1950 speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, where he claimed to have a list of communists working in the Department of State. The blacklisting phenomenon preceded and outlasted McCarthy himself, affecting numerous professionals across film, television, and

radioindustries.

The Committee's focus on the entertainment industry was strategic — not random. Films, radio programs, and television shows reached millions of Americans daily, making them potential vehicles for ideological messaging. In October 1947, the HUAC launched public hearings investigating alleged communist influence in Hollywood, where ten screenwriters and directors — later known as the Hollywood Ten — took an unprecedented stand against government intrusion.

Led by screenwriters Dalton Trumbo and Ring Lardner Jr., alongside director Edward Dmytryk, this group categorically refused to answer the Committee's questions regarding their political affiliations or to name others with communist connections. Their defiance was based on a principled constitutional argument that such inquiries violated their First Amendment rights to freedom of speech, assembly, and political belief.

The Committee and courts rejected this legal strategy, resulting in the Ten being cited for contempt of Congress in November 1947, with each subsequently serving between six months and one year in federal prison. Their conviction marked the beginning of the entertainment industry blacklist, as major studios announced the Waldorf Statement

¹ E. Schrecker, *Many Are the Crimes: McCarthyism in America* (Princeton University Press, 1998), 47.

declaring that they would not employ individuals who refused to cooperate with congressional investigations — effectively ending the Hollywood careers of the Ten and establishing a precedent of professional exile for those who challenged the Committee's authority.

This initial round of hearings established the template for what would follow: public testimony, demands for names of other “subversives”, and professional consequences for those who refused to cooperate. The Hollywood blacklist emerged as studios — under pressure from groups like the American Legion and fearing public boycotts— agreed not to employ those identified as communists or those who refused to clear themselves before the Committee. Following the Hollywood Ten's contempt citations, a second wave of entertainment industry professionals adopted a different legal strategy when called before the HUAC in the early 1950s. These witnesses invoked their Fifth Amendment constitutional protection against self-incrimination, refusing to answer questions about their political affiliations or to identify others with communist connections. Nevertheless, while legally sound — and preventing the contempt of Congress charges that had

resulted in prison sentences for the Hollywood Ten — this approach carried severe professional consequences. Studio executives, under pressure from anti-communist groups and fearing public backlash, instituted a de facto policy against employing “Fifth Amendment Communists”.

The major studios, talent agencies, and production companies systematically removed these individuals from ongoing projects and refused to offer new employment opportunities, regardless of talent or previous contributions to the industry. Many prominent careers were abruptly terminated, with blacklisted professionals forced to work under pseudonyms, relocate abroad, or abandon their entertainment careers entirely — demonstrating that even though constitutional protections prevented legal penalties, they still provided little shield against economic retaliation.

By the early 1950s, the entertainment industry had developed an elaborate system of political screening. As Thomas Doherty documents in *Cold War, Cool Medium*, major studios implemented loyalty oaths and established security offices to vet employees.² The *Red Channels* publication, released in 1950 by the right-wing journal *Counterattack*, listed 151 actors, writers, musicians,

² T. Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2003), 124-126.

New York Times Apr 12, 1952 pg. 7

ADVERTISEMENT

A STATEMENT by Elia Kazan

In the past weeks intolerable rumors about my political position have been circulating in New York and Hollywood. I want to make my stand clear:

I believe that Communist activities confront the people of this country with an unprecedented and exceptionally tough problem. That is, how to protect ourselves from a dangerous and alien conspiracy and still keep the free, open, healthy way of life that gives us self-respect.

I believe that the American people can solve this problem wisely only if they have the facts about communism. All the facts.

Now, I believe that any American who is in possession of such facts has the obligation to make them known, either to the public or to the appropriate Government agency.

Whatever hysteria exists—and there is some, particularly in Hollywood—is inflamed by mystery, suspicion and secrecy. Hard and exact facts will cool it.

The facts I have are sixteen years out of date, but they supply a small piece of background to the graver picture of communism today.

I have placed these facts before the House Committee on Un-American Activities without reserve and I now place them before the public and before my co-workers in motion pictures and in the theatre.

Seventeen and a half years ago I was a twenty-four-year old stage manager and bit actor, making \$40 a week, when I worked.

At that time nearly all of us felt menaced by two things: the depression and the ever growing power of Hitler. The streets were full of unemployed and shaken men. I was taken in by the Hard Times version of what might be called the Communists' advertising or recruiting technique. They claimed to have a cure for depressions and a cure for Naziism and Fascism.

I joined the Communist Party late in the summer of 1934. I got out a year and a half later.

I have no spy stories to tell, because I saw no spies. Nor did I understand, at that time, any opposition between American and Russian national interest. It was not even clear to me in 1936 that the American Communist Party was abjectly taking its orders from the Kremlin.

What I learned was the minimum that anyone must learn who puts his head into the noose of party "discipline." The Communists automatically violated the daily practices of democracy to which I was accustomed. They attempted to control thought and to suppress personal opinion. They tried to dictate personal conduct. They habitually distorted and disregarded and violated the truth. All this was crudely opposite to their claims of "democracy" and "the scientific approach."

To be a member of the Communist Party is to have a taste of the police state. It is a diluted taste but it is bitter and unforgettable. It is diluted because you can walk out.

I got out in the spring of 1936.

The question will be asked why I did not tell this story sooner. I was held back, primarily, by concern for the reputations and employment of people who may, like myself, have left the party many years ago.

I was also held back by a piece of specious reasoning which has silenced many liberals. It goes like this: "You may hate the Communists, but you must not attack them or expose them, because if you do you are attacking the right to hold unpopular opinions and you are joining the people who attack civil liberties."

I have thought soberly about this. It is, simply, a lie.

Secrecy serves the Communists. At the other pole, it serves those who are interested in silencing liberal voices. The employment of a lot of good liberals is threatened because they have allowed themselves to become associated with or silenced by the Communists.

Liberals must speak out.

I think it is useful that certain of us had this kind of experience with the Communists, for if we had not we should not know them so well. Today, when all the world fears war and they scream peace, we know how much their professions are worth. We know tomorrow they will have a new slogan.

Firsthand experience of dictatorship and thought control left me with an abiding hatred of these. It left me with an abiding hatred of Communist philosophy and methods and the conviction that these must be resisted always.

It also left me with the passionate conviction that we must never let the Communists get away with the pretense that they stand for the very things which they kill in their own countries.

I am talking about free speech, a free press, the rights of property, the rights of labor, racial equality and, above all, individual rights. I value these things. I take them seriously. I value peace, too, when it is not bought at the price of fundamental decencies.

I believe these things must be fought for whenever they are not fully honored and protected whenever they are threatened.

The motion pictures I have made and the plays I have chosen to direct represent my convictions.

I expect to continue to make the same kinds of pictures and to direct the same kinds of plays.

ELIA KAZAN

Kazan's statement in The New York Times.
Courtesy of The New York Times.

and other entertainment professionals who allegedly had ties to communist organizations or causes.

The blacklist operated through formal and informal mechanisms — while no official government blacklist existed, the effect of being named in the HUAC testimony often meant an immediate termination of employment. The major studios had agreed to a common policy in what became known as the aforementioned Waldorf Statement, declaring they would not “knowingly employ a Communist”. Networks and sponsors similarly refused to hire those under suspicion.

The psychological impact on the creative community was profound.

As playwright Arthur Miller — himself later called before the HUAC — observed: “fear controlled everything. Fear was everywhere.”³

This atmosphere of suspicion fundamentally altered the nature of artistic expression, leading to self-censorship and the avoidance of socially relevant themes that could have been deemed controversial. For those caught in the HUAC’s crosshairs, options were limited, and each carried significant costs. Those who refused to testify by invoking the Fifth Amendment — a U.S. constitutional right that forbids “double jeopardy”, protecting a citizen against self-incrimination — typically ended up

being blacklisted. Testifying, but refusing to name names often had the same consequence. Those who cooperated by identifying others often saved their careers, but faced social ostracism from colleagues who viewed their cooperation as betrayal.

On March 9th, 1954, CBS journalist Edward R. Murrow delivered a meticulous thirty-minute broadcast on his program *See It Now* that systematically challenged Senator Joseph McCarthy’s anti-communist crusade. Utilizing McCarthy’s own words and footage against him, Murrow methodically exposed the Senator’s contradictions, unsupported accusations, and intimidation tactics that had dominated American political discourse. The broadcast concluded with Murrow’s measured, yet powerful statement that “the line between investigating and persecuting is a very fine one”, effectively questioning McCarthy’s methods without partisan rhetoric. This deeply dramatic moment in television journalism catalysed changing public sentiment, contributed to McCarthy’s declining influence, and set in motion a sequence of events that culminated in the Senate voting 67–22 to condemn McCarthy on December 2nd, 1954, for conduct “contrary to senatorial traditions”. The censure effectively ended McCarthy’s

3 A. Miller, *Timebends: A Life* (Grove Press, 1987), 235.

political power, marking one of the most consequential intersections of journalism and governmental accountability in American history.

Elia Kazan — One of America's Most Acclaimed and Controversial Directors

Before his testimony permanently altered his reputation, Elia Kazan had established himself as one of America's most acclaimed and influential directors. Born in Constantinople (now Istanbul) to Greek parents, Kazan immigrated to the U.S. as a child. After studying at Williams College in Massachusetts and the Yale Drama School in Connecticut, he joined the Group Theatre in 1932, where he worked alongside Lee Strasberg and formed a close relationship with Clifford Odets — and later with Tennessee Williams.

Founded in 1931 by Harold Clurman, Cheryl Crawford, and Lee Strasberg, the Group Theatre transformed American performing arts by instituting a collaborative ensemble dedicated to socially conscious productions and acting techniques based on realism. The company's artistic vision was inspired by Richard Boleslawski, who decided to remain in the U.S. as soon as the Moscow Art Theatre completed its second American tour. Boleslawski's American Laboratory Theatre provided Strasberg and other founding members of the

Group Theatre — and later The Actors Studio — with rigorous training in Stanislavski's System.

Richard Boleslawski's escape from post-revolutionary Russia in 1920 — first to Poland and then to America — proved fortuitous, as he avoided the brutal political repressions that would later unfold under Stalin's regime. While American theatre artists would eventually face McCarthyism's professional blacklisting, Boleslawski's former colleagues who remained in Russia confronted the far more lethal Great Purge (1936-1938), during which an estimated 750,000 people were executed and millions more sent to labour camps.

Having safely established himself in America, Boleslawski's influence on the formation of the Group Theatre became profound. Through his teaching at the American Laboratory Theatre, where Strasberg, Clurman, and Adler studied his interpretation of Stanislavski's techniques, Boleslawski created the methodological foundation upon which the Group Theatre would build its artistic identity. His emphasis on psychological truth, systematic actor development, and the transformation of personal experience into universal expression became core principles of the Group's approach.

Ironically, while Boleslawski had fled political repression in Russia due to anti-communist views, his theatrical



People protesting for the liberation of the Hollywood 10
 Courtesy of IndieWire.com

descendants at the Group Theatre would later face their own political challenges during the McCarthy era for sympathizing with the Communist Party. Nevertheless, the consequences for the Group Theatre were far less deadly than those experienced by artists under Stalin's show trials and executions. Richard Boleslawski's methodology profoundly influenced the Group Theatre's approach to acting and production, while the company's leftist political orientation emerged independently during the Great Depression. This political perspective manifested in productions that addressed class struggle, economic inequality, and labour rights, reflecting the socioeconomic challenges of the era. The company attracted new talents who embraced its artistic methodology and political vision.

Playwright Clifford Odets created powerful works such as *Waiting for Lefty* that embodied the Group's progressive ideals. Stella Adler and Sanford Meisner developed groundbreaking methodologies based on their Group Theatre experiences, while performers such as Lee J. Cobb and John Garfield later brought the company's naturalistic approach to mainstream American entertainment. Elia Kazan represents a particularly notable case among Group Theatre members, as his directorial career flourished despite his later controversial testimony before the HUAC. During his time with the Group Theatre, Kazan became a member of the Communist Party for approximately 19 months (from 1934 to 1936) before leaving the party due to disagreements over its attempts to control the

Group Theatre's artistic direction.⁴ Although the company disbanded in 1941 after a decade of innovative work, its emphasis on ensemble performance, psychological truth, and social relevance permanently transformed American dramatic arts. Kazan's directorial career took off in the 1940s and early 1950s. On Broadway, he directed landmark productions including Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In Hollywood, he established himself with critically acclaimed films such as *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), and the film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). His work often explored social issues and psychological complexity, earning him a reputation as a director of uncommon insight and power. By the time of his HUAC appearance, Kazan had won an Academy Award for *Gentleman's Agreement*, an examination of antisemitism that demonstrated his interest in socially relevant filmmaking. Ironically, this progressive artistic sensibility made him a particularly valuable witness for the HUAC, as his cooperation would signal that even those with liberal credentials recognized the "communist threat."⁵ Elia Kazan was first called to testify before the HUAC in an executive

session on January 14th, 1952. During this closed hearing, he acknowledged his own brief Communist Party membership, but refused to identify others. According to Richard Schickel's biography of Kazan, this initial refusal led to significant professional consequences: "within days, Twentieth Century Fox informed him that they were suspending preparation on his next film."⁶ The pressure on Kazan mounted in the weeks that followed. Friends and colleagues—including fellow Greek-American Spyros Skouras—urged him to reconsider his position. Kazan later described this period as one of intense personal anguish, writing in his autobiography: "I'd had weeks of sleepless nights. I'd been walking around in a dark tunnel. I was isolated from everyone."⁷

The Eight Names and Their Career Fates

On April 10th, 1952, Kazan returned to the HUAC—this time for public testimony. In this session, he reversed his earlier position, providing the Committee with the names of eight individuals who had been members of the Communist Party during his brief involvement: Clifford Odets (playwright and screenwriter), J. Edward Bromberg (actor), Lewis Leverett (actor and

4 E. Kazan, *Elia Kazan: A Life* (Da Capo Press, 1988), 157-162.

5 V. S. Navasky, *Naming Names* (Hill and Wang, 1980), 199,

6 R. Schickel, *Elia Kazan: A Biography* (Harper Collins, 2005), 84.

7 Kazan, *Elia Kazan*, 452.

theatre director), Morris Carnovsky (actor, theatre producer, and talent agent), Phoebe Brand (actress), Tony Kraber (actor and singer), Ted Wellman (theatre producer and director), and Paula Miller Strasberg (actress, acting coach, and wife of Lee Strasberg).

Kazan's decision to name these former colleagues had profound repercussions on his personal relationships and professional trajectory, with McGilligan and Buhle adding that Kazan only named the people he did not like.⁸ The testimony immediately polarized the artistic community, with some viewing Kazan as having made a principled stand against communism and others condemning him for betraying friends and colleagues to save his own career.

Kazan himself attempted to justify his actions in a full-page advertisement in *The New York Times* on April 12th, 1952, the day after his testimony. In this statement, he wrote: "I believe that any American who is in possession of such facts has the obligation to make them known, either to the public or to the appropriate governmental agency."⁹ This public declaration further inflamed the

controversy, as it suggested not just compliance under duress, but active endorsement of the HUAC's activities.

The eight individuals named by Kazan experienced varying degrees of professional hardship following their identification. Examining their fates provides insight into the real-world consequences of HUAC testimony.

Clifford Odets – once the Group Theatre's star playwright with works like *Waiting for Lefty* and *Awake and Sing!* – saw his career notably diminished. Although he continued to work in Hollywood after being named, the quality and frequency of his projects declined markedly. His final years were characterized by personal struggles and diminished creative output before his death in 1963.¹⁰

J. Edward Bromberg, a character actor with numerous film credits, died of a heart attack in 1951 at age 47, shortly after being subpoenaed by HUAC but before Kazan's testimony. Many colleagues attributed his death to the stress of the investigation, making him, in their view, a literal casualty of the blacklist.¹¹

Morris Carnovsky and his wife Phoebe Brand suffered significant

⁸ P. Buhle and P. McGilligan, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 327.

⁹ Elia Kazan, "Why I Testified", *The New York Times* (April 12, 1952), 7.

¹⁰ M. Brenman-Gibson, *Clifford Odets: American Playwright* (Atheneum, 1981), 512-514.

¹¹ Buhle and McGilligan, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist*. University of Minnesota Press (University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 405-408

career setbacks. Carnovsky – a distinguished stage actor – was largely excluded from film and television work after being named. He eventually found a place teaching at the American Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Connecticut, and rebuilding a career focused on classical theatrical roles.¹²

Lewis Leverett – a lesser-known actor and director with the Group Theatre – saw his career effectively ended by the blacklist. He later taught acting privately, but never regained his professional standing in the theatre or film industry.¹³

Paula Miller Strasberg – who had largely retired from acting to support her husband Lee Strasberg's career and work as an acting coach – was perhaps least affected professionally by being named.

However, the personal betrayal was particularly acute given the close relationship between the Strasbergs and Kazan during their Group Theatre years.¹⁴

Tony Kraber – an actor with a modest career – found himself unable to work in television after being named. When later called before the HUAC himself, he famously responded to the question of whether he knew Elia Kazan by

saying: "I would rather not answer that. We had a relationship that was terminated."¹⁵

Ted Wellman – the least documented of those named – effectively disappeared from professional theatre and film following his identification, illustrating how the blacklist erased entire careers from the historical record.

The human cost of these testimonies extended beyond professional consequences. Families were strained, marriages broken, and friendships severed. Many blacklisted artists faced financial ruin, and some, unable to work under their own names, were forced to write using pseudonyms or "fronts" who would take credit for their work.¹⁶

Artistic Response: Kazan's Films as Moral Exploration

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of Kazan's post-testimony career is how his films engaged with themes directly related to his HUAC experience. Kazan's post-testimony films demonstrate a deeper engagement with questions of moral ambiguity, betrayal, and personal integrity.

His most significant works from this

12 L. Ceplair and S. Englund, *The Inquisition in Hollywood: Politics in the Film Community, 1930-60* (University of Illinois Press, 2003), 389-390.

13 Navasky, *Naming Names* (Hill and Wang), 243.

14 D. Garfield, *A Player's Place: The Story of The Actors Studio* (Macmillan, 1980), 125-127.

15 E. Bentley, *Are You Now or Have You Ever Been: The Investigation of Show Business by the Un-American Activities Committee, 1947-1958* (Harper & Row, 1972), 183.

16 Buhle and McGilligan, *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (University of Minnesota Press), 405.

period can be read as attempts to process, justify, or at least explore the moral complexities of his decision.

On the Waterfront (1954) – written by fellow HUAC informant Budd Schulberg – tells the story of Terry Malloy (Marlon Brando), a dockworker who decides to testify against corrupt union leaders. The film's famous line "I coulda been a contender" resonates with Kazan's own sense of lost opportunity and corrupted potential. The narrative presents informing as an act of moral courage — not betrayal, suggesting that loyalty to corrupt systems perpetuates injustice. As David Thomson observes, *On the Waterfront* represents "the most elegant and emotionally satisfying justification of the informer's position ever made."¹⁷ While Kazan never explicitly connected the film to his testimony, the parallels were obvious to contemporary viewers and remain the standard interpretation among film historians. *East of Eden* (1955) – based on John Steinbeck's novel – explores themes of betrayal, moral ambiguity, and divided identity through the biblical framework of Cain and Abel. The character of Cal Trask (James Dean) struggles with his own moral nature and seeks his father's approval while wrestling with revelations about his mother's

past. As Robin Wood argued, the film tackles the conventional ideas of good and evil, insisting on the fact that a human's destiny is equally defined by inheritance and choice. *A Face in the Crowd* (1957) examines the corrupting influence of power and media, following the rise and fall of Lonesome Rhodes (Andy Griffith), a drifter who becomes a powerful and manipulative media figure. The film's almost prophetic warning about the dangers of media-manufactured populism reflects Kazan's growing disillusionment with institutional power of all kinds — political or commercial.

America, America (1963) – Kazan's most personal film – chronicled his uncle's journey from Anatolia to the U.S. The protagonist compromises his ideals and manipulates others to achieve his dream of reaching America, actions that parallel Kazan's own pragmatic navigation of professional and political pressures. As Richard Slotkin observes, the film "embodies the paradox at the heart of the American immigrant experience: the pursuit of freedom often requires sacrifices of both principle and connection to one's past."¹⁸

These films reveal a director grappling with the moral complexity of his choices instead of seeking simple absolution. Through his art, Kazan explored the tension between

¹⁷ D. Thomson, *A Biographical Dictionary of Film* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 372.

¹⁸ R. Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), 489.

idealism and pragmatism, individual conscience and social responsibility in ways that transcended simple self-justification.

Industry Reaction and Cultural Fallout

The response to Kazan's testimony within the entertainment industry was swift and polarizing. While some colleagues publicly supported his decision, many others viewed it as an unforgivable betrayal. Joseph L. Mankiewicz – then president of the Directors Guild of America – initially supported a motion to revoke Kazan's membership, but ultimately backed down in the face of legal concerns.¹⁹

Kazan also faced backlash on a personal level: old friends who called him by his nickname, "Gadg" – short for "Gadget" – cut him off, turning their heads whenever they ran into him. His friendship with playwright Arthur Miller – a close collaborator – was irreparably damaged: Miller dramatized his view of informing in *The Crucible* (1953), using the Salem witch trials as a historical allegory for the HUAC's activities. Navasky narrated the exchange between Kazan and Miller when the latter sent him a copy of *A View from the Bridge* (1955), which condemns informers:

—"I would be honoured to direct it," Kazan wrote to Miller. — "You don't

understand," Miller replied. "I didn't send it to you because I wanted you to direct it. I sent it to you because I wanted you to know what I think of stool pigeons."

When Tony Kraber – a fellow member of the Group Theatre – was called to testify, he was asked if Kazan's testimony was accurate. Kraber asked: "is this the Kazan who signed a contract for \$500,000 the day after he gave names to the Committee?" Despite Kazan denying this, his detractors said that he was wealthy enough to live luxuriously without the films, that he could have stayed on Broadway, where the blacklist was not enforced with the same rigor.²⁰

John Garfield – who, as previously mentioned, passed shortly after Kazan's testimony – had reportedly said of informers: "I hate a guy who gives up another guy to save himself. If you want to talk about yourself, all right, but to give names of other guys because you don't want to go to jail or you don't want to lose your job, I hate that."²¹

Beyond the personal consequences, Kazan's testimony contributed to the broader effectiveness of the blacklist by lending it legitimacy. As a respected artist with progressive credentials, his cooperation suggested that even liberals recognized the necessity of the anti-communist investigations.

¹⁹ Navasky, *Naming Names*, 202-204.

²⁰ Ibid., 214.

²¹ Ibid., 176.

This made it harder for others to resist the Committee's demands and easier for studios to justify their participation in the blacklist.

In the 1960s, public support for McCarthyism waned, but rehabilitation came too late to salvage the careers –or to repair the personal damage – of those who were blacklisted. The significance of Kazan's decision and actions could also be reassessed from the perspective of those who chose different paths when confronted by the HUAC. Among those called to testify, three main responses emerged.

The first group, exemplified by the Hollywood Ten, openly defied the Committee by refusing to answer questions about their political beliefs and associations, citing First Amendment protections of free speech and association. This approach resulted in contempt of Congress citations, jail sentences, and certain blacklisting.

The second group invoked the Fifth Amendment protection against self-incrimination, refusing to answer questions that might incriminate them. While this strategy avoided contempt charges, it still typically resulted in blacklisting, as studios were unwilling to employ those who had "taken the Fifth".

The third group – including Kazan – chose to fully cooperate, acknowledging their own

Communist Party membership and naming others. This approach usually preserved their ability to work, but often at significant personal cost in terms of relationships and reputation.

Notable examples of resistance include Lillian Hellman, who wrote to the HUAC: "I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashions", refusing to name names while offering to testify about her own activities.²² Larry Parks – star of *The Jolson Story* – initially resisted, but eventually named names under intense pressure only to find his career destroyed nonetheless — demonstrating that even cooperation provided no guaranteed protection.

Director Robert Rossen also refused to cooperate at first, but later returned to name 57 people — 49 more than Kazan's eight, yet receiving significantly less historical condemnation and raising questions about why Kazan's testimony has remained so central to cultural memory of this period.²³

This comparison highlights the absence of easy moral choices in the HUAC era. Each response carried significant costs, and the pressure applied to witnesses was intense and multifaceted, combining legal, economic, and social coercion.

²² L. Hellman, *Scoundrel Time* (Little, Brown and Company, 1976), 93.

²³ Navasky, *Naming Names*, 287-288.



A session at the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC)
Courtesy of the Associated Press.

Long-term Cultural Impact and Historical Assessment

The blacklist era left an indelible mark on American culture that extends far beyond the immediate fates of those involved. The fear of political reprisal affected artistic expression itself, as creators avoided controversial subjects and studios implemented self-censorship to prevent potential criticism.

Film historian Paul Buhle argued that American cinema lost a decade of potential social commentary during this period, with filmmakers steering away from issues like labour relations, racial inequality, and economic injustice that had been more common subjects in the 1930s and early 1940s.²⁴ This artistic caution contributed to the relatively

conservative cultural production of the 1950s, only really breaking down with the social movements of the 1960s.

The lasting impact on institutional practices was equally significant. As Ellen Schrecker documents, academic freedom in universities was curtailed, with loyalty oaths becoming common requirements for faculty positions.²⁵ The FBI's surveillance of artists and intellectuals expanded dramatically, creating a chilling effect on political expression that lasted for decades. For Kazan, the controversy never fully subsided. His 1988 autobiography, *A Life*, addressed the testimony directly, with Kazan remaining largely unrepentant. He wrote: "I'd had enough of living

²⁴ P. Buhle and D. Wagner, *Hide in Plain Sight: The Hollywood Blacklistees in Film and Television, 1950-2002* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 42-45.

²⁵ E. Schrecker, *No Ivory Tower: McCarthyism and the Universities* (Oxford University Press, 1986), 116-118.

with a divided consciousness”²⁶, suggesting that his decision provided psychological resolution, if not universal moral approval. Throughout his memoir, Kazan delved deeply into this defining moment, detailing how his testimony before HUAC represented not simply a political choice but a personal reckoning with his own divided loyalties.

In *A Life*, he framed his decision as an inevitable break from what he characterized as the rigid dogmatism of his former Communist associates, describing the emotional and intellectual journey that led him to value individual conscience over group solidarity. While acknowledging the personal costs and professional complications his testimony created, Kazan maintained in his autobiography that his actions were consistent with his evolving values about artistic freedom and personal integrity, even as he recognized that many would continue to judge him harshly for what they perceived as betrayal rather than principled conviction. The polarizing nature of this action was also dramatically illustrated on live television, on March 21, 1999, when Elia Kazan received an Honorary Oscar, *in recognition of his indelible contributions to the art of motion picture direction*. During the 71st Academy Awards, as the 89-year-old director approached the

stage, some attendees — including Warren Beatty, Meryl Streep, and Martin Scorsese — stood and applauded, while others — such as Nick Nolte, Ed Harris, and Amy Madigan — remained defiantly seated, refusing to applaud. The tension in the audience was palpable, with cameras capturing the stark visual of roughly half the audience standing while others sat with arms firmly crossed. Kazan himself made no direct reference to the controversy in his brief acceptance speech, simply thanking the Academy for its “courage and generosity” in selecting him. Outside the venue, several protesters gathered with signs condemning Kazan’s HUAC testimony. The ceremony had been preceded by weeks of heated debate in industry publications, with prominent Hollywood figures publishing opposing viewpoints. This moment represented one of Hollywood’s most public reckonings with its blacklist era, as many considered Kazan’s testimony a betrayal that destroyed careers, while supporters argued his artistic contributions transcended his controversial political actions. The standing ovation from some, contrasted with the silent protest from others, embodied Hollywood’s unresolved feelings about one of its darkest chapters.

26 Kazan, *Elia Kazan*, 459.

Cultural Impact and Historical Assessment

The issues raised by Kazan's testimony and the blacklist era maintain their relevance in contemporary discussions of artistic freedom, political loyalty, and moral responsibility. Recent controversies surrounding cancel culture, political polarization, and the relationship between art and politics echo themes from this earlier period. For many on the political right, Kazan acted as a hero and remained one, but many artists, writers, and intellectuals chose – or were forced – to leave the U.S. to avoid persecution, affecting the cultural landscape in the U.S. and abroad. For the rest of his life, Kazan would be known both as Broadway's best director and as a "Judas of the McCarthy era". He would be remembered for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *East of Eden*, or *On the Waterfront*, and for destroying the careers of some of his colleagues. As Bernard Weinraub argued, Kazan's post-HUAC work should be understood as a genuine wrestling with moral ambiguity instead of self-justification. This perspective suggests that the most valuable response to this troubled history may be not definitive judgment, but continued engagement with its complexities and contradictions. In his ambitious 1999 historical drama *Cradle Will Rock*, Tim Robbins

crafted a multi-layered examination of the political and cultural forces that ultimately led to the Hollywood blacklist. Robbins approached the subject through a parallel historical moment: the controversial 1937 production of Marc Blitzstein's pro-labour musical *The Cradle Will Rock* under the Federal Theatre Project. The film meticulously reconstructed how government censorship, corporate interests, and anti-communist sentiment converged to suppress artistic expression during the Depression era. Through an ensemble cast portraying historical figures including Orson Welles, Diego Rivera, and Nelson Rockefeller, Robbins illustrates how the mechanisms of ideological control that would later manifest in the HUAC hearings were already taking shape in American institutions a decade earlier. Instead of directly depicting the blacklist itself, Robbins' film provides a nuanced historical context that illuminates the systematic suppression of dissenting voices in American arts and the institutional frameworks that enabled political prosecution of artists throughout the mid-twentieth century. As Robbins said: "the lessons of the blacklist are still pertinent today. Whenever we decide that we need to compromise our freedoms to fight an enemy, we risk becoming what we're fighting against."²⁷

²⁷ S. J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004), 312.

Contemporary Resonance — Political Pressure and Artistic Freedom

The recent CNN broadcast of *Good Night, and Good Luck* tapped into this continuing relevance. The play – which dramatizes Edward R. Murrow’s famous 1954 See It Now broadcast challenging Senator McCarthy – resonated with contemporary viewers concerned about media responsibility in confronting political extremism and defending democratic values. Originally produced as a film in 2005, Clooney and Heslov’s story focuses on Murrow’s decision to use his platform at CBS to directly challenge McCarthy’s tactics, despite corporate pressure and the potential for personal and professional repercussions. The parallel to Kazan’s situation is clear, although Murrow and Kazan made different choices when confronted with political pressure.

The global audience of 7.34 million viewers for CNN’s broadcast suggests a renewed interest in understanding this historical period as a way of processing contemporary political anxieties. As James Poniewozik noted in his review of the original film, *Good Night, and Good Luck* is “less interested in congratulating the audience for being on the right side of history than in challenging it to consider the human cost of making

difficult moral choices in real time, without historical hindsight.”²⁸

The day after CNN’s broadcast of *Good Night, and Good Luck*, the 2025 Tony Awards ceremony featured multiple references to contemporary political polarization and the importance of artistic freedom.

Several award recipients drew explicit parallels between current political pressures and the McCarthy era, suggesting that the lessons of that period remain urgently relevant. The global audience for *Good Night, and Good Luck* and the political dimension of the 2025 Tony Awards demonstrate that these historical events remain living history, constantly reinterpreted considering current concerns. As we continue to navigate tensions between individual conscience and collective responsibility, between artistic freedom and political accountability, the stories offer not answers but essential questions that each generation must confront anew.

In an era of renewed political polarization, examining this history helps us understand the institutional mechanisms of persecution and the personal dilemmas faced by those caught in such systems. Perhaps most importantly, it reminds us that moral courage is rarely simple and that historical judgment should be tempered with an understanding of the intense pressures faced by individuals in extraordinary circumstances.

28 J. Poniewozik, “Murrow’s Moment”, *Time Magazine* (October 17, 2005), 64.

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THE RIGHT TO SAY “NO”

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BIO
Maria Lelea, born on February 16, 1998, in Pancevo, Serbia, is an actress and a PhD candidate in Performing Arts at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. Since 2023, she has also been a student at Politehnica University of Timișoara, majoring in Communication and Public Relations. She completed her undergraduate studies at West University of Timișoara, specializing in Performing Arts, before moving to Sibiu for her master's degree in Acting. She has performed in a variety of roles and many of them marked an essential step in defining her doctoral research topic. Recognizing the contemporary importance of rewriting and redefining female characters, she initiated her PhD thesis on Hypostases of Femininity in Contemporary Theatre.

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ABSTRACT
This article tackles topics such as the freedom to choose at the beginning of one's career, psychological balance, proposing alternatives (working with a female director, dramatization, or monodrama performance) or the courage to have a voice at the beginning of one's career. The desire to act, the pressure to find a place in a theatre as quickly as possible, coupled with the huge competition, the sheer number of graduates and the scarcity of places can be a real drama for young actors – where their voice can be suppressed. The cares of life turn the initial desire to be on stage into a survival instinct.

KEYWORDS
mental health, feminism, choice, voice, emancipation

Introduction

After three years of research, I realized the importance of personal experience in an academic study in theatre, which led me to formulate my research directions from my own questions about my status or career as an actress. In this article, I chose to address two topics: the extent to which freedom of choice exists at the beginning of a career and how this limitation influences the mental health of the young actress. I also present some artistic alternatives for young actresses, again based on my own artistic research. But perhaps the most powerful motivation of this article is to empower female voices. When one person chooses to tell her story, she can empower someone else to do the same. What does feminist research mean? It is important to emphasize that feminism, in contemporaneity, has become fluid. There is no single definition. Just as there is no one way of being feminist. Lizabeth Goodman talks about this fluidity: "If there was ever any agreement on what feminism is, that agreement was not adequately recorded in any source book I can locate. I know from experience that the term is used differently in the United States and Britain, and from one generation of women to another. This being the case, it is not practical

to expect (much less demand) clarity or uniformity of opinion in a cross-cultural study of feminist theatres. Even if there was once some agreement on the definition of the term 'feminist theatre, there is no such agreement in the 1990s. The point is simple: there is not one feminism, nor one feminist theatre. Each form of feminism and of theatre can be studied in relation to the idea that 'feminist theatre' is itself a form of cultural representation influenced by changes in the geographies of feminism, women's studies, economics, politics, and cultural studies."¹

For me, feminism cannot exist without the right to say *no* and the freedom to choose. In 1949 Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*: "For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women; and it is not new. Enough ink has been spilled in quarrelling over feminism, and perhaps we should say no more about it. It is still talked about."² But apparently, almost a hundred years later, feminism is still being debated, especially in the theatre. Thus, the importance of conducting research on the voice of the young actress at the beginning of her career have come into view. Tackling this issue through thorough documentation and extensive

¹ Lizabeth Goodman, *Contemporary Feminist Theatre - To Each Her Own* (Routledge, 2003), 3.

² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. & ed. H. M. Parshley (Jonathan Cape, 1953), 13.

research is absolutely necessary. It is a topic that is very much discussed in the media, in *social media*, in coffee shops or backstage, being an extremely important issue for actresses. What I set out to do with this article was to articulate these thoughts within a theoretical and academic framework. Therefore, I focus on three important directions: freedom of choice at the beginning of a career, mental health, and artistic alternatives for young actresses.

When we talk about turning an occupation into a profession, there are some essential aspects, such as community recognition, specific knowledge, the existence of specialized schools and the *code of ethics*. We thus understand that ethics and morality underpin the professions, and the acting profession should be no exception. To be treated fairly, equitably, to be respected and appreciated are the foundations of inclusive theatre. And the first step towards this ideal is the freedom to say *no* and the courage to make your voice heard from the very beginning of your career.

Freedom of choice in the career of a young actress

Freedom of choice in a young actress' career is a complex subject, because it involves both personal freedom and industry constraints. Every young actress dream of

complex scores, renowned male directors and female directors, a safe and positive space at rehearsals, fair pay, and truly rewarding projects. But the current situation is difficult: there are many actors, few auditions, and even fewer positions in state theatres. Thus, young actors end up accepting small roles, any directors, unprofessional, negative working environments, little money, and performances made just for the sake of being made. Unfortunately, at the beginning of an actress' career, the freedom to choose roles is restricted. Also, in order not to be labelled difficult or sensitive, young actresses choose to remain silent in the face of injustice. Moreover, in the current context, tackling issues often associated with progressive discourse, such as feminism, often means taking a stance that may be viewed with reluctance or even hostility. The writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie underlines this ambivalence with a childhood story: "I was about fourteen. We were in his house, arguing, [...] I remember that as I argued and argued, Okoloma looked at me and said, «You know, you're a feminist». It was not a compliment. I could tell from his tone – the same tone with which a person would say, «You're a supporter of terrorism»."³ As a result of the research, I have created a strong connection between the complete actress and

3 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *We should all be feminists* (Vintage, 2014), 2.

activism. Young actresses concerned with social causes want roles in social theatre, complex female characters, and productions with strong messages. But such roles and projects are not always available, so young actresses accept what they are offered – even if it is not what they dreamed of. There are many reasons for this: the need to gain experience, lack of financial stability or the simple desire to act. When the desire to be an actress is linked to the need to bring about change, it is difficult to accept projects that do not have such a stake. Moral sacrifices can have negative effects on mental health and self-esteem.

It can be observed that the sacrifices of an actor are mainly divided between the value of the quality of the projects and their material value. Only a good understanding of one's own values and principles can give us the necessary clarity to discern between unavoidable sacrifices and those that one is willing to make consciously, without compromising one's identity or dignity. This process is even more important at the beginning of our careers, when external pressures, industry expectations and the desire for affirmation can distort our perception of the right and healthy choices for the long term. Many aspects of freedom of choice at the start of a career are relevant to both actresses and actors. But it is also important to raise an issue that

is much more salient for women, namely abuse and harassment.

These experiences, common in both drama schools and theatres, not only limit a young actress's options, but can profoundly influence her perception of her own professional and personal worth. This can sometimes lead to compromises that should not become the norm for a young actress. Therefore, any discussion about freedom of choice in career must also consider the context of power, vulnerability, and protection mechanisms available in the industry.

The theatre world is characterized by power imbalances, a chasm that becomes all the deeper for young actresses. In order not to upset or miss an opportunity, young actresses are at a much higher risk of accepting unfavourable working conditions, such as accepting harassment, abusive directors, or toxic working environments. Moreover, for the same reasons, young actresses will be less vocal about the abuse and harassment they experience. Perhaps the most important lesson to learn early in our careers is that we can say *no* too. We have been taught that *saying no and having credibility* is linked to notoriety. Which is false, because every woman, no matter how young or just starting out, deserves to be believed and to be able to share her story. To be able to build our own artistic voice, it is important to have

the strength to refuse problematic roles, abusive directors or toxic spaces that perpetuate sexism and discrimination. Moreover, it is only through the strength of our stories that we can combat all the stereotypes that encourage abusers. The problem is that reality is nuanced and there are many risks when we talk about the abuse we have experienced. In our society, *victim blaming* is prevalent. This phenomenon occurs when a person who has suffered abuse or injustice is held partly or totally responsible for what has happened to them. In the context of stalking and abuse, this phenomenon occurs when people suggest that the victim “*had it coming*” through their behaviour, outfit, or decisions. *Victim blaming* can discourage victims from talking about their experiences and seeking help, thus perpetuating the abuse. It is a mechanism that protects abusers and maintains a climate of silence.

Women who go through abuse are either not believed, blamed, or have their experiences minimized. It becomes even more difficult for a woman already traumatized by abuse to talk about what she has experienced. The risks do not just stop at the woman’s reputation, but can have significant effects on the actress’s career, often she may

be labelled as exaggerated or have her career sabotaged by her abuser. In today’s society and especially in theatre, raising the issue of abuse usually has negative effects for the victim. This reflects the incipient stage of these discussions in our public space, as Cristina Modreanu points out: “If in the United States political correctness and the positive discrimination it generates are increasingly challenged, after having fulfilled its role of balancing the social plane, the path we are on is only just beginning.”⁴

Mental health of the young actress

By addressing mental health openly, it can create a safe environment for actresses, encouraging them to talk about their experiences and seek help. This can promote a culture of empathy and understanding, both within the theatre community and among audiences. Mental health has become a recurring theme in contemporary drama, particularly in the typology of the *victim of society*. But then the next question arises – if we can talk about *mental health* on stage, why is it less talked about off stage? Fredrika Thelandersson analyses the importance of celebrities talking about mental health:

“We examine celebrities who

4 Cristina Modreanu, *The Gladiator Butterfly. Political, queer and feminist theater on Romanian Stage* (Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2016), 80: „Dacă în Statele Unite corectitudinea politică și discriminarea pozitivă generată de aceasta sunt contestate tot mai des, după ce și-a îndeplinit în bună parte rolul de a echilibra planul social, drumul pe care ne aflăm noi e de abia la început” (my translation).

have spoken out about their own struggles with mental illness and explored themes of sadness and weakness in their work. The logic at work in celebrity confession is that when a famous person comes out and reveals that they are suffering they communicate to fans that it is okay to feel that way. [...] We see an increase of ordinariness of celebrities, who now have to maintain the relationship with their fans via myriad social media channels that put excessive focus on intimacy and realness, a framework within which being open about mental illness becomes an enhancing feature of an authentic brand rather than something to be ashamed of."⁵

The mental health of young actresses is a broad topic, not limited to abuse. We can refer to different aspects such as sacrifices, stereotypical roles, the feeling of emptiness when projects don't come up, the constant pressure of being chosen or rejected, strong competition, malicious backstage gossip and slander, things that a classical professional doesn't have to face.

When talking about the mental health of actresses, the most often used example is Marilyn Monroe, the actress being a symbol of the unwarranted fears and insecurities experienced by actresses. Thoughts about identity, ambitions, meanings

of the profession, lack of talent or depth are issues that every actress faces at least once in her life.

"In the biographical record, Monroe's suffering - taking as its form chronic self-doubt, an unstable sense of self, and a seeming inability to forge healthy relationships - is framed as fundamentally connected to her professional role as a performing woman. Above all, Monroe is presented in terms of her seeming inability to formulate a stable, coherent identity [...]

In such narratives, the creation of an alternate identity becomes a strategy designed to mask an essential emptiness. The notion of the actress as cypher, evacuated of meaning unless she is performing, recurs in fictional and biographical representations of the actress."⁶

As a first step, external factors need to be analysed. The financial situation is a constant concern for society, but it can be even more difficult for people in the arts. As we all know, very many actors leave university every year, but very few positions in state theatres become vacant in a year. Thus, most young actors find themselves in the situation of being independent, working either in independent theatres or on projects in state theatres. Even with the good fortune of having several premieres a year and many performances a month,

5 Fredrika Thelandersson, *21st Century Media and Female Mental Health* (Springer International Publishing, 2021), 21.

6 Fiona Gregory, *Actresses and Mental Illness. Histrionic Heroines* (Routledge, 2018), 1.

there is the problem of stability.

Without a basic monthly salary, the young actor lacks financial security, which can lead to chronic anxiety, intense emotional stress, and even mental exhaustion. *The lack of a stable income* can lead to a constant state of uncertainty, which affects the ability to concentrate and creativity – two essential aspects of the acting profession.

This brings us to the second important aspect of mental health: *fatigue* and *artistic compromise*.

The lack of a stable income can push young actors to find a second job, not always correlated with acting. It is a huge disappointment when after three or five years of studies one must work as a sales assistant, courier, or children's party entertainer. In such situations it is obvious that the actor's work with themselves takes second place. Creativity, emotions, motivation, and self-confidence can be inhibited and thus affect the young actor's artistic path. When financial survival becomes the priority, the energy and time needed for artistic development is diminished. Also, lack of constant practice can result in loss of confidence, performance anxiety and perhaps the most difficult emotional aspect - the feeling of being disconnected from your vocation.

In the long term, this imbalance can cause many talented actors to give up their artistic careers, not for lack

of passion, but because of a system that does not offer them security and support. Another option for survival would be *artistic sacrifices*, equally hard on an actor's soul and mind. Every actor wants to play strong characters, play complex parts, work with famous directors, and have valuable projects. But due to the external factors previously discussed, artistic compromises begin to appear – such as entertainment shows, stereotypical characters, insignificant roles in commercial productions, voice-over work, advertisements that offer no artistic challenge, collaborations in mediocre projects, or appearances in entertainment programs solely for the sake of visibility. The distance such projects create between the aspirations with which the young actor started out and reality is painful.

There are also certain aspects of mental health that are more prominent in actresses, such as *physical appearance*. In our research we looked in detail at beauty in theatre and whether it is an *asset* or a *challenge*. But it is important to emphasize again the pressure of physical appearance, because physical stereotyping in the casting process is much more common among young actresses. These physical stereotypes have a strong influence on the mental health of the young actress, as they not only limit the diversity of roles, but

also create immense pressures on the psyche and reinforce gender roles. The actress's relationship with her body can be conflictual, with the feeling that her own body is a necessary tool for professional success rather than an integral part of her artistic identity. Emphasizing gender roles encourages superficial views of women's representation on stage and artistic discrimination. It is important to emphasize that these stereotypes have effects both on actresses (anxiety, body dysmorphia, eating disorders) and on the female audience – who often do not feel that are represented on stage. We cannot address the mental health of young actresses without bringing up abuses in the theatre world. Young actresses are perhaps the most susceptible and vulnerable to abuse. Abuse can take different forms, from sexual harassment, blackmail, emotional manipulation to discrimination and professional exploitation. But they all have the same consequence: *trauma*. The trauma of being in a position where you can't say no, of not being believed, or even listened to, can have permanent effects on a young actress's psyche and soul. *The Rise Project* team writes on their website: "Most cases go unreported. Victims are discouraged from filing complaints against their abusers, they are stigmatized and blamed."⁷

Still, we are living in a time when women's voices in the theatre world are gaining courage. Many actresses are speaking out publicly about the abuse they have suffered and calling for abusers to be held accountable: Katia Pascariu, Ilinca Manolache, Ada Galeș, Ana Ularu. Here we are again mentioning well-known names, but let's not forget that the real heroines are the young actresses – actresses we have not heard of, but who have the courage to confront their abusers.

Artistic alternatives for young actresses

We often hear the expression "Art is subjective". But such expressions are common knowledge. Scientific knowledge shows us that not all arts have the same degree of subjectivity. In music, for example, talent is much easier to identify. So are mistakes – we hear if someone is under-toned, singing off-key or has lost a beat. In the visual arts, we see if proportions are wrong, perspectives don't line up or details are inaccurate. Theatre has a greater degree of subjectivity. While there are various technical and objective aspects of an actor's talent, such as voice, diction or rhythm, the main characteristics of talent in the performing arts are hard to define and hard to quantify. How can we measure on a fair and objective

⁷ Rise Project, ABUZ Chair - Rise Project, accessed: 27.02.2025: "Majoritatea cazurilor nu sunt reclamate. Victimele sunt descurajate să depună plângeri împotriva agresorilor, sunt stigmatizate și blamate." (my translation).

scale the emotion, energy, charisma, intuition, or vulnerability of an actor? And it is precisely this strong subjectivity that defines theatre that also causes many injustices. This sub-chapter aims to identify some alternatives in combating the stereotypes and injustices that a young actress may encounter at the beginning of her career. We will focus on three aspects, which meant enormously for my artistic path when I finished my studies – *dramatizations or adaptations, monodrama performance and collaboration with female directors*. The first dramatization I made was in my third year, for my undergraduate monodrama, an adaptation of Aglaja Veteranyi's *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*. The freedom to choose my own text, to have some form of control over the character I play and to create a text on my own vision of what my career could look like. In the summer of 2021, I read the book *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F*, a true story based on the life of Christiane F.⁸ The topic of addiction is important to me, and Christiane's character instantly appealed to me. I decided to make a new dramatization, this time a much more complex – to serve as the basis for a one-woman show. I did my research, I read and reread, wrote, and rewrote. Within a few

months, I had the text *Noi, copiii cu aripi* (*We, the Children with Wings*). The text gave me the chance to get closer to social theatre, which I had been dreaming of since my first year at university. Then, almost by chance, I met Mariana Cămărășan, who accepted my proposal to stage this text written by me. The sense of power I felt that year was like nothing else – I wrote the text, I made the proposal, I was in control of my destiny. And more than that, I felt that by choosing the theme I could really help through my art. I travelled a lot with this show, I participated in various festivals, and it was taken over by the independent theatre *unteatru* Bucharest.

Dramatization and monodrama performance are valuable tools for an actor, both as a form of career control and as a true performance exercise. Alina Nelega talks about the importance of monodrama for an actor: "Monodrama, we would say, is the only one that really offers compensation to the actor who is eager to play «meaty» characters - for if we can talk of a performance at the level of the actor, as we talk today about «text» or «director's» performances, monodrama is definitely the actor's own performance, the character's chance to get back on stage in one form or another."⁹

8 Christiane F. (Christiane Vera Felscherinow) is the author of the autobiography *Zoo Station: The Story of Christiane F. (Wir Kinder vom Bahnhof Zoo, 1978)*, which became a symbol of the generation affected by drugs and alienation in West Germany in the 70s. Her story was also popularized by the 1981 film adaptation.

9 Alina Nelega, *Structuri și formule de compoziție ale textului dramatic* [Structures and

Actresses, by the nature of their profession, are not characterized by authority. That is why it is so valuable for a female actress to experiment with techniques such as *dramatization* or *monodrama*, as a way of exercising the authority that is specific to the jobs of director or playwright. Also, women occupying positions, professions and jobs considered to belong to the male sphere are the most important factor in the correct representation of women in the theatre and in the development of female characters. Thus, the characters approach the female experience and the *female gaze*, as opposed to the *male gaze* that has dominated theatre and cinema until now. If we want to offer realistic representations of female experiences, it can be very advantageous to seek to work with female directors. The influence of women in dramaturgy, directing and production is major: they create *gender balanced* casts, increase the choice of roles for actresses, bring a new emotional and aesthetic perspective, bring theatre closer to the female experience and offer positive and realistic representations of women. By looking at women in roles of power, one can see an equalization of opportunities, rethinking gender roles and

presenting positive role models for the younger generation.

Combating stereotypes on stage and bringing the female perspective closer is possible, especially by choosing a team with similar values.

It is very important for women to help and support each other, that's why working with female directors, young women of our generation or established female directors, is a form of feminism and progressivism. Building relationships is more important now than ever.

At the same time, the chance to get to know different people in the industry is also much bigger than in the past – conferences, festivals, or even *social media*.

Through smart choices we can minimize artistic sacrifices, work on meaningful projects, be proud of our results, and enjoy psychological balance, even at the beginning of our careers. Tools such as dramatization, adaptation, monodrama performance, forming beneficial relationships or supporting other women can be extremely valuable for a young actress. At the same time, let's not forget that such choices can also be transformative for our female audiences, because after all, the choice of acting is deeply about empathy and people. Melissa

Formulas of Dramatic Text Composition] (Eikon Publishing House, 2010), 12: "Monodrama, am spune noi, este singura care oferă cu adevărat o compensație actorului dornic să interpreteze personaje «cu carne» - căci dacă putem vorbi despre un spectacol la nivelul actorului, așa cum vorbim azi de spectacole «de text» sau «de regizor», monodrama este categoric spectacolul de autor al actorului, șansa personajului de a ajunge din nou, într-o formă sau alta, pe scenă." (my translation).

Silveister talks about the first time she saw a Barbara Streisand movie (the movie *Yentl*): “The movie ended, and people started to get up, but I stayed glued to my seat. As the credits rolled, I saw something that I had never seen before. A woman’s name everywhere. I probably had never thought about it, but seeing it had a profound effect on me.

This woman was the producer, the director, the co-writer, the star, and the singer. Whatever you might think about the movie, you can’t help but be impressed with the feat she accomplished.”¹⁰ It is essential to realize that a career path can also take this form, and to refuse to submit to patriarchal boundaries, because a positive choice can have a huge effect on other women’s choices. That means progress.

Tudor Vianu says that “The theatrical art requires multiple collaboration, a chain of synergistic efforts.

Theatre is an image and symbol of society, a social microcosmos.

We all learn what society is and what it demands of each of us by watching and reflecting on a theatre performance.”¹¹ And in this social microcosmos, everyone’s voice must be heard. Whether we’re talking about the casting process, freedom of choice, or sanity, it’s very important to remember

that our voice is important while we’re a student, and a month after graduating from college, and when we win a major award. The right to use our voice, to be heard and believed is a fundamental right. It is in no way conditioned by achievement, notoriety, age, or fame. No one can be brave all the time, and vulnerability is part of the human experience. When one person dares to speak up, resist or act, it can give someone else the strength to do the same. That is why it is important to remember that when we tell our story or speak out about abuse, we are not just telling it to ourselves. Our story can help and save other women. Looking at the professional pressures at the beginning of our careers, it cannot be ignored that there are various means through which we can have some form of control, such as dramatizations, performing in monodramas or working with female directors. There are always solutions, and we can always say no. Being an actress is not just about being chosen – a complete actress chooses in turn.

¹⁰ Melissa Silveister, *In Her Voice* (Open Road Distribution, 2015), 1.

¹¹ Tudor Vianu, *Scriseri despre teatru* (Eminescu Publishing House, 1977), 71: „Arta teatrală cere o colaborare multiplă, o înlănțuire de eforturi sinergice. Teatrul este o imagine și un simbol al societății, un microcosmos social. Învățăm cu toții ce este societatea și ce anume cere ea fiecăruia din noi, asistând și meditănd la un spectacol de teatru.” (my translation).

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BENEATH THE NEON LIGHT: THE ANATOMY OF A LOST AND FOUND ORCHARD

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This article investigates the manifestations of the *new sincerity* on the contemporary Romanian stage, with a particular focus on *Am avut o Livadă*, a theatrical production directed by Eugen Jebeleanu. The play blends Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* with a modern text by Yann Verburgh, recontextualizing Chekhov's themes within the socio-political reality of post-communist Romania. Characters from Chekhov's original are intertwined with contemporary figures, creating a polyphonic narrative that reveals generational trauma, fluid identities, and emotional dislocation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Erika Fischer-Lichte, special attention is given to the interplay between presence and absence, as well as the transformation of actor-audience dynamics, embodiment and corporeality on stage, and the symbolic spatial design.

postmodernism, new sincerity, metamodernism, intermediality, transition, fragmentation, liminal space

"Theatre with a message, with commitment, with responsibility, but not with... grimness."¹ This is how Eugen Jebeleanu described his theatrical style in an interview with Ioan Big in 2022. Thus, we are talking about responsible, purposeful theatre. In this article, I aim to explore manifestations of *new sincerity* on the Romanian stage, focusing my analysis on the performance *We Had an Orchard*². This performance is a blend of a classic Chekhovian drama³ and a contemporary text signed by Yann Verburgh⁴, that sheds an entirely new light on the original material. The play probes the collective memory of the restitution processes of the 1990s – of lost and reclaimed spaces, but also of borders – be they geographic, mental, or imaginary – that generate tensions between the real and the symbolic, between identity and alterity. In this inquiry, I will reflect on the notion of authenticity as a fluid construct, which I will attempt to outline through a set of criteria meant to guide the reader's reflection toward this new sincerity and what it truly means to recognize a play as authentic.

Viewing *We Had an Orchard* through a variety of theoretical lenses, I will argue that it serves as a paradigmatic example of authentic theatre. In *Being and Time*⁵, Heidegger defines authenticity as a target we strive toward, but never fully achieve. Continuing this line of thought, I assert that authentic theatre manifests through a transgression of conventions and a total disregard for any form of artistic "label" – if we can call it as such. These acts of rebellion are constantly metamorphosed, profoundly influenced by the climate of their time, continually reshaping the idea of authenticity. How, then, can authenticity be achieved on today's Romanian stage? We can no longer speak of directing in the traditional, hierarchical sense – the director as a divine architect – but instead we focus on collective creation, on the meeting of multiple creators (directors, playwrights, actors, set designers, etc.), each carrying their own obsessions. From this exchange, from this dialogue of sensitivities, emerges the authenticity we seek to capture. This new sincerity – marked by emotional honesty and

1 Ioan Big, "CLIN D'OEIL | EUGEN JEBELEANU: «Fac teatru și film cu mesaj, cu responsabilitate, dar nu cu încrâncenare», " in *Zile și nopți*, published on June 8, 2022, <https://zilesinopti.ro/2022/06/08/interviu-cu-eugen-jebeleanu-fac-teatru-si-film-cu-mesaj-cu-responsabilitate-dar-nu-cu-incrancenare/>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

2 A performance directed by Eugen Jebeleanu, which premiered on October 20, 2023, at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest.

3 *The Cherry Orchard* (1903), the last play written by Anton Chekhov.

4 Translated from French by Diana Nechit.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, English translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson from the seventh German edition (Blackwell Publishers, 1967), 223.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



a radical openness to one's own vulnerability – is brought to the forefront. Directors, particularly those creating in publicly funded theatres, must speak “about people in low-income jobs or from the LGBT minority because they all contributed to these subsidies.”⁶ Contemporary theatre thus articulates a responsibility to reflect the current socio-cultural reality, integrating political and ideological narratives, embracing intermediality, and cultivating a deep awareness of societal needs. This shift aligns with broader cultural and theoretical developments. Critic Jim Collins introduced the concept of “new sincerity”⁷ into film criticism in his 1993 essay, *Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity*, where he contrasts ironic eclecticism with an earnest embrace of stylistic conventions. Similarly, David Foster Wallace – who challenged postmodernism's reliance on irony – argued that irony deconstructs without offering alternatives, making the turn toward sincerity a necessary evolution. Scholars have coined terms such as “post-postmodernism” to capture this

cultural moment, including currents like altermodernism, digimodernism, and metamodernism. Among them, metamodernism stands out for placing new sincerity at its core – an approach that serves as the theoretical framework for this discussion.

The analysis will be structured into three interdependent sections which function like layers of a painting, where each intervention builds on the previous. The first step is an analysis of the ideas introduced by playwright Yann Verburgh, along with the reconfigurations of Chekhovian characters and new dramatic entities, focusing on their relational structures. This first part will act almost like a scenic recipe, in which the dramaturgical ingredients are tied together by subtle tensions. The second section will explore the dimension of corporeality – the relationship between gesture, movement, and body – drawing on Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of performance, posthumanist philosophy, metamodernism⁸, and queer studies. Here, the actor is viewed as a rhizomatic presence, constantly oscillating between

6 Eugen Jebeleanu in Ionuț Mareș, „Eugen Jebeleanu: «Trebuie să scuturăm spectatorul prin povești la care nu a avut acces până acum»,” in *Films in Frame*, published on September 14, 2021, <https://www.filmsinframe.com/ro/interviu/interviu-regizor-eugen-jebeleanu/>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

7 See Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (Routledge, 1993).

8 In *Notes on Metamodernism*, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define metamodernism as a cultural sensibility characterized by a dynamic oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. Rather than offering a fixed theory, they emphasize a fluid, essayistic approach that reflects the nonlinear and open nature of contemporary experience.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



becoming and dissolution. Next comes spatiality – set design, sound, and cultural echoes that sneak in, sometimes subtly, other times frontally. Here, the fragility of the idea of space becomes visible. Space is no longer just a setting, but a conundrum; it is permeable, always between demarcation and dissolution, continuing the meditation on borders. The performance oscillates between two narrative cores and the universes of the characters that animate them. On one side, we find eight figures from *The Cherry Orchard* – Liubov Andreevna, Ania (Ioana Bugarin), Varia (Eduard Trifa), Lopakhin (Ruxandra Maniu), Gaev (Alexandru Papadopol), Trofimov (Nicoleta Lefter), Charlotta (Simona Popescu), and Firs (Diana Gheorghian); on the other, six characters from Verburch's contemporary text – Daniela (played by Elvira Deatcu, who also embodies Liubov Andreevna, becoming the densest point of confluence between the two worlds), her son Matei (Niko Becker, who becomes, through symbolic allusions, a possible double of Grisha, Liubov's drowned child), Cati (Alina Berzunțeanu, see Fig. 8), Daniela's sister, who emigrated to the West eighteen years ago in search of a new life, Paul and Radu, her husband and son (Gabriel Pintilei and Vlad Bîrzanu), and finally the sisters'

uncle, Bruno (Ionel Mihăilescu), who is better revealed in a late autobiographical monologue. Among these characters, a red thread materializes, gradually revealing each one's personal trauma. Between Daniela and Matei (see Fig. 3), a Freudian dynamic develops, marked by ambiguous maternal-filial tensions and unresolved emotional frustrations. The relationship between Matei and Cati – his biological mother who abandoned him when she left the country – adds another layer of pain and alienation, infused with a persistent sense of rejection. Tension also mounts between the two stepbrothers, Matei and Radu, a relationship marred by deep jealousy, where each covets exactly what the other seems to have: love, validation, a sense of belonging. This performance perhaps offers the most ingenious ways in which the director and playwright explore the notions of presence and absence, invoking not just corporeality but the actors' very identities. According to the playwright, this piece is part of a trilogy with two other productions directed by Eugen Jebeleanu – *Itineraries* (2019 premiere) and *The Seagull* (2022 premiere): "These three shows are like three paintings revolving around the subject of theatre."⁹ Thus, Niko Becker not only plays with his scene partners like a puppeteer (recalling

⁹ Taken from the program brochure of the performance.

Fig. 5



Fig. 6



his portrayal of Treplev) in acts III and IV, marked in chalk on a blackboard placed on one of the bar walls, but he also spars with the audience. He establishes what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls a “a special relationship with the spectators, a particular bond sensed physically as a kind of energy flowing back and forth between actor and spectators.”¹⁰ Matei / Becker addresses the audience during his most vulnerable moments – he descends from the stage and tells us about his mother and friends who use the bar to stage their own *Cherry Orchard* – anchoring us in the space we are in and inviting us to closely observe what follows. In a way, we witness a genuine theatre directing seminar – an intentional choice. Jebeleanu creates theatre for a *connoisseur* audience, attentive to detail, capable of recognizing the subtleties of scenic language. Just like Treplev, who wears that seagull’s head, Matei undergoes his own becoming in a hybrid form – man-animal. Charlotta (see Fig. 1), one of the Chekhovian characters able to migrate between the two worlds, engages with Matei directly in the bar, asking him for a bag of peanuts to feed her dog. After he gives them to her, she starts throwing them chaotically around the room, irritating him. After several attempts to stop her, Matei

ends up transforming into a dog himself, enacting a kind of Lacanian mirroring, this version of him taking shape like a hallucination or a dream, as a doubled reflection of the bodily image. If the spectator closed their eyes, it would be impossible to distinguish between actor and animal – that is how authentic the metamorphosis was. The level of embodiment that Niko Becker achieves is extraordinary, making it almost impossible to differentiate between the actor’s semiotic body and his phenomenal one: “Presence is produced by particular processes of embodiment, which are able to bring forth anew the phenomenal body of the actor as an energetic body and, at the same time, his semiotic body as a representation of a dramatic figure. However, it is conceivable that processes of embodiment performed by the actor or performer re-create his phenomenal body as an energetic body and thus produce presence in the strong sense of the concept, without representing any figure or anything else.”¹¹ This moment of transformation not only showcases the actor’s remarkable physicality but also gestures toward the deeper thematic current of identity as mutable and contingent – a thread that continues to unravel in what follows.

10 Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Appearing as Embodied Mind – Defining a Weak, a Strong, and a Radical Concept of Presence,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks (Routledge, 2012), 104.

11 *Ibid.*, 112.



Fig. 8



From this moment on, another essential dimension unfolds: the awareness that we are witnessing a disoriented character, willing to become whatever the other demands. This theme of fluid identity profoundly reflects the lived experiences of Romania's 1990s sacrifice generation – marked by anxiety, uncertainty, and a deep crisis of direction. When this man-animal body returns to his human form, Matei and Charlotta share a kiss, followed by an erotic scene. This moment recalls Donna Haraway's definition of our condition as companion species: "We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a natural cultural legacy."¹² This intimate moment between Matei and Charlotta becomes an expression of mutual recognition in alterity. In a gesture of fusing differences, distinct bodies, significantly *other*, enter a relationship of co-creation, embodying exactly what Haraway calls a "natural-cultural legacy" – a

form of love that is not natural, but tense, ambivalent, sometimes even destructive. Sexuality, in this context, does not appear as a solution but as a symptom: of confusion, of the need for meaning, of the desire to be defined through the *other*.

Of course, from the perspective of the man-animal body, we can also view Matei through a Deleuzian lens – as a body without organs¹³. Matei uses his traditionally organized body – the "organism", a holistic construction that stores, internalizes, and reproduces trauma, norms, and socially imposed behaviours – as a territory of intensities – a surface that pulses and revolts against imposed discipline, which, as Deleuze notes, "regiments and constrains the subject."¹⁴ As in Artaud's vision, this corporeality finds its "true place" not through transcendence, but through an upside-down dance – visceral, unpredictable, liberating¹⁵. Thus, Matei *deconstructs himself* on stage, exploring the limits of what a body can become beyond memory, trauma, and language, only to rebuild himself later. More constructively, "postmodernism comes to the animal as a reminder of the limits of human understanding, and also of the value of working

12 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.

13 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Continuum Publishing Group, 2004).

14 *Ibid.*, 116.

15 Antonin Artaud, "To Have Done with the Judgment of God," in *Surrealism Plays*, 1947. <https://www.surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10



at those limits"¹⁶ – the emerging figure of this exploration, which Steven Baker calls "the postmodern animal"¹⁷, is a cultural product of a post-Cartesian, ecological, neo-totemist worldview that rejects dualistic thinking and oppositional taxonomies in favour of models emphasizing complexity and dynamism.

Another significant difference between this production and a traditional one lies in the casting: certain male roles – Lopakhin, Firs, and Trofimov – are played by women, while Varia, a female character, is played by a man. These directorial choices do not necessarily follow a narrative logic but are conceived rather as a form of poetic expression. Ruxandra Maniu manages to render Lopakhin's characteristic crudeness with remarkable precision, but through a Western lens – we see in Lopakhin a kind of Stanley Kowalski¹⁸, a resentful man who can be charming when it suits him, embodying a toxic masculinity reimaged for a more nuanced reality. In the case of Firs, it is pleasing that beyond the grumpy butler stereotype, he is also allowed to express a playful side, albeit only in Matei's presence. Although there is no physical resemblance between

Diana Gheorghian and Chekhov's imagined Firs, the actress captures the archetype of the loyal servant and his inner complexity. Trofimov, the eternal student, gains in Nicoleta Lefter's interpretation a dreamy, almost utopian aura that revives his characteristic idealism but adapted to a painful present where ideals are crushed by harsh everyday life. His relationship with Ania expresses a love freed from traditional constraints and prohibitions, offering a new vision of romance. This production is not a coming-out play addressed to a heterosexual audience hoping for understanding or acceptance. As the director notes, the presence of love in queer couples appears naturally on stage – just as it exists in real life, without the need for justification. While there have been other attempts to portray lesbianism in Romanian theatre, many unfortunately confirm Monique Wittig's hypothesis that such representations are essentially products of the "straight mind."¹⁹ This approach to diversity fails to transcend the limits imposed by hegemonic heterosexual norms, and in this sense, performative approaches often maintain the same dominant structures of power and representation. Varia

16 Una Chaudhuri, "Animal Rites: Performing Beyond the Human," in *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (The University of Michigan Press, 2015), 507.

17 Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (Reaktion, 2000), 16.

18 Character from *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. He is Stella's husband.

19 Monique Wittig, "The Straight Mind," in *Feminist Issues*, vol. 1, 1980.

(see Fig. 5) embodies all symbols of masculinity, but with a twist – she wears heels and exudes an uninhibited corporeality, devoid of remorse, becoming a true focal point that amplifies the performance's expressive originality.

The set design by Velica Panduru is infused with cultural references, blending a recognizable atmosphere evocative of the Lynchian universe with a subtle reminiscence of the painting *Nighthawks*²⁰ (see Fig. 10), through the architectural detail of the bar, with its precise and contrasting angles. The artwork displayed on the walls amplifies this ambiguity, placing us under the vigilant gaze of the Madonna. The scenographic choices create a space in which the cultural and social context is authentically reflected, featuring representative elements of that era – slot machines, wooden bead curtains, an old TV broadcasting news from a semi-recent reality, and the neon sign *La Vișini café bar*. Within this atmosphere, the way the characters interact with the space becomes a performative act in itself. The music, curated by Remi Billardon, plays a central role in structuring affectivity, marking emotionally intense moments, and supporting the narrative's intimate or liberating progression. This soundtrack, which seems to moderate the fluctuations of the performance's

intensity, allows the characters to build their portraits, settling into the story where they feel most at ease, after a continuous search.

A striking example of this is Cati, who – following a tense interaction with Matei, just after he has learned that she is, in fact, his mother – breaks down. Through a contortion, both physical and psychological, she stretches out on the floor and goes into spasms, accompanied by Billardon's musical choice, *Wild Is the Wind* by Nina Simone.

These moments of emotional release unfold with an almost ritual intensity, perfectly in sync with the atmosphere created. Another example of an emotional outburst or acting-out through music is offered by Matei, who expresses himself through percussion (see Fig. 6 and 7). The echoes of the past and future are present in the way he strikes the wood against the metal of the drums, and his rhythm seems to resonate from the depths of the self, striving to release a sorrow that has been quietly accumulating.

This act of reconciliation with oneself is a deeply felt tension – almost suffocating – but profoundly meaningful, perfectly complementing the complexity of the characters and the narrative.

We Had an Orchard goes beyond a simple adaptation of Chekhov's play, offering an interpretation that explores, with intensity and depth,

20 Edward Hopper's painting, *Nighthawks*, 1942.

the contemporary dilemmas of exile. Just as Yann Verburgh has superimposed Chekhov's orchard onto the Romania of those who left, the performance rekindles an acute emotional and cultural tension, where the roots of the past meet the reality of those who have departed. Here, the strength of the production lies not only in the recognition of the text but in how it becomes a vehicle for exploring both collective and personal memory.

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Appendices

Photographs taken by Sabina Costinel for the Odeon Theatre Bucharest. <https://teatrul-odeon.ro/spectacol/am-avut-olivada/> (accessed: April 22, 2025).





Ali Deac in *Tattoo*, directed by Radu Afrim, Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu
© Florin Ghioca

TEXT-ANTITEXT. LANGUAGE- ANTILANGUAGE. ROMANIAN AND GERMAN THEATRE IN SIBIU

— **ALEXANDRU-GEORGE DEAC** —

Radu Stanca National Theatre

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This article examines the transformations of Sibiu theatre from historical, aesthetic, and pedagogical perspectives, focusing on the cultural continuity of the German theatre, the internationalization brought by the Sibiu International Theatre Festival (FITS), and the postdramatic orientation of actor training at the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. The first part analyses the identity-building and pedagogical role of the German section of the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, seen as a cultural bridge between the Habsburg past and the multicultural present. The second part explores FITS as a space of symbolic negotiation between European theatre and new performative aesthetics within the postdramatic paradigm. Finally, the article reflects on contemporary theatre pedagogy, where corporeality, stage presence, and nonverbal skills and expression become central to the actor's training process, illustrating a postdramatic vision of performance. Through this trajectory, the study argues that Sibiu theatre constitutes a vital laboratory for understanding the convergence of tradition, experimentation, and internationalization in contemporary Romanian theatre.

German-language theatre, postdramatic performance, theatre pedagogy, festival

Two stages. Two cultures

Hans-Thies Lehmann observed an aspect of postdramatic theatre that constantly recurred, regardless of the difficulty of fitting a performance into the norms, namely the way in which disobedience and self-sufficiency with respect to classical forms paradoxically became the very defining features of the genre, the very features that categorised the work as avant-garde, postdramatic, etc. We could say that we are once again faced with a cyclical phenomenon, and everything postdramatic, the visual era, the revolutionary current of the *collision of the arts*, is nothing other than a reaction to over-saturation. Postdramaticism in art and culture is nothing but a response to the hyper-intellectualisation of art and the need to change by turning back to the senses and their origins. The senses would seem to always remain faithful when the intellect may be confused, fatigued, or going through a period of transition that makes it vulnerable, as when possible parasitic elements invade it. As Lehmann states: "Theatre and drama have existed, and still exist, in a relationship of tension-ridden contradictions. To emphasise this state of affairs and consider the whole extent of its implications are the first prerequisite for an adequate understanding of the new and newest theatre. The

cognition of postdramatic theatre starts with ascertaining to what extent its existence depends on the mutual emancipation and division between drama and theatre. A genre history of drama in and of itself is therefore only of limited interest to theatre studies. Yet, since the theatre in Europe has practically and theoretically been dominated by drama, it is advisable to use the term «postdramatic» in order to relate the newer developments to the past of dramatic theatre, that is, not so much to the changes of theatre texts as to the transformation of *theatrical modes of expression*. In postdramatic forms of theatre, staged text (if text is staged) is merely a component with equal rights in a gestic, musical, visual, etc., total composition. The rift between the discourse of the text and that of the theatre can open up all the way to an openly exhibited discrepancy or even unrelatedness."¹ The kind of character similar to Tiger in *Tattoo* (the dramatic writing devised by Igor Bauersima and Réjane Desvignes, staged at the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre in Sibiu and directed by Radu Afrim) is also his quasi namesake in the Netflix film *Tiger King* (directed by Eric Goode & Rebecca Chaiklin 2019/2020). A real character, flawed, speech-impaired, aggressive towards the law and rules, deplorable in every way. *Damnably* and yet sympathetic. Imperfect

¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated and with an introduction by Karen Jürs-Munby (Routledge, 2006), 46.

and ultimately believable. This type of theatre no longer hides behind templates and clichés, but rather acknowledges a sad truth: man is unpredictable and quite hideous, but not in an interesting, noble way, not in the dramatic-tragic Richard III and the Hunchback of Notre Dame style, but in the hilarious and pathetic style of a pitiful character from Texas America called, as he calls himself, Joe Exotic. And so, the human comedy takes on cyclical, secular forms.

Sure, Tarantino is also postdramatic, in the sense that he deconstructs the historical text to make post-mortem revenge for the mistakes of history, but to do so he needs hard research and a deep regard for old forms, tradition. Without the knowledge of history, we cannot speak of avoiding the mistakes of the past for a better future, but all require an *obsession to fulfil*. It is about the ability to use all the elements, including history, archival documents, to create this kind of complete art, represented by postdramatic art. A complex art that has, of course, its defining elements even when it seems chaotic, destructive, and at this point we have to go back to Peter Brook's words that theatre is (supposedly) *present* – it cannot ignore the current, contemporary situation from any angle, be it politics or social issues, the manners and events of the time to which we belong when

dealing with theatre.²

Another fundamental point to reaffirm is that it is not the same whether you act in your mother tongue or in an adopted language. We know this from our own experience, but also from that of other actors. As an artist, mother tongue means the way words resonate in the oral cavity, and this phenomenon is directly connected to the way they resonate in the soul cavity. When we speak another language there is still a mental filter that sometimes distances us from the viscosity of the original utterance. It is difficult to touch the same chords, the same nuances in a foreign language, and even if it is not impossible, it remains a challenge. Even more praiseworthy and deserving of acclaim is the virtuosity of those who manage to reach that visceral level, despite the filter I mentioned.

The German-speaking public in Sibiu is a public that loves both classical theatre (of dramatic text) and contemporary, post-dramatic theatre in equal measure. Irrespective of the criteria of the theatre offer of the last years, classical or postdramatic theatre, the German Section has put the emphasis on the external elements of the actor (scenography, lights, sound, text), a fact justified by several reasons. One is easy to understand in the context that the

2 See Peter Brook, *The empty space* (Atheneum, 1968).

team of German-speaking actors is much smaller in number than that of the Romanian Section, and therefore the distribution of roles can sometimes be deficient or can pose a challenge for the director or the project. But there is another aspect to be considered: the type of scenography specific to postdramatic performance and all the features of this theatre are flourishing in the German Section, also because it belongs to another culture, Anglo-Saxon, which is, after all, part of the Nordic culture that laid the foundations of postdrama at a universal level. Another aspect is that this culture is trying to adapt, to survive, not being at home, and is becoming “a culture in exile” that needs more marketing policy and interesting choices to attract, persuade and retain audiences. Of course, there is an audience of middle-aged and elderly Transylvanian Saxons, as well as an increasingly significant number of young Romanian speakers of English and German. But all sorts of obstacles arise because it is not their mother tongue, as I was saying, and it seems that German civilisation would end up being blurred by everything that the specific Transylvanian and especially the Romanian language and culture entail. The text itself is sometimes hard to find or feel, when written by a German/Austrian, and is therefore perceived and pronounced

differently when interpreted by a German-speaker. Having a German-speaking audience, which represents a percentage of the population of Sibiu, of which young people represent a smaller number, which inevitably diminishes when we refer to those who attend the theatre. If we consider the fact that many of them attend predominantly the performances of the Romanian-language section, we deduce that the remaining audience for the German section is even smaller. Staging a performance based on a Shakespeare text will certainly be beneficial for a young high school student, for example, but the fact that today’s audience can be attracted with *devised theatre* (Bauersima-Desvignes), created through the exceptional artistic collaboration between director Afrim and stage designer Buhagiar, should be mentioned as an inspiring moment in the history of local theatre and beyond. At the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century one can already speak of a strong European cultural spirit brought and imposed here, in Transylvania, and especially in Sibiu, by the Saxon intelligentsia of the Habsburg Empire. The German Theatre in Sibiu, however, had already begun its historical journey in the humanist era, in the 17th century, with the amateur theatre performed in the humanist reformed gymnasiums,

religious mysteries performed in churches and travelling theatre. In 1788 the first bookshop/printer was established in Sibiu and the foundations were laid for the construction of the first theatre in this part of Europe. In the beginning, there was an open-air theatre in the city's central square, where medieval mysteries were staged and every year new technical advances were made: the stage on pulleys with a rolling scenery was a real discovery of its time, introducing the audience to the theatrical world of these performances, most of which were liturgical in nature. in *History of the Theatre* Oscar G. Brockett and Franklin J. Hildy discuss at length the historical importance that liturgical drama played in the development of the theatre in its medieval period. As they note regarding central European cultural spaces: "Religious drama continued to be performed primarily within churches-whether cathedrals or monasteries-until about 1200, when occasionally it began to be presented out of doors. Although liturgical plays continued to be performed in some churches until the sixteenth century."³ They also draw attention

to the fact that, from a certain point on, liturgical drama left the space of the churches to be performed outside: "By 1300 liturgical drama seemingly had developed as far as it could within the confines of the church, and consequently plays began to be given out-of-doors."⁴ Also, a very detailed description of this phenomenon is given by the theatre historian Ion Zamfirescu who states in his *Istoria universală a teatrului* that "The ship of churches and cathedrals [...] was the theatre building. The religious service itself was conceived as a dramatic performance. The liturgical ceremonial, with its solemn movements, ritual gestures, melodious utterances, priestly vestments, objects of worship and its wealth of symbolic forms, appeared as a staging. The officiating clergy were the actors."⁵

In a dialogue with the manager of the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre, Constantin Chiriac, he recalled the privileged position that Sibiu has always had, as the cultural centre of the country and through the international exposure brought by the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, but especially due to the

3 Oscar G. Brockett Franklin J. Hildy, *History of the Theatre*, tenth edition (Pearson, 2014), 82.

4 *Ibid*, p. 79

5 Ion Zamfirescu, *Istoria universală a teatrului* [*The Universal History of Theatre*], vol. III, (State Publishing House for Literature and Art, 1958), 20: „Nava bisericilor și a catedralelor (...) era clădirea de teatru. Slujba religioasă în sine era concepută ca o reprezentație dramatică. Ceremonialul liturgic, cu mișcările lui pătrunse de solemnitate, cu gesturile rituale, cu rostirile melopeice, cu veșmintele sacerdotale, cu obiectele de cult și cu bogăția lui de forme simbolice apărea ca o punere în scenă. Clericii oficianți erau actorii.” (my translation)

cultural background represented by the Transylvanian Saxon intelligentsia and the Habsburg Empire, together with the presence of the Masonic Lodge. All these are reasons for attracting major cultural and economic forces to the region. The German community brought professional choirs to the church, supported public readings and theatre performances, concerts, all of which had a beneficial influence on the culture of the Transylvanian region. Theatre experts and historians of the region argue that the development of the art of theatre performance in this area is primarily due to influences from the Germanic area after Transylvania's accession to the Habsburg Empire. The fact that it had become a veritable Viennese court, as the aediles, politicians and cultural figures of the Empire would change their permanent or temporary residence here, instilled the city with a whole new lifestyle, especially after 1692, when Sibiu became the capital of the Principality. We are of course also talking about other influences, not just cultural ones, namely the benefits of economic progress which will bring material wealth to the population and, implicitly, stimulate their interest in culture, in spending time in a pleasant but also highly spiritualised/intellectualised way. This is the period when the British court was also at its cultural-theatrical peak, bearing

the unrivalled imprint of the great Shakespearean genius, and from which the qualitative revolution in the dramatic performing arts was set in motion in a mutual influence with Viennese intellectuality, life, and social organisation. The Empire's mayors and officials supported cultural progress, the transition from improvised, amateur theatre to professional performances, especially in the second half of the 18th century. The process is not only a strategy for implementing German culture in the region, but also part of a political system of standardising ethnic groups and implementing authoritarian, centralising policies. The aim was thus to erase native individuality and to educate the population towards German values and sensibilities.

Naturally, this process of "cultural Germanisation", which was rampantly imposed in cities such as Sibiu, Timișoara and Brașov, was received with reservations and animosity by the locals, especially in rural areas where these performances used to be held in a solemn, religious setting, both in terms of theme and space. Censured and criticised by local bigotry, the performances nevertheless enjoyed the moral and financial support of imperial officials. Suddenly, the middle classes and beyond, the military, civil servants, civil servants, the new generation in particular, became the main audience for these

performances. We can talk about theatre and theatrical performances in Sibiu as far back as two centuries ago, through the existence of the medieval mysteries, the travelling theatre at the courts of the local boyars and counts, then the Jesuit theatre, and thus, in the middle of the 18th century, in a Germanised Carpathian area, the profession of professional actor was born for the first time. This is a very important moment in the history of Transylvanian theatre. There was an official transition from fairground theatre, with its easy, vulgar humour and simplistic themes and subjects, to large-scale, eloquent dramatic works with a strong social, historical, moral message – works that contributed to the cultural progress of the community.

A century and a half later, during communism, the Romanian theatre started to be promoted as a nationalist policy of cultural (re)Romanianisation of the region, which would lead to the encouragement of an artistic competition between the Romanian theatre and the German theatre in Sibiu, a phenomenon that has its own dose of artificiality. During this period, the German Theatre in Sibiu was at its peak, performing every day of the week with a strong troupe of about thirty professional actors, plus a technical team, touring and travelling both abroad and in all the German-speaking cities

of Romania. There was also a real connection between the population of parishioners in the German Reformed churches and priest, so it was extremely important that the community prelate, who enjoys immense trust from the parishioners, urged the community to participate in cultural events in the area.

Theatre is a living art, and “of the living”, a formulation that appears axiomatically, and rightly so, in any discourse on this art, and will therefore reflect the trends and spirit of the age it is passing through. To seek explanations and/or accusations about the rights to exist or not of a theatrical formula, a troupe of actors with a certain specificity, is nonsense and can damage the artistic and cultural harmony of a community. At the same time, there is no denying that there will be slippages, misunderstood or misinterpreted aspects, missed or misused opportunities for various reasons, and one of the most important of these is the political factor which censors, in a relatively visible manner, any appeal to a broad audience that is persuaded by emotions. The process is explicable because art remains the most powerful weapon in moulding an individual or social group. We are and will remain beings sensitive to the beautiful and its opposite, for whom instinct, intuition will take precedence, despite argumentation.

In this sense, the cultural leader has an extremely important responsibility, to maintain the formal and informal balance between the decision-makers at the political and economic level, and the need for inner freedom which remains for a genuine artist the only reason to be. "On 17 November 1956, the German Department of the Sibiu State Theatre was set up with an inaugural performance based on Bertolt Brecht's *Mutter Courage und ihre Kinder*, on 27 November."⁶ This is a historical fact, a piece of information taken from the Sibiu theatre institution's website, but behind the data there are many psychological, emotional, and intellectual nuances that will shape its work. We can deduce that it claims a specific culture and sensibility, the Germanic one, which is fully embraced, that it sets itself lofty goals, to spread true culture, already classicised, even though it is only a little over a decade since the text and the performance were first published. It is a twofold declaration of faith by the troupe and the management of the Sibiu theatre institution at the time, to correlate quality and novelty and innovation in the performing arts, a desire from which it has not deviated even today. The truth of what has been said above about the balance between the community (with components dominated by the economic,

social, political) and the cultural plan, is proven by the fact that this inauguration of the German section is a continuation of what had been done long before, as we mentioned: On 11 June 1787, Martin Hochmeister signed a contract with the magistrate of Sibiu thus granting him the land on which to build the first theatre, that he designed from his own funds in the building of the Thick Tower, one of the city's defence towers. [...] "Radu Stanca" National Theatre Sibiu is one of the longest-standing theatres in Romania and Europe, founded on 11th of June 1788 as a German-language theatre. The first theatre building on the current territory of Romania was built in Sibiu. [...] On 1st June 1788, the Sibiu Theatre was inaugurated with the festive prologue "Thaliens Opferweihe" by the theatre's director, Christof L. Seipp, and with the performance "Familia comică" by Johann Karl Wetzel.⁷ However interrupted, for whatever reasons, the German-language theatre in Sibiu has a tradition that enriches and even ennobles the city and beyond. Perhaps this is the fundamental reason for its revival, desired and necessary, as I was explaining that the present is not as bright as it deserves. However, the causes depend less on the artistic dimension, but perhaps more on the economic and cultural context, which also includes the needs of

⁶ History, Sibiu's Theatre Tradition, <https://www.tnrs.ro/istoric>, accessed: 3.02.2025.

⁷ *Ibid.*, accessed: 3.02.2025.

the public, which can be created or enhanced by a skilful marketing policy, but only up to a point. It is a truth imposed by the fact that art also presupposes playfulness, an appetite for the play of ideas and their immaterial beauty, which cannot be formed in the short term and, even less so, cannot be generalised throughout society. However, the interest in German-language productions by the theatres in Sibiu (the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre and the *Gong* Theatre) is real and generates a lot of joy and energy as we learn from the local press, which reports the phenomenon impartially, highlighting its merits and its shortcomings. We learn that there are collaborations between the two sections, Romanian and German, that the performances are translated into Romanian to make them accessible to all, that there are new productions all the time, and even a festival dedicated to German-language theatre in March. But, at the same time, there is no denying the limited material, logistical and human resources for this section, which is becoming the “poorer relative”, and the more declarative involvement of officials in the development of German-language theatre. We could say that this is a predictable situation, that the differences that create discontent cannot always be ironed out at the desired pace, or perhaps they are

destined to remain, which is not an insurmountable obstacle if there is social and cultural dialogue, and cooperation between cultures is a permanent exercise.

No matter from which perspective or on which side of the barricade one may stand, theatre in German is an important and rich cultural lode in Sibiu, which gives it uniqueness and remains a source of spiritual regeneration and a spur for self-improvement for both actors and the general public, because multilingualism is one of the clearest barometers of the cultural level in a contemporary society.

A revolution created by the “Sibiu theatre laboratory”. Postdramatic tendencies.

Sibiu is more than just the cultural heart of Transylvania, a consequence, in particular, of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, which after more than three decades of existence shows its inevitable impact on the public in this part of Europe. The festival has built up an educated public with refined tastes that is hard to amaze, hard to fool, an intellectual, European, sometimes cosmopolitan, and highly intelligent public. With *indoor* and *outdoor* sections of theatre, dance, circus, music, theatre-reading, conferences, exhibitions, film, book launches, workshops, theatre school meetings, with over two hundred venues, the festival is truly one

of the significant European and international cultural events, inviting some of the most innovative forms of artistic expression. Bands, teams, individuals, artists, people of art and culture meet every year in Sibiu to propose interesting projects and debates, to generate micro or macro cultural revolutions (and evolutions). World-renowned cultural personalities such as Lev Dodin, Peter Brook, Nakamura Kanzaburo, Neil LaBute, Robert Wilson, Eugenio Barba, Eimuntas Nekrosius, have expressed themselves and the school they represent artistically here, inviting, therefore, to aesthetic, theoretical, philosophical dialogues, etc.

The festival attracts important artists and companies in the field of performing arts, but it must also come with a strong local artistic proposal, especially from the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre, which becomes an International Theatre during the ten days of the Festival. The theatrical institution of Sibiu, as organiser and host, has the responsibility of being prepared with a team and a range of performances that match the festival's mission, namely a mission of avant-garde, post-dramatic experimentation, of what is meant by exploration in the field of performing arts and contemporary theatre. The preparation of these artists and productions takes time and starts with the theatre school,

continues with the beginner's theatrical internship which, with the experience of participating in the Sibiu International Theatre Festival and other festivals around the world, will gradually metamorphose (like a caterpillar that becomes a butterfly and begins to fly, enchanting both with the grace of flight and the beauty of its wings) into a complete, competent artist, with a complex range of skills, perfectly adapted to the new art and culture of the 21st century.

In the Sibiu theatre school, so connected and strongly influenced by the presence of one of the most important theatre festivals in the world, the training of young artists is aimed at discovering and overcoming physical and rhythmic limits and at developing a perfect non-verbal theatrical education. In terms of academic study, emphasis is placed on the acquisition of bodily expressiveness, skills in the area of dance, ballet, pantomime, and also on serious musical and rhythmic training, improvisation performance, etc. In short, it is vital to learn the universal means of artistic expression, through which the future actor/performer prepares for international performances and implicitly for communication and interpretation independent of text, nationality, culture of origin, politics, language (word, text), open to everything that is *international*. It is an approach centred on the

“human being” from everywhere, more precisely it aims to train international students.

As actors of this school, perhaps we did not really realise the postdramatic trends that we as a generation were following when we studied acting. We may not have realised, theoretically, the postdramatic times we were part of as a class/generation, and we did not know then, almost two decades ago, as very young actors or students, which avant-garde direction we were being guided towards, but we are now deeply grateful. As mature actors, exercising our profession in a democratic environment open to international cultural communication, we can truly assess and appreciate the value of a solid postdramatic theatre education. Our parents’ generation, born in the 1950s, did not necessarily have to learn English, and the actors of that generation did not have to worry about the theatrical language that a performance would need to have in order to be understood and successfully received on other stages of the world, given that there was no touring and communication with the West, at any level, including theatrical, was extremely limited. In fact, it had become a source of humour when teachers imitated the endless tirades of the actors of those times. They were, of course,

signalling that we are living in new times, times in which *action*, stage movement, is as vital to the word as the other way round. They are in complete co-dependence in the theatre performance of the new era, to the same extent that they are not directly linked or co-dependent on sound, lights, and scenography.

The educational-cultural bridges established between the University of Sibiu and other institutions in the world have created a constant need for theatre students and teachers to have new and adapted means of expression and international communication. In other words, we can talk in Sibiu of a cultural laboratory where the world’s latest trends in performing arts are being experimented.

As Ioana Toloargă effectively sums up one of the dimensions of Lehmann’s theory, postdramatic theatre is “marked by the prevalence of the visual and the corporeal [...] to the detriment of the textocentrism that marked the evolution of European dramatic art.”⁸ For this reason, for a long time the student – naturally, contrary to his or her ardent expectations and longings – is not put in contact with the text/scenario and does not utter words, but is instead obliged to learn to convey the message, the emotion, by other means. He will study diligently to

8 Ioana Toloargă, “Matei Vişniec. Spațiul românesc al dramaturgiei postdecembriste - teatrul postdramatic” [Matei Vişniec. The Romanian Space of Post-Decembrist Drama - Postdramatic Theatre], *Transilvania*, (Complexul Național Muzeal ASTRA, 5-6/2023), 137.

express his feelings by any (or all) other means than the literary, the textual, the spoken word, and this aspect immediately propels the education he has received onto experimental barricades, focussing on the evolution of the new genre of postdramatic performance with all that it entails. Thus, the aim is to train actors to be capable not only of telling stories, but of playing themselves, “here and now”, of communicating with the audience and provoking them to telepathic discussions.

The “international student” is trained in the theatre school in Sibiu in order to later appear as an “international performer”, and we are no longer just dealing with actors who pour out endless tirades of text. The actors become international artists-performers with a triple specialisation (actors, dancers, and musicians), because they have been brought up in this nursery-laboratory and have all the necessary tools, perfectly suited to the new contemporary postdramatic theatre, which is imposing itself as a theatre without borders, constituting a real experience and not just a viewing (audience) of a fable (narratives).

In an age of the visual, the one-dimensionality of classical dramatic theatre no longer satisfies even

when we approach true classical texts that must also be transposed on stage, naturally, in a university-centre city like Sibiu. Whether it is a very good training in the direction of dance-contemporary-ballet, for example in the spirit of the Pina Bauch school, or the execution of a classical pantomime movement (such as the techniques of walking against the wind or the exercise of changing masks), like a real clown Bip⁹ à la Marcel Marceau, or the use of various musical instruments (one can take as an example any of the shows staged in Sibiu by the director Silviu Purcărete), the performer from Sibiu is trained to a high artistic level and that is why the performances of the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre are successful in international tours. Only after they have mastered all the techniques and elements inside and outside them, only after they have understood their body, their physical limits and possibilities, their vocal abilities, only then the student performers have the right to embrace the word.

Incidentally, Purcărete’s mention is not by chance and is not exclusively centred on the use of instruments. The relationship between his performances and postdramatic theatre has been discussed, among others, by Jozefina Komporalý:

9 According to Marceau, the name of the character Bip comes from that of Charles Dickens’ Pip in the novel *Great Expectations*. Bip was the classic scapegoat subaltern, but also a figure of hope dressed in what has become iconic attire: white sailors trousers, a striped shirt and a hat with a single red flower. See <https://wonderopolis.org/index.php/wonder/who-was-marcel-marceau>, accessed: 30.01.2025

Indeed, Purcărete's theatrical world transcends the realm of the textual, and whilst his most expressive and celebrated artistic strategies tend to be associated with the visual, his stage compositions cannot be reduced to «decorative pictures»; they are rather «human landscapes, canvases of both inner life and society» (Andrea Tompa, *Silviu Purcărete's world*, 2009). In Purcărete's work, textual integrity is important insofar as it permits the unleashing of a creative imagination prompted by and rooted in the source text, yet transcending it and allowing for various forms of creative adaptation, ranging from «commentary» to «analogue» adaptation (Deborah Cartmell and Imelda Whelehan, *Adaptation: From Text to Screen, Screen to Text*, 1999)¹⁰

Similarly:

Purcărete's shows are, in this sense, a series of contrasting synaesthesia, in which the image becomes the central axis around which the other components are adapted. [...] However, the primacy of the image does not

diminish the power and necessity of music and language of any kind. Thus, his performances often take the form of sensory orgies that defy the criteria of synchronism, event authenticity, and homogenisation in the same total image of seemingly disparate elements.¹¹

We cannot fail to mention Marceau once again, him being a starting point in the personal exploration of the itinerary travelled towards knowing the limits of physical expressivity. These limits, in the personal journey travelled, have been reached *without the help of the text*, Marceau being an important and huge personal trio of inspiration-motivation-sweating – because the work done to study these techniques is a labour and a hard study of many years, in school, life and on stage.

Marceau is, as an artist, part of that avant-garde wave of the French resistance, and reaches virtuosity of physical expression born of the need to embody the inexpressible or what was forbidden by the persecution of political censorship. Marceau understands that something does not have to

¹⁰ Jozefina Komporaly, *Radical Revival as Adaptation: Theatre, Politics, Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 58.

¹¹ Diana Nechit, Andrei C. Șerban, "Triptyque Silviu Purcărete: le théâtre comme infidélité" ["Silviu Purcărete triptych: theatre as infidelity"], *Symbolon* (UArtPres, 1 (40)/2021), 113: „Les spectacles de Purcărete sont, en ce sens, une série de synesthésies contrastantes, la plupart du temps, dans lesquelles l'image devient l'axe central sur lequel les autres composantes sont adaptées. [...] La primordialité de l'image ne diminue cependant pas la force et la nécessité de la musique et du langage de toute nature. Ainsi, ses spectacles prennent souvent la forme d'orgies sensorielles qui défient le critère du synchronisme, de l'authenticité événementielle, de l'homogénéisation dans la même image totale d'éléments apparemment disparates.” (my translation)

be spoken if it can no longer be silenced. That something can be felt rather than spoken, written, or heard. In other words, the senses become deceptive, the intellect can betray in art but not the sincere impressions born of feeling. So, without using the text or the word, this artist can give the tragic a playful form, giving the spectator the chance to decode the political, social and human message, whatever its nature. The performer involves the audience as an accomplice in his performance (the dramatic act) when the dramatic text becomes illegal, dangerous, or useless, redundant. As an artist, Marcel Marceau was praised for his expressivity, considered to be able to express in a gesture what other scholars could not write and encompass in whole novels, because it was not only the exercise, but above all the artist's passion and faith that made the execution flawless. We can exemplify in the pantomime of the weight-lifting acrobat in 1975 in Paris, a classic moment of pantomime, in which the actor/mime (Marceau), in grimacing face make-up, performs a deplorable weight-lifting exercise. The choreography and gymnastics of the moment do not represent a high degree of difficulty (it does not require the actor to be at the level of a professional ballet dancer or Olympic gymnast) but the belief in the story he is telling, the dedication,

hard work and, again, faith, make the moment so truthful, funny, and worthy of admiration. We can say that such artists and graceful theatre moments have become models for actors in Sibiu.

In conclusion, this study has tried to offer a perspective of postdramatic theatre on the Romanian scene, namely in a vibrant and complex artistic universe, such as Sibiu. Postdramatic theatre demonstrates how the theatre "known to us all" as a sum of well-structured actions through a dialogue supported by actors who recreate a reality, becomes something else altogether, an impersonal address of a performer who builds together with the audience a "present situation", a process in which emotional involvement is optional. However, those performances created by the *Radu Stanca* National Theatre and analysed in this article demonstrate that in art in general, and in theatre in particular, any evolution or exhausting journey towards new horizons is only meant to make us more deeply aware of and recognise the premises from which we started. In other words, the emotion experienced as a result of taking part, in whatever capacity, as actor-performer or spectator, in a theatre production such as the two mentioned in the paper, goes beyond the limits of analytical thinking.

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Carolee Schneemann

DE-/RE-CONSTRUCTION OF ROMANTIC LOVE IN FEMINIST MEDIA: *I'M NOT THE GIRL WHO MISSES MUCH* (1986) AND *FUSES* (1964-1967)

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This paper focuses on the relationship between feminism and romantic love, analysing the intersection of these two sensitivities, which are often perceived as being at opposite poles in the collective imagination, while also exploring potential ways of "reconciling" these perspectives. By examining the necessity of using one's own body as primary material in artistic creation and the increasingly blurred boundaries between life and art-within the context of multiple gender imbalances-the study presents two case studies: Pipilotti Rist's video performance *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), which addresses the aggression of internalising masculinist discourse while critiquing the harmful impact of pop music, and Carolee Schneemann's experimental film *Fuses* (1964-1967), in which the artist and her then-partner engage in sexual acts over different seasons, observed by their cat. Beyond highlighting feminine and feminist creativity, one of the aims of this research is to emphasise the sometimes-significant role of art in social and ideological change.

feminist media, feminism, corporeality, romanticism, avant-garde

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Feminist media – (in)accessibility and need

Video art developed as a political and aesthetic choice. On the one hand, a rejection of the norm and censorship and a quest for freedom of expression – in video art, there was no need to be bound by any doctrine or to respect the rules and constraints of *mainstream* film production, the restrictions were more of a technical nature. On the other hand, the accessibility of production was a great asset, the use of portable cameras was easier to learn, working with them was cheaper, and they offered total control over the material, which was beneficial for experimentation – from the way of filming and the freedom of subjective expression, to the developing and the various interventions on the film.

In the introduction to *Women of vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video*, theorist Alexandra Juhasz defines *feminist media* as “the diverse work with or concerning film, video, television, and digital production made by those who critique the many inequitable power relations that limit women.”¹ Juhasz situates the productions in this category in the alternative or independent zone, as they are made “outside the sanction and profit motive of the

industrial model”², and explains that artists and performers were turning to video art as they were often denied access to institutions and did not receive funding for the projects they wanted to make.³

Alexandra Juhasz notes a lack of continuity and history, which is essentially a lack of documentation and accessibility to the history of art created by women: “a recurring cycle of feminist knowledge and action: feminists exist and are forgotten, make their work and see it disappear, are remembered and get lost, are rediscovered, erased, and rerepresented yet again”⁴, noting that in the 1970s, feminists who founded the discipline of *women’s studies* had to search for real but hidden feminist legacies⁵. The theorist also points to several questions and issues that feminist media artists are concerned with: “They talk about how difficult it is for women to acquire capital. They insist on [...] the absolute necessity of an infrastructure. Many want to think through the complex relation between art and activism; others add their concerns about intellectual work like theory or teaching [...] Many of these women use the media to interrogate the meanings and sensations of their bodies. They often focus

1 Alexandra Juhasz, *Women of vision: Histories in Feminist Film and Video* (University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 1.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Ibid.*, 6.

4 *Ibid.*, 2.

5 *Ibid.*

on sexuality and sexual identity. Identity in and of itself is often a focus: identity in its formation, identity in its consolidation, and in its contestation and fragmentation. How does feminism relate to other political or personal investments? [...] Interpersonal relationships matter greatly: the compelling desire for or appreciation of role models; the complexity of attachment to mothers; the uncertainty about having or the attachment to children; the support of friends, colleagues, and lovers. [...] What is the role of men in feminism? How do you continue to make feminist work over the span of a career, even as you change and feminism changes?"⁶

To objectify and to object

A question that perhaps inevitably arises when moving into the study of feminist art is: *how can romantic love be represented in a feminist manner?*

Undeniably necessary, feminist creations are constantly concerned with critiquing oppressive and fetishizing representations of romantic love, representations that often reduce women to the status of vulnerable and fragile muse, the embodiment of male fantasies (*woman as token*). A relevant

example of this are the video performances by the Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist (b. 1962), which focus on the refusal to internalise the masculinist discourse in pop music. *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (1986), based on the first verse of The Beatles' *Happiness Is a Warm Gun* (1968), and *I'm a Victim of This Song* (1995), a cover of Chris Isaac's *Wicked games* (1989), satirise both idealising and constraining perspectives on romantic relationships ("When I hold you in my arms (ooh, oh, yeah) / And I feel my finger on your trigger (ooh, oh, yeah) / I know nobody can do me no harm (ooh, oh, yeah)"⁷), targeting victimisation, laments, unrealistic expectations of men - expectations which, validated by the patriarchal system, also lead to the formation of unrealistic expectations of women, of themselves, of their partners and of relationships. In *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* (fig. 1), Pipilotti Rist films herself repeatedly singing the opening line of The Beatles' song, adapted to the first person, in a hysterical manner, suggesting a release of energy, a struggle, a state of saturation, of rejection, an individual liberation or even exorcism, a "positive exorcism", as she describes it in an interview⁸. The rhythm of the images and sound is altered, accelerated,

6 *Ibid*, 6-7.

7 The Beatles, "Happiness Is a Warm Gun" (lyrics), <https://genius.com/The-beatles-happiness-is-a-warm-gun-lyrics>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

8 Pipilotti Rist Interview: Positive Exorcism, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n-n0isretmA0>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

creating an effect that is partly comic, partly painful, and partly awkward, even uncomfortable. Her entire body is blurred; we cannot see her face, and her features are indistinguishable. Her body has the unnatural movements of a puppet, of an object controlled and tormented by an invisible force and, as an inevitable effect of alienation, it decomposes. Her breasts fall out of her dress as a consequence of objectification, and the thinned voice suggests the treatment of the woman as a child, an infantile, incomplete being – which Susan Sontag speaks of in a sense when she observes that women are denied or prevented from becoming adults: “Without work, women will never break the chains of dependence on men—the minimal prerequisite for their becoming fully adult [...] The arts of psychological coercion and conciliation for which women are notorious—flattery, charm, wheedling, glamour, tears—are a servile substitute for real influence and autonomy.”⁹ Nuancing Sontag’s idea, labour can be substituted for creativity (which also contains work): to create in a manner true to one’s own feelings is a way of maturing and gaining independence and adult status; authenticity attracts autonomy. The personal dimension assumed, the message conveyed through one’s own body and the chosen

aesthetics have a revealing effect: *the woman The Beatles so nonchalantly sing about is not a real woman*, but a sketch, a prototype, a vague, blurred image, a fragment of desire. For a real woman, such a definition is damaging. Internalising such a discourse is alienating. The woman on the screen tried to be the woman in the song, but failed – why does this inability to fit in feel like failure? Why is the need to belong so strong, and yet so difficult to fulfil? Why does the inability to be part of the *mainstream* narrative plague her, as if it were an unbeatable ideal? Music can be dangerous: it can make you take on dreams that aren’t your own, in which you don’t really find yourself, and which can blur your identity. *I’m Not The Girl Who Misses Much* is a manifesto against the reiteration of masculinist discourses that see women as a function rather than a being, and a fight to prevent this.

Continuing in the same register, nine years later, *I’m a Victim of This Song* (or *...a victim of his song*, if the title were explanatory) combines a sensitive, delicate and dreamy way of singing with an angry, hysterical, frustrated one, creating a contrast between the representation of romantic relationships in pop music and the way they often are in real life. The images are of the video diary or non-professional observational documentary type, manipulated

⁹ Susan Sontag, *On Women*, ed. David Rieff, introduction by Merve Emre (Picador, 2023), 49–50.

through various interventions. *I'm a Victim of This Song* is a portrait of disillusionment, of a specific wound of the present (pop music being part of our lives, willy-nilly, because of its popularity and accessibility), a refusal of representations in which you don't find yourself and of expectations that you can't and don't want to fulfil. Through *I'm a Victim of This Song*, Pipilotti Rist also suggests the need to question the idea of "salvation" in a couple ("The world was on fire, and no one could save me but you"¹⁰): in reality, the stakes are neither to save nor to be saved (or, in any case, it is not a healthy option); this legacy of binary thinking eliminates the idea of personal integrity as well as the integrity of the couple, placing the success of a relationship in dependence, in salvation — whether unilateral or mutual.

One of the most difficult things seems to be reconciling romanticism and feminism, both directions being indirectly presented to us as incompatible. We associate romance with poetry, vulnerability, dreaming, adolescence. We associate feminism with rebellion, disillusionment, reaction, maturity or coming of age. We associate romanticism with a feeling, an individual experience, a sweetened view of reality, a kind

of escapism, and feminism with a collective need, a collective wound that needs to be recognised and healed, a confrontation with an unpleasant and long-denied reality, a discovery and/or assumption of identity. How can contemplation and action coexist? Can poetry and activism work together? What is the meeting point of these two sensibilities situated, in the collective imagination, at opposite poles? How can we break out of stereotypes, out of the way we are taught to feel and think about romantic love; out of the way we are taught to (self-)represent and act? What is the alternative to the many criticisms? What does a feminist creation about romantic love look like?

Fuses: explicit = poetic, ≠ pornographic

At a time when the word "vagina" and the showing of pubic hair were forbidden in American films¹¹, Carolee Schneemann (1939-2019, fig. 2), an artist who "uses her own body as her primary medium in her vast oeuvre of performance, photography, painting, film, and video"¹² made *Fuses* (1964-1967). In her first film, an avant-garde medium-length production, she and her then-husband, composer James Tenney (1934-2006, fig. 3), have

¹⁰ Chris Isaak, "Wicked games" (lyrics), <https://genius.com/Chris-isaak-wicked-game-lyrics>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

¹¹ Steve Rose, "Carolee Schneemann: 'I never thought I was shocking'", <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/10/carole-schneemann-naked-art-performance>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

¹² Juhász, *Women of vision*, 61.

sexual intercourse over the course of several seasons, observed by their cat, Kitsch (fig. 4). Schneemann describes the film as “an homage to a relationship of ten years – to a man with whom I lived and worked as an equal”¹³.

Fuses shows the sexual relations of a couple, devoid of embellishments and romanticisation, freed from the constraints and limitations of *the male gaze* and not subject to the dominance-submission relationship. The film is composed of close-up shots of relatively short duration. Carolee Schneemann intervenes on the celluloid by “burning, baking, cutting and painting” it, by dipping the film in acid, building up “dense layers of collage”¹⁴ and achieving various effects (fig. 5-10), which manage to deconstruct the concept of romantic love as a perfect, intangible object, wrapped in clichés, which you admire and aspire to in vain.

The film contains, in addition to figurative elements, unseen fragments of bodies, thus focusing on touch, on sensoriality, on how *it feels*, and not on the visual aspect. The nudity is organic, natural, the bodies do not fit into the norms of erotic and pornographic productions, but into *reality*. Asked if they had any qualms

about using their own bodies in the film, Schneemann replies, “No, because I needed to see if I could re-proportion the structures that were being given to me as hierarchical aesthetic factors. Pop art produced mechanized female bodies and I wanted to show something different from that deadness and slickness. It was in the culture as a way of being and looking and behaving. We refused to let our bodies become instruments of that kind of power.”¹⁵ The lack of *glamour* and the absence of sound (an element so present in pornographic productions), the presence of laughter, of pleasure, of the joy of sex are constitutive elements of this revolt and alternative visions. The presence of the animal, whose gaze is not altered by the socio-political and cultural context in which it lives, and whose experiences are predominantly instinctual, produces a moment of interspecific empathy, making the spectator aware of the highly conventional nature of society. Of *Fuses*, Schneemann says: “I did the filming even while I was participant in the action. There were no aspects of lovemaking which I would avoid [...] Perhaps because it was made of her own life by a woman, *Fuses* is both a sensuous and equitable interchange; neither

13 Carolee Schneemann, “Notes on Fuses, 1971”, <https://www.schneemannfoundation.org/writing/notes-on-fuses>, accessed: 07.05.2024.

14 Schneemann, “Notes on Fuses”.

15 Robert Enright, “Notes on Fuseology. Carolee Schneemann Remembers James Tenney,” <https://bordercrossingsmag.com/article/notes-on-fuseology>, accessed: 07.05.2024.

lover is «subject» or «object».”¹⁶ *Fuses* is explicit without being vulgar and romantic without being sentimental. It demystifies but does not profane. I believe that the purpose of this film is not to titillate; the viewer does not feel like a *voyeur* while watching. The intimacy present on the screen is not meant to stimulate sexually, but to express an individual reality, a *Zweisamkeit*¹⁷ composed of touch, light, sensuality, the ocean shore, streetlamps lit in the city at night, windows, stars, flowers – the dark and bright world of the couple or what is often described as the “primal world” (fig. 9-11). This atmosphere is also created by the chromatics (colours more saturated than in reality, those reminiscent of oil paintings or expressionist contrasts), by the chosen angles, the long and multiple exposures, the inverted shots, by the altered, jerky rhythm and, very importantly, by the duration of the shots (this collage nature of the film, aesthetically opposed to pornographic films, is to some extent also a technical consequence – *Fuses* was filmed with several borrowed Bolex cameras¹⁸, which were capable of filming only

30 seconds at a time¹⁹). However, and although it won an award at Cannes in 1968, *Fuses* has often been censored and banned²⁰, including as recently as 2011 in Texas.²¹

The fusion of body and creation

Paradoxically, the creativity, the editing, the interventions, the silence, the choice to be the subject of one’s own erotic film and the risk of exposing one’s own intimacy create a more powerful, natural, and *vivid* effect than productions in which the illusion of reality is impeccable. Still, it lacks *authenticity* – a concept almost impossible to define because of its inherent subjectivity, but which could be described by *sincerity*, *lack of pretentiousness* and, implicitly, a *lack of censorship* that has nothing to do with exhibitionism or the need to prove something, but simply with the need to express, to tell the truth. The body, as both instrument and working material, places life and creativity on an equal footing, in the sense that neither undermines the other, nor exists as a substitute for the other. Autobiography is not just an artistic material that you process and transform in order to

16 Schneemann, “Notes on *Fuses*”.

17 Intimacy between two people, usually of a romantic nature. From German: “Einsamkeit” (“loneliness”) and “zwei” (“two”).

18 *Ibid.*

19 *Ibid.*

20 Steve Rose, “Carolee Schneemann: ‘I never thought I was shocking’”, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2014/mar/10/carole-schneemann-naked-art-performance>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

21 Alison Knowles with Carolee Schneemann, <https://brooklynrail.org/2019/03/criticspage/Alison-Knowles-with-Carolee-Schneemann>, accessed: 12.05.2024.

express yourself but also to hide yourself, and art is not primarily therapeutic but active, powerful, necessary not only at an individual but also at a social level. This postmodernist vision, in which there is no separation between author and creation, leads to the formation of a whole, a homogeneity and a lack of concern for the boundaries between realities. Autobiography and art unfold and are created simultaneously; they merge, become *fusions*.

Concerned with the desexualisation of the female body and its liberation from patriarchal constraints, Carolee Schneemann's vision proposes an interconnection not only between life and art, but also in the relationship between body, mind, and environment; she confesses in a letter to a friend in 1976: "I do not «show» my naked body! I am being my body"²².

Carolee Schneemann is often described as a "radical feminist", but in many cases, the radical label only denotes the intensity of a reaction – the reaction to an oppressive system, to the lack of freedom and justice. Radicalism is not always synonymous with anarchy and cannot be divorced from the context in which it emerges. It is often necessary to balance things out. The necessity of this type of art, "radical"

for those faithful to conservative and canonical views, is visible and can bring about major changes on an individual and, gradually, also social level. Schneemann explains his use of close-ups of genitalia by wanting viewers to confront the process of identification and different attitudes towards one's own and the other's gender. In a text about the film, she confesses: "After one of the first screenings of *Fuses*, a young woman thanked me for the film. She said she had never looked at her own genitals, never seen another woman's, that *Fuses* let her feel her own sexual curiosity as something natural, and that she now thought she might begin to experience her own psychical integrity in ways she had longed for. That was in 1967."²³ Art liberates: a free artistic creation conveys a sense of freedom to those who met it. Creations such as *I'm Not The Girl Who Misses Much* and *Fuses*, liberating both in their content and their aesthetics, convey that feminism is not just a women's movement, which is strictly about women, but one that is about mutual respect between human beings and beyond; a movement that, however bombastic it may sound, can lead to an improvement in the quality of life on Earth. In her essay "The Third World of Women", Susan Sontag states that "Women

²² Lillian Crawford, "Carolee Schneemann: The artist whose naked body was a canvas", <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20221108-carolee-schneemann-the-artist-whose-naked-body-was-a-canvas>, accessed: 13.05.2024.

²³ Schneemann, "Notes on *Fuses*".

and men share the same ultimate aim: to gain genuine autonomy, which means participating in (and being let alone by) a society that is not based on alienation and repression [...] To be sure, every human being in this imperfect world stands in need of liberation—masters as well as slaves, oppressors as well as the oppressed.”²⁴ So, from this point, one can move on to the question: *what does feminist art look like about romantic love made by men?*

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Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11



CALLING FOR EMPATHETIC CULTURAL PRACTICE IN PERFORMING ARTS FESTIVALS

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ABSTRACT The article advocates for empathetic cultural practice in performing arts festivals through the CURATE model, which provides a theoretical framework for dealing with contemporary fragile contexts characterized by polarization and instability. The framework uses Fischer-Lichte's performativity theory, Turner's liminality concepts, and Malzacher's performative curating to redefine curators as 'empathetic architects' who create spaces for intercultural dialogue and authentic encounters. The CURATE model consists of six interconnected elements which transform traditional curatorial gatekeeping into care-based stewardship to establish festivals as healing spaces and intercultural mediators that build community resilience and meaningful connections during uncertain times.

KEYWORDS curating, empathy, performing arts festivals, interculturalism, liminality

The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries marked a proliferation of “turns” in arts, culture, and scholarship – from the transnational turn to the experiential turn, from the social turn to the ethnographic turn, from the curatorial turn to the performative turn, to name but a few. But what constitutes the larger context for all these paradigmatic shifts? As we approached the millennial transition, transformations became the new normality, while the frequently invoked paradigm of the rapidly changing world introduced new discursive frameworks across all strands of human existence – political, economic, technological, educational, and cultural spheres alike. What do all these turns generate beyond innovation and emerging trends at each level? They simultaneously produce instability, insecurity, and anxiety as the inevitable reverse of progress, to say the least.

Scholarship and academia have mirrored all these changes on theoretical and conceptual levels. This new human tapestry of perpetual change has apparently become the *modus operandi* in a globalised world. When we add to this the axiomatic understanding that human nature is fundamentally shaped by dichotomies and

dialectical discourse, the question arises: how and with what tools can we navigate such fragile contexts? The democratisation of cultural production has precipitated what some scholars term a “cultural war” – a clash of worldviews and an intensified desire for distinction. The pursuit of the exceptional, the eccentric, and the outstanding represents nothing but compensatory mechanisms. Excessive noise has become overwhelming in McLuhan’s *global village*, whereas human nature strives for balance through the dialectical positioning of “self” versus “other”. Has the extreme, then, become the defining characteristic of a new form of *equilibrium*? We live to witness the snowball effect brought about by Brexit, but not in the manner which was expected – i.e., more states asking to leave the European Union – but rather a more profound rupture: the manifestation of linguistic discourse becoming reality. This demonstrates what Wolkenstein describes as “the construction of ‘us’ versus ‘them’ as a means of referencing one’s belonging to in-groups, additionally applicable to national identity. ‘Them,’ or the Other, allows for people to directly compare themselves against something outside of their nation”¹. This process operates through

1 Emma Wolkenstein, Nationalism in the Age of Brexit: The Attitudes and Identities of Young Voters, *The Journal of Undergraduate Ethnography* (Dalhousie University, 12 (1)/2022), 70-87.

a mechanism whereby “people can create identity by defining the cultural, physical, and ethnic attributes that exist for the Other, hence applying the opposite characteristics to themselves. These differences, however, are always positive upon self-reflection and negative when applied to Others.”² What we witness, then, is not merely political rhetoric but a domino effect and a transformation of discourse into lived social divisions. Yet, if an epidemic of aggression in its barbaric or more subtle manifestations has indeed emerged from this context of perpetual change, then how can performing arts festivals and curatorial practices respond by underscoring the imperative for humanity and constructively addressing these extremes? This article embarks on a quest for empathetic practices and what might be termed “a peace mission”³, drawing inspiration from the healing function of festivals established after the First and Second World Wars. As Fischer-Lichte notes, major festivals like the Edinburgh International Festival, the Festival d’Avignon, the Festivals

of Athens and Epidaurus, and the Théâtre des Nations embraced “the healing function already attributed to the Salzburg Festival”.⁴

Theoretical context: from curating art to curating experience

Theoretical frameworks help researchers understand how festivals can handle modern societal issues during this period of uncertainty. Ric Knowles argues that festivals can function as sites “more conducive to real and open negotiation and exchange across acknowledged and celebrated cultural and other difference”⁵. He fancies replacing “international” with “intercultural”, thereby “proposing new festival genealogies and epistemologies that privilege trans- and intranational exchange over consumption, and the intercultural over the international”⁶.

This theoretical approach is sustained by Tom Sellar’s observation that “effecting change will become an essential element of curating, along with care, stewardship, critical thought, and conceptual daring”⁷. The current curatorial practice undergoes

2 *Ibid.*, 73.

3 Erika Fischer-Lichte, “European Festivals”, in Knowles, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to International Theatre Festivals. Cambridge Companions to Theatre and Performance* (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 89.

4 *Ibid.*, 90.

5 Ric Knowles, *International Theatre Festivals and Twenty-First-Century Interculturalism* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 26.

6 *Ibid.*, 26.

7 Tom Sellar, “Situation Critical. What Comes Next for the Field of Performance Curation?”, in Davida, Dena, Gabriels, J., Hudon, V., Pronovost, M. (eds.), *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice* (Berghahn Books, 2019), 376.

a fundamental transformation according to Sellar, who draws from Michele Steinwald's concept of an "architecture for engagement" that fights against passive programming while demanding active intervention through new formats. This can be regarded as both spatial and conceptual framework. Thus, performance is understood as social practice, a way of creating meaningful encounters, address contemporary challenges, and maintain essential curatorial ethics. "Faced with the contingencies of the twenty-first century – economic inequality, racial justice, environmental and humanitarian crises, lives supersaturated with digital media – the instigators of live performances have begun to question and change habits, offering audiences fresh ways of seeing."⁸ These scholarly perspectives establish festival curators as agents who can develop effective responses to instability, distrust, and growing anxiety. They can surmount uncertainty, embrace, and address fragile and vulnerable contexts through the activation of the curator's complete instrumental repertoire, and create spaces for intercultural dialogue and empathetic engagement. Also, this

approach suggests that festivals can serve as constructive platforms that address the need for humane connection in a world where aggravating distance and perpetual change define the current state of the art.

The curator in contemporary cultural practice: from selection to care

Ferdman identifies the growing prominence of curators as dominant figures in modern performing arts and the emergence of interdisciplinary performance festivals during the last decades⁹. The curatorial work of Von Bismarck develops critical dimensions because it functions as a negotiation space for cultural and economic field conditions. "Curatorial activity appears as a cultural practice that runs across and permeates disciplines and professions, which is located somewhere between the fields of research and art, as it is related to them both and shaped by their agents".¹⁰

The concept of curatorship emerged during the late 18th century while the professional definition of curatorship solidified after 1945¹¹. As recorded by Schneider, the etymology of the term derives

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Bertie Ferdman, "From Content to Context. The Emergence of the Performance Curator", *Theater* (Duke University Press, 44 (2) / 2014), 5–19.

¹⁰ Beatrice von Bismarck, "Relations in Motion. The curatorial condition in visual arts and its possibilities for the neighbouring disciplines", in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal* (Spring, 55/2011), 53.

¹¹ Bertie Ferdman, *op. cit.*, 8.

from the Latin “curatus”, meaning “of, belonging to, or having a cure or charge”, and was initially used to describe parish priests, caregivers, and according to The Oxford English Dictionary, “one appointed as guardian of the affairs of a person legally unfit to conduct them himself”¹². The idea of “care” has shifted over the decades, navigating from the traditional role of an archivist or keeper of objects – as contemporary job classifications may still narrowly define it – to the star-artist-curator of visual arts biennials and into the realm of performing arts and live-arts festivals, where curators now “actively and creatively shape the framing of the presentation and production of artistic works”. Thus, “at the core of these live arts curators’ belief systems lies the notion of ‘care’ and the intrinsic value of artistic expression”¹³.

The CURATE model – a framework for empathetic cultural practice

The CURATE model emerges from this theoretical framework to unite different curatorial perspectives with theoretical insights about performing arts curation, building on the curator’s role as someone who navigates the ‘in-betweens’ – juggling pragmatic demands,

creative vision, power dynamics, and strategic concerns. The framework functions as a thinking tool to analyse the complex and layered work of live arts festival curators through their ability to create context, facilitate relationships, and demonstrate empathy. At its core, the CURATE model cultivates care: for people, for space, for language, and for emotion, in an act of cultural hospitality. Curation extends beyond work selection because it represents a broader practice which unites artistic decisions with moral obligations.

The framework has potential applications that reach further than performing arts festivals and the Bourdieusian ‘field of restricted production’. It draws on Malzacher’s approach of “performative curating” and his emphasis on placing “the social and other relational aspects of art” as the foundation of curatorial strategy. “If we understand performativity not only as something that is intrinsic to the live arts, but also as a strategy to actively emphasize the very construction of its own reality, to show the process and not merely the product, to playfully acknowledge the artistic as well as the social, political, theoretical context, it becomes clear

12 Rebecca Schneider, “Dead Hare - Live”, in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal* (Spring, 55/2011), 64.

13 Dena Davida, Jane Gabriels, Veronique Hudon, Marc Pronovost (eds.), *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice* (Berghahn Books, 2019), 2.

how this could become a powerful means for curating.”¹⁴ Curators perform more than selecting exhibition content because they direct the entire process of artist-work-audience interactions through their mastery of the curatorial process.¹⁵

The six elements of the CURATE framework – Context, Universal Humanity, interRelatedness, Adaptability, Transformation, and Empathy – provide a method to study and enhance curatorial practice through empathetic engagement. Each element addresses particular curatorial challenges while building an integrated system that places human relationships above institutional control structures.

Creating context

The CURATE framework begins with ‘Context’, which demands researchers to shift from individual analytical viewpoints toward understanding cultural production and reception as complex interconnected systems. As Malzacher demonstrates, curatorial work concerns “contexts:

connections between artists, artworks, spectators, cultures, social and political realities, parallel worlds, discourses, institutions”¹⁶. However, in order to do so, a curator must use analytical tools to detect the “eventness of performances”, which Fischer-Lichte identifies as the dynamic intersection of multiple contextual forces that create meaning.¹⁷ The four key elements of festival experience include time (the temporary architectures that shape festival experience), space (the geographical and spatial configurations of cultural encounter), place-specificity (local context, the embedded culture and climate that determine local reception conditions), and discourse (the communicational frameworks that can enable or constrain cultural dialogue).

As we draw upon Beatrice von Bismarck’s concept of curatorial practice, this framework acknowledges that “it is this putting into motion of not only objects and people, but also and above all the relations that these acquire with respect to each other, as well as to

14 Florian Malzacher, “Bethinking One’s Own Strengths. The Performative Potential of Curating”, in Dena Davida, Gabriels, J., Hudon, V., Pronovost, M. (eds.), *Curating Live Arts: Critical Perspectives, Essays, and Conversations on Theory and Practice* (Berghahn Books, 2019), XVIII.

15 Nicola Scherer, *Narrative internationaler Theaterfestivals. Kuratieren als kulturpolitische Strategie*, transcript (Verlag Bielefeld, 2020), 15,

16 Florian Malzacher, “Anwalt der Nische: Kurator der performativen Künste: ein Job mit unklarem Profil, Ziel und Zukunft”, *Theater Heute* (Theater Verlag, 04/2011), 9.

17 Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Culture as Performance. Theatre history as cultural history”, Centro de Estudos de Teatro, Actas/ Proceedings História do Teatro e Novas Tecnologias, 2004, 10, https://ceteatro.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/comunicacao_erika-bf9.pdf, accessed: October 2024

space, time and the institution”¹⁸.

The individual dimensions function autonomously yet interact with each other to form the contextual framework that enables festivals to serve as cultural meeting spaces for community building and artistic development.

Last but not least, Fischer-Lichte concludes that “performance must satisfy specific conditions of ‘production’ and ‘reception’” because “two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime”¹⁹. This temporal co-presence is characterized by ephemerality and heterogeneity – “it is impossible that exactly the same constellation between actors and spectators will turn up once more”²⁰. Alongside considerations of time-based structures, spatiality functions both as container and content in festival dramaturgy. What Fischer-Lichte terms “performative space” is a space which “opens special possibilities for the relationship between actors and spectators”²¹. The path to becoming a creator of context requires continuous development of personal cultural and socio-emotional intelligence as well as the intelligence of all stakeholders

involved in the festival including peers, team members, volunteers, artists, audiences, authorities, and sponsors. The process of curating and composing space requires active listening together with effective communication of all cultural elements which form a place’s discourse whether it is a nation or a local area or any geographic unit. The wider cultural and social environments define both the context and narrative of a festival while serving as its structural framework and driving force which forms the operational matrix that sets boundaries and opportunities for festivals while requiring advanced curatorial skills. Discourse, as the fourth dimension of context, enables festivals to create meaning through their communicational resources. According to Von Bismarck this represents “a form of practice which can be used not only by curators, but also by all other agents in the field of culture” and invites them to join “processes of meaning production”²². Similarly, Malzacher states that curatorial work primarily involves “verbalization, mediation, discussion” as essential components for creating contexts.²³ Consequently, Armour emphasizes

18 Beatrice von Bismarck, *op cit.*, 56.

19 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance* (Routledge, 2008), 38.

20 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Culture as Performance*, *op. cit.*, 10.

21 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, *op. cit.*, 107.

22 Beatrice von Bismarck, *op cit.*, 52.

23 Florian Malzacher, *Theater Heute*, *op cit.*, 9.

conversational curation: "I see the act of curation as a conversation... I need to consider the audience as someone I wish to speak to, and perhaps more importantly, with."²⁴

Universal values: navigating dichotomies and dismantling patronizing discourses

How can a curator reconcile dichotomies that shape human experience while working to dismantle patronizing – colonialist, Eurocentric attitudes, and hegemonic discourse – that have historically dominated cultural practice? The goal of this work is to analyse how curatorial choices either perpetuate or disrupt current power dynamics. Frie Leysen encourages curators to examine how Eurocentric biases continue to influence modern curatorial practices: "We still have a colonial attitude and we are still imperialists. We still have the feeling that Western culture is superior—we still don't see that others might be just as rich or even richer. In this regard, programming an international festival is for me

mainly about changing our western perspective."²⁵

Festival environments establish gatekeeping mechanisms which accept diversity through defined comfort zones according to Gaupp's "*different but not too different* concept"²⁶ when speaking of art. However, to reconcile dichotomies and soften power relations, Gaupp advocates for a "transcultural curatorial practice" that "would legitimise conflict as part of engaging with 'new' art forms"²⁷, while Knowles calls for "an epistemological process of decoloniality"²⁸ through learning from indigenous festivals practices. Similarly, Fischer-Lichte describes "the relationship between subject and object" "not as dichotomous but as oscillatory"²⁹, because performers and spectators influence each other within a self-generating system of interaction that promotes equitable cultural exchange by allowing different perspectives to coexist in the festival context.³⁰

The current curatorial practice faces existing tensions which

24 Norman Armour, Curator's Glossary, in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal*, (Spring, 55 / 2011), 96.

25 Frie Leysen, Curator's Glossary, in F. Malzacher, T. Tupajić, and P. Zanki (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal*, (Spring, 55 / 2011), 106.

26 Lisa Gaupp, "The 'West' versus 'the Rest'? Festival Curators as Gatekeepers for Sociocultural Diversity", in *Managing Culture: Reflecting on exchange in global times, Sociology of the Arts* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 2. http://fox.leuphana.de/portal/files/14652126/Gaupp_paper_ESA2019_SociologyofCulture.pdf, downloaded January, 2025

27 *Ibid.*, 12.

28 Ric Knowles, *op. cit.*, 30.

29 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance, op. cit.*, 17.

30 *Ibid.*, 165.

these perspectives both identify and provide solutions to achieve decolonial transformation. Leysen recognizes our colonial attitude while Gaupp shows how festivals function as gatekeeping systems to diagnose current practice problems. Fischer-Lichte's "oscillatory" subject-object relationship offers a method to transcend hierarchical cultural interactions, yet Knowles presents a revolutionary approach by transforming festivals into intercultural mediators for artists and others to engage in live performative dialogue across respected real differences. Knowles provides a radical solution with his reconceptualization of "festivals as intercultural mediators, where artists and others can come together in generative ways in live, performative dialogue across real and respected differences"³¹, proving how existing practices for genuine territorial sharing can actually achieve decolonial practice instead of reformed colonialism and universal values acceptance.

InterRelatedness: co-presence, mirroring, and the space between

InterRelatedness, the third pillar of this framework, reconfigures the festival as a complex system of reciprocal relationships, drawing on Malzzacher's and Fischer-Lichte's

performative curating framework and, Hendrix and Hunt's³² Imago theory psychological insights, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of connection at both individual and community levels. This approach highlights the essential coexistence of all participants in the performative event while showing how their interactions create transformative "in-between" spaces. As mentioned before, the 'autopoietic feedback loop' concept developed by Fischer-Lichte serves as a theoretical framework to analyse these interconnected elements: "The audience's perception influences the performance from the outset and affects all participants reciprocally, so that energy begins to circulate in the performance space..."³³.

This feedback system creates a dynamic field of relations which dissolves traditional boundaries between performers and audience while all participants contribute to the emergent performance reality. Similarly, the fundamental principle of Imago theory shows that relationships operate as 'co-creative systems' which produce meaning healing and growth through the quality of presence and interaction between related individuals.³⁴ The Imago principles provide useful insights about festival spaces when

³¹ Ric Knowles, *op. cit.*, 232.

³² See Harville Hendrix, Hellen LaKelly Hunt, *Doing Imago Relationship Therapy in the Space-Between: A Clinician's Guide* (W.W. Norton & Company, 2021).

³³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*, 165.

³⁴ Harville Hendrix and Hellen LaKelly Hunt, *op. cit.*, 16.

applied to inter-community contexts because they help social actors achieve mirroring and validation and empathic attunement.

Festivals establish conditions for meaningful social encounters between people from different backgrounds through mirroring and validation processes just like Imago therapy establishes new patterns of connection between individuals. According to Malzacher, the fragile contexts of recent times including wars in Ukraine and Palestine and worldwide, political, and social polarization and radicalization can benefit from this approach³⁵. What affects us at micro-level shows on macro-level, and vice-versa.

The audience experience is integral to this live system of inter-relatedness and active co-creation. As Fischer-Lichte observes: "Performance, then, requires two groups of people, one acting and the other observing, to gather at the same time and place for a given period of shared lifetime. Their encounter – interactive and confrontational – produces the event of the performance."³⁶

In a festival, however, the curator needs to address multiple stakeholder perspectives so inter-relatedness becomes essential for handling the complex network of relationships between artists,

audiences, sponsors, government and local bodies, media, and local community etc. The curator functions as a 'relational architect' who designs spaces and processes to create Turner's 'liminal' and 'liminoid' experiences which provide structured chances for communities to experience difference and create new meanings through collective embodied engagement.

Victor Turner's concept of liminality bridges the Imago therapy to Fischer-Lichte's performativity theory. According to Turner, liminal states exist as transitional areas between two states where "communitas can play across structural systems". This liminal state produces what Turner identifies as "experiential basis of the Christian notion of actual grace" - moments of transformative encounter that emerge from collective presence³⁷. Hence, if curatorial work is fundamentally relational, then it must be conceptualized as layered work, with distinct points of entry for different audience segments. In this context, the curator functions as both architect and inhabitant of complex meaning-making systems. This mediating function resembles the postmodern novel that unfolds multiple narrative levels of meaning, enticing spectators to become engaged in the discovery of new

35 Florian Malzacher, "Bethinking One's Own Strengths. The Performative Potential of Curating", in *Curating Live Arts*, op. cit., XVIII.

36 Erika Fischer-Lichte, op. cit., 38.

37 Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theater. The Human Seriousness of Play* (PAJ Publications, 1982), 45.

interpretive keys that enable them to access increasingly complex layers of understanding and experience. Like Süskind's *Das Parfum*, which masks deeper dimensions beneath its crime narrative surface, curatorial practice simultaneously operates across multiple registers. The curator emerges as a savvy of game theory, orchestrating and adapting to contexts that invite audiences into 'cultural code hunts' while maintaining the delicate equilibrium between stakeholder satisfaction and artistic risk-taking. Thus, the relational curator provides contexts that open up layered realities and indefinite relational possibilities for diverse audience segments, opening thereby the discourse for the following pillar, which refers to adaptive curatorial practices.

Adaptive curation: fluid frameworks for fragile contexts

Contemporary curatorial practice needs to be both adaptive and adaptable, the fine the distinction between the two almost interchangeable terms being that one evolves from within, while the other responds to external forces. This shift reflects Malzacher's "performative curating" and Van Campenhout's "shared curatorship, putting into question the authorial

roles and introducing new potentials for exchange and sharing of (artistic) material, a curatorship that extends the invitation to rethink the ecology of the performing arts system from within."³⁸ According to the Cambridge Dictionary to adapt, as a transitive verb, means "to change, or to change something, to suit different conditions or uses" and "to change your ideas or behaviour to make them suitable for a new situation" as an intransitive verb³⁹. The adaptiveness component addresses the curator's need to respond to rapidly changing circumstances – political shifts, economic fluctuations, technological developments, or evolving artistic practices.

A live arts festival curator needs adaptiveness as their core competency to create sophisticated cultural intelligence which goes beyond simple reactive adjustments. The 21st-century environment requires an entrepreneurial mindset for managing continuous change so curators must develop "cultural adaptiveness" which means handling complex stakeholder relationships alongside artistic integrity. Live arts festivals draw diverse audiences who split into multiple aesthetic communities that use different interpretive

38 Elke van Campenhout, "Shuffling the Deck, Shifting Positions. Curating as environmentalism", in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal* (Spring, 55/2011), 42.

39 <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/adapt>, accessed: February 2025.

frameworks⁴⁰. The diverse nature of audiences creates significant challenges for curators especially when they work with companies from different locations because they need to provide subtitles and cultural modifications and monitor discussion content⁴¹. Successful curators develop 'polyglot cultural competencies', while creating bridges between disparate taste cultures and facilitating cultural cross-pollination.

The implementation of cultural mediation programs exemplifies adaptive strategy in practice. The practice of 'adaptive curators' creates various access points for cultural engagement instead of enforcing single dominant frameworks.

The method acknowledges that various audience groups need unique interpretive approaches to cultural experiences yet maintains the transformative essence and emotional impact of each performance.

Curatorial adaptiveness operates across multiple time frames – the time of the festival itself, educational endeavours, and long-term cultural capacity development. Spatially, curators create intersection zones where diverse audience segments can interact and explore new aesthetic dimensions. The

political adaptiveness presents the most difficult challenge because it demands handling conflicts between inequality and migration and gender discrimination and ecological issues together with different political perspectives of audience members. The process demands both ethical adaptiveness and intellectual integrity to establish safe spaces for debate and discussion. The economic perspective shows adaptiveness as a crucial tool particularly when funding stands as a significant challenge. Mårten Spångberg views network funding models as mechanisms to strengthen power structures⁴² and encourages curators to create methods which protect artistic integrity despite unpredictable funding sources. Systemic adaptiveness requires knowledge about the amount of change that particular environments can withstand before they lose their fundamental characteristics. The curator functions as both cultural gatekeeper and innovator by linking local tradition to international dialogue.

In essence, the ability to adapt enables festivals to become active spaces which deliver cultural understanding and social growth. The framework requires

40 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, op. cit. 90.

41 Richard Schechner, "Performance studies: The broad spectrum approach, in Henry Bial" (ed.), *The performance studies reader* (2nd ed.), (Routledge, 2004), 8.

42 Mårten Spångberg, "Motivation at the End of Times", in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal* (Spring, 55/2011), 76.

adaptiveness as its fundamental competence which enables curators to function as “complex mediators” who unite audience requirements with performer needs while working within budget constraints to create unified yet adaptable cultural experiences. Performing arts festivals function as cultural convergence platforms which unite artistic expression with social cohesion to drive the ongoing development of the performing-arts sector.⁴³

Transformation and threshold: liminality and performative potential

Fischer-Lichte describes curatorial transformation as the process when performance contexts experience the “collapse of oppositions” which transforms “either-or” into “as-well” experiential modes.⁴⁴ The dissolution of oppositions creates an empty space between opposing elements that reveals an interval which “points to the threshold between the spaces, to the state of liminality, into which the performance transfers all those who participate in it.”⁴⁵ The curator serves as a designer who builds liminal experiences

through their use of “verbalisation, mediation, discussion”, according to Malzacher⁴⁶.

Turner’s theory explains how festivals create threshold experiences that develop stronger connections between *communitas* and liminality than between *communitas* and normative structure.⁴⁷ The boundary-crossing spaces in former socialist countries enabled Turner’s concept of “playing” with structure to emerge which produced cultural innovations that continued beyond the festival period.⁴⁸ The act of playful transgression produces its most significant effects in regions which experienced recent breakdowns of strict controlling systems. The self-creating process operates through systems that organize themselves while they need continuous intake of new unexpected and unplanned elements that emerge.⁴⁹ The systems generate unpredictable circumstances as “spectators might have found instances of emergence and their own reaction or the behavior of other spectators equally difficult to predict.”⁵⁰ The curator creates frameworks that allow new

43 See Jennifer Radbourne, Hilary Glow, Katya Johanson, *The audience experience: A critical analysis of audiences in the performing arts* (Intellect, 2013).

44 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Performative Power of Performance*, *op. cit.*, 22.

45 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Culture as Performance. Theatre history as cultural history*, 11: https://ceteatro.pt/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/comunicacao_erika-bf9.pdf, 2004

46 Florian Malzacher, *Anwalt der Nische*, *op. cit.*, 12.

47 Victor Turner, *op. cit.*, 45.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Performative Power of Performance*, *op. cit.*, 165.

50 *Ibid.*

possibilities to enter instead of working to achieve predetermined outcomes. Ferguson shows how “touchstone experiences” function as motivating forces which push curators and artists to transcend symbolic capital accumulation for transformative encounters.⁵¹ These operate through “autopoietic feedback loops” where participants experience themselves as “involved and responsible for a situation nobody single-handedly created.”⁵² The curatorial environmentalism of Van Campenhout provides an understanding of transformation as ecological process through “shared curatorship, putting into question the authorial roles”⁵³. She recognizes that “the real curating is the non-curated part of the interstices, of the places in-between, of the potential of the situation for changing one’s attitude, one’s mind or one’s sense of belonging.”⁵⁴ The transitional area serves as a transformative space through unplanned interactions while expanding its reach to include “a redistribution of power that makes us rethink the fabric of our social bodies and belonging.”⁵⁵ The festival functions as a meeting point that unites different social,

cultural, and political interests to form timely communities which may produce lasting effects.

Empathy and care: towards an ethics of curatorial practice

Empathy functions as a fundamental human capacity which enables people to understand and share feelings of others while also keeping their self-awareness. It stands as the most uniquely human quality in our modern era of artificial intelligence, where algorithms can replicate cognitive processes but lack the ability to truly empathize with others. Drawing upon Clare Graves’ “Levels of Existence” model, we consider the empathetic curator integrated with what Graves labels as “Green”, a value system characterized by humanitarian values, community consciousness, and the ability to share with others while creating genuinely open spaces.⁵⁶ The creation of empathetic festival spaces depends on curators who establish environments which value relational interactions above consumption hierarchies. These spaces function through Elke Van Campenhout’s “shared curatorship” which challenges authorial roles

51 Alex Lazaridis Ferguson, “Symbolic Capital and Relationships of Flow: Canada, Europe, Canada, Europe, and The International Performing Arts Festival Circuit”, *Theatre Research in Canada*, 34(1) / 2024, 97-124.

52 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Performative Power of Performance*, op. cit., 165.

53 Elke van Campenhout, “Shuffling the Deck, Shifting Positions. Curating as environmentalism”, in *Frakcija*, op. cit., 42.

54 *Ibid.*

55 *Ibid.*

56 Clare W. Graves, “Levels of Existence: An Open System Theory of Values”, *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 10(2)/1970, 131-155.

to create new opportunities for material exchange and sharing.⁵⁷ Such practices generate both social and cultural capital by enabling authentic encounters between diverse participants, transforming festivals into sites of mutual learning rather than unidirectional presentation.

The deepest manifestation of empathetic space occurs through Fischer-Lichte's identification of "space between opposites" which creates a threshold area for genuine transformation to happen – the "betwixt and between"⁵⁸. The empathetic curator works primarily in this liminal space which exists between artist and audience and self and other to dissolve barriers and create authentic communication. Turner's concept of "communitas" describes authentic human relationships that emerge outside structural authority systems, which exists more closely with liminality than with normative structure.⁵⁹ It is within these transitional areas – where established power systems become temporarily inactive – that empathetic curatorial practices operate.

Hans Ulrich Obrist defines his curating approach as a method of

non-interference through which he states: "The curator must be a catalyst who disappears."⁶⁰ A deep empathetic understanding enables curators to recognize appropriate times for intervention and withdrawal while allowing others to express themselves freely.

Understanding the difference between "inclusive" and "open" practices becomes essential at this point. 'Inclusive' functions as an opposite of 'exclusive', as these two concepts establish dualistic relationships that might prove counterproductive. Open spaces that welcome various expression methods serve better for establishing authentic participation opportunities for diverse individuals. Zagar's prescient observation, as captured by Ferguson, reveals empathy's ultimate function within curatorial practice: the cultivation of resilient cultural ecosystems that transcend institutional dependency. Her vision of "an enduring informal cultural network" suggests that empathetic curatorial relationships create lasting bonds capable of withstanding systemic disruption. The proposed "habitus of generosity" represents a fundamental reimagining of Bourdieu's

⁵⁷ Elke Van Campenhout, *op.cit.*, 42.

⁵⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Culture as Performance. Theatre history as cultural history", Centro de Estudos de Teatro, *Actas/ Proceedings História do Teatro e Novas Tecnologias*, 2004, 11.

⁵⁹ Victor Turner, *op. cit.*, 45.

⁶⁰ Hans Ulrich Obrist, Diaghilev is the most important curator of the 20th century, an Interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, in Florian Malzacher, Tupajić, T., Zanki, P. (eds.), *Curating Performing Arts. Frakcija Časopis Za Izvedbene Umjetnosti / Performing Arts Journal* (Spring, 55/2011), 46.

competitive cultural field, where curatorial empathy transforms the circulation of symbolic capital into a regenerative system of mutual support, positioning the empathetic curator as steward of collective artistic continuity through networks of care that outlast institutional frameworks.⁶¹

Conclusions and future research

The CURATE framework demonstrates how contemporary curatorial practice balances institutional preservation with revolutionary change. The shift indicates a change in curatorial practice, which moves from authorship to stewardship and from program development to community building. The CURATE model calls for an empathetic method of curatorship as our present time reveals institutional failures together with social gaps and emotional fatigue. This transformation possesses the ability to transform both festivals and the broader cultural landscape while developing resilience and creating connections during periods of uncertainty. Future research requires practical implementation to achieve its refinement, and needs additional research to determine its effectiveness when applied to different cultural environments, through longitudinal audience studies examining emotional and

civic impacts of care-oriented practices, qualitative research with curators, cultural managers, and volunteers exploring affective labour strategies, comparative analysis between care-based and traditional approaches, and policy development integrating CURATE principles into cultural funding and training frameworks. The model requires a complete shift from traditional authority and taste-based gatekeeping to shared responsibility and sustained relational presence and radical attention which could transform both festival ecosystems and the broader cultural landscape to build community resilience and foster meaningful connections during uncertain times.

Future research should focus on three main objectives: integrating diverse audiences including people with disabilities, working collaboratively with curatorial teams, and refining the model's empirical dimensions to ensure its effectiveness in different cultural contexts and community needs.

⁶¹ Alex Lazaridis Ferguson, *op. cit.*, 122.

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