

BOOK REVIEW:

**Mihaela Michailov, *Corpuri radicale în spectacole contemporane*,
București: Editura Vellant, 2021, 232 p.**



As a playwright, critic and lecturer (at UNATC “I. L. Caragiale”, Bucharest), Mihaela Michailov (b. 1977) knows how to build a piece of research that is both valuable and innovative in the domains she is focusing on, but also accessible to the general public. Representing a new and improved version of her doctoral thesis, the book *Corpuri radicale în spectacole contemporane* (roughly translated to *Radical bodies in contemporary performances*) concentrates on the ways modern theatre, performance art and contemporary dance perceive and “play” with the human body.

The book is divided into three chapters, all similarly structured – a general introduction, between 5 and 9 case studies on representative figures, and a short analysis regarding the theme of corporeality in the vision of Romanian artists. The text is accompanied by black and white images, but even more helpful are the QR codes that, when scanned, lead you to various YouTube videos or web pages.

In the first chapter, titled “Protesting bodies. Directorial theories and practices”, the main focus is corporeality in theatre, a field that was first innovated by the Russian actor and theoretician, Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940). Meyerhold was interested in the revolutionary role that theatre could take on, using it as a way to educate and emancipate those oppressed by an abusive regime. The Russian actor’s ideas represent only the starting point of a long string of actors/theatre directors/theoreticians that will continue to develop the theme of corporeality in their plays – Antonin Artaud (1896-1948), Eugenio Barba (b. 1936), Romeo Castellucci (b. 1960) and many more.



When it comes to Romanian theatre, Mihaela Michailov doesn't go as in-depth as in the first part of the chapter but still manages to highlight the more important names and the themes that are explored alongside that of the human body. From pioneers such as Ion Sava (1900-1947), Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011), David Esrig (b. 1935), to Mihai Măniuțiu (b. 1954), Radu Afrim (b. 1968), Eugen Jebeleanu (b. 1989) and not only, the subject of corporeality receives feminist, racial and LGBTQ undertones.

„Bodies in danger. Performance and Body Art” is the second chapter and it concentrates on how different artists chose their own bodies as their main medium of creation. Even more than that, performance art represents “an event that involves everyone, to varying degrees, and depending on different capacities” (p. 89), meaning that its socio-political message has an even stronger impact on the audience. The roots of this branch of art can be found in the avant-garde movements (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism), but its most memorable representatives only started to emerge in the 70s-80s: Marina Abramović (b. 1946), ORLAN (b. 1947), Ana Mendieta (1948-1985).

The communist regime has not been an impediment to the development of performance art in Romania, as we can see in the early works of Ion Grigorescu (b. 1945), Geta Brătescu (1926-2018), or Alexandru Antik (b. 1950). In the '90s, after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu and the instauration of the democratic system, performance art became even more popular and represented the main focus point of different art festivals.

Last but not least, the third chapter, “Interrogative bodies. Fluid representations in contemporary dance”, is an introduction to the world of “theatre-dance”, a world where standing in place can still be considered dancing. Tackling subjects such as lost innocence, fear, fragility or even the “transgression of human nature” (p. 189), contemporary dance performers hardly fail at immersing the audience in their shows. Pina Bausch (1940-2009), Sasha Waltz (b. 1963), and Vera Mantero (b. 1966) are some of the dancers and choreographers that Mihaela Michailov describes in this chapter.

In Romania, contemporary dance only started to take off in the early 2000s, but its fast-paced progress it's nothing short of impressive. According to Michailov, contemporary dance “became a territory of absorption of artistic practices from visual art, politics and philosophy of the body” (p. 191), which gave dancers, now more than ever, the chance to reflect on the hardships of the society we are living in, and therefore to deeply connect with the spectators.

That being said, one of the first questions that this review wants to answer is: does Mihaela Michailov succeed in reaching her primary goal, as it is stated in her foreword? The answer is, without a doubt, yes. The playwright does a great job in creating a “mini dictionary” of key figures and performances from

each domain mentioned, all while managing to highlight the connections between them. Even though she doesn't put as much emphasis on the Romanian cultural space, Michailov's analysis is still pretty thorough, and it doesn't leave the reader with unanswered questions, but maybe just a taste for a little bit more.

Is Michailov's book approachable to the average reader? In the most part, yes. Channelling both her playwright and pedagogical skills, the author gives us a pleasurable reading, where she doesn't shy away from explaining different specialized terms and from going back to various historical moments, all in order for her presentation to be as precise and logical as possible. Nonetheless, *Corpuri radicale în spectacole contemporane* is a book specifically aimed at those interested in the world of corporeality in arts, as Michailov states at the end of her foreword.

Another thing to appreciate about Mihaela Michailov's book is her objectivity when it comes to the artists she presents, whether we are talking about foreign performers or performers that she knows personally. For example, in the subchapter about Rodrigo García (b. 1959), a director whose plays revolve around the concepts of mass consumption and food waste, Michailov doesn't hesitate to question his methods, wondering if he is not "guilty" of the same acts he is criticising (p. 67).

To conclude this review, I have to say that *Corpuri radicale în spectacole contemporane* by Mihaela Michailov is a must-read for those who have a passion for either modern theatre, performance art or contemporary dance, especially if they are active in these fields. Not only is it a well-written book, but it also analyses a world that not many people are familiar with and not many articles are exploring enough, that of corporeality in the vision of artists.

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