

TORTUOUSLY TURNING REALITY INTO THEATRE: THE CASE OF NICOLETA ESINENCU

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ABSTRACT. How do the professionals of the theatre of the real deal with the dilemmas raised by the techniques and ethics of representation that lie at the heart of this particular drama genre? There is little in the available scholarship to provide much guidance in this regard. This article addresses the question and the gap encased within it by examining the critical case of Nicoleta Esinencu, one of the most high profile contemporary drama directors of this kind in Eastern and Central Europe. Focused on the work done by Esinencu at the avant-garde Laundry-Theatre in Kishinev, the analysis dwells on the ethics of documentary work and of representing real life people, the information-gathering process, the choice of topics and the societal implications of the performance. Furthermore, the article captures the bespoke interdisciplinarity of ethnographic research and drama studies while unearthing unsuspected tensions between the claims about representing authentic experiences made by the theatre of the real and the actual perceptions of the professionals.

Keywords: documentary theatre, ethics of representation, performative practices, Laundry-Theatre, Nicoleta Esinencu

A generic term under which very different practices of stage or drama approach of events, situations, real issues and working with materials pre-existing the creative process are brought together, documentary theatre is an extremely wide umbrella, to which alternative concepts are often preferred, such as “verbatim”, “docu-drama”, “ethnotheatre”, etc². From an even broader perspective, which takes into account less the “how” (the use of documentary research tools) these plays or theatrical texts are constructed and more the “what” they cry out for (a privileged relationship – of fidelity and authenticity – with the reality outside the scene).

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² For recent examples of rejection of the “documentary” label, see Jules Odendahl-James, “A History of U.S. Documentary Theatre in Three Stages”, *American Theatre*, 22 August 2017.

Theatre of the real, the formula preferred by researcher Carol Martin, covers “a wide range of theatre practices and styles that recycle reality, whether that reality is personal, social, political, or historical” (Martin, 2013: 5), whether factual theatre, theatre of witnesses, non-fictional or tribunal theatre, war and battle reenactments, or autobiographical theatre, with a long history – dating from the beginning of the 20th century³ –, but taking on an increasingly important role with the democratization of access to information.

The formal, thematic and aesthetic diversity of the theatre of the real/of the documentary theatre makes it the most versatile “genre” and, at the same time, the most fertile on practically every scene of the world (quotation marks are meant to mark the fact that, regardless of the term used, we never talk about a genre, but about the intersection of idiosyncratic practices, methods and tools, the common denominator of which is the claiming of a direct relation to reality – and, of course, the belief that reality does exist). The fact that the documentary toolkit serves, as Carol Martin insists, for the representation of social or political realities (and “the personal is political” anyway), and this representation is animated by a specific ethos – but also motivated by the historical relation of the documentary practices with the left-wing movement –, the tendency to overlay, above the already mentioned terminology, the labels of “social theatre” and/or “political theatre” is almost impossible to suppress. This, although, if one can really say that the theatre of the real is political and/or social through its themes, it may very well happen that what it aims at to be the politics of the theatre itself⁴, not all cases of social or political theatre are necessarily documentary-based, and the ambiguities of the definition, conventions, strategies and forms of the theatre of the real, in the context of the ubiquity of information, lead to the increasing relativization of the borders between documentary and fiction.

In the end, however, it is precisely this versatile character – together with the very rapid evolution of new technologies⁵, including archiving, and forms of audience interaction (through which it exercises its social-political functions) – that makes the theatre of the real impossible to discuss otherwise than in its extremely individual – and for this very reason, exemplary – iterations.

³ For an introduction to the history of documentary theatre, see Magris and Picon-Vallin, 2019.

⁴ Two of the six functions of the theatre of the real as identified by Carol Martin (in Martin, 2006) are “to critique the operations of both documentary and fiction” and “to elaborate the oral culture of theatre in which gestures, mannerisms, and attitudes are passed and replicated via technology”.

⁵ Although the rise of the documentary is intimately linked to the evolution of the access to information, its storage, reproduction and multiplication, it should be noted that the theatre of the real is not formally conditioned by the stage use of new technologies, and their role is central first and foremost in the documentation process itself: “Theatre of the real is born from a sea change in archiving brought on by digitization and the Internet” (Martin, 2013: 5).

Starting from and using mainly an interview conducted by me, in November 2019, with an artist highly relevant for the theatre of the real in Eastern Europe, whose connections with the documentary scene in Romania and influence over it are recognized⁶, the following analysis questions, using the concrete example of Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic practice, some of the central elements of the modes working in the theatre of the real – the ethics of the documentary approach and the ethics of representation of real people, the documentation processes, the themes and the stakes of its privileged relationship with reality.

Born in 1978, Nicoleta Esinencu is, probably, the best known name, at European level, in the contemporary theatre in the Republic of Moldova and one of the notable influences on the small (independent) stage of the documentary in Romania. Becoming known in 2004-2005 with the play *Fuck you, Eu.Ro.pa!*, and constantly involved in international collaborations (especially in Germany and France), Esinencu has been, since 2010, part of an artistic collective, Laundry-Theatre, whose name comes from the space (both independent theatre and venue for artistic events) that they managed and in which their productions were performed for seven years (the basement of a public laundry in the centre of Kishinev). For the most part, Nicoleta Esinencu's texts/performances, before opening the Laundry-Theatre and after – among the few exceptions are *Life* (2016; about the war in Ukraine) and *Ballads of memory*, created in Cluj –, document the social life and politics in the Republic of Moldova, from the historiography of the Holocaust, the war in Transnistria, the protests in Kishinev, the linguistic mix (the performances freely mix Romanian and Russian) and the Soviet inheritance to the social pressure on the gay community, the educational system or the condition of workers, from the perspective of power relations in the contemporary society and the effects of the post-Soviet transition on human relations.

In its almost ten years of existence, the Laundry-Theatre had a variable composition, at the beginning including, for a good period, predominantly actors, along with Esinencu, actress Doriana Talmazan and producer Nora Dorogan, and an equally good period consisting only in the three founders. In November 2019, two long-term employees of the Laundry-Theatre (Artiom Zavadovsky and Kira Semionov) were invited to join the collective.

Specific to the theatrical productions of certain collectives and to their adherence to a non-hierarchical organization of the creative process, the shows of the Laundry-Theatre are sometimes signed in alphabetical order by the entire

⁶ See, among others, the considerations of director David Schwartz in his interview with Maria Cernat, published by the online magazine *Baricada.org*, "David Schwartz: Theatre Performances Must Target Systemic Oppression", Part II, 9 January 2018, <https://ro.baricada.org/david-schwartz-interviu-end/>.

team, their authorship being assumed collaboratively. “What keeps the Laundry together is not the theatre production, it is a concept that we all build, it is not a pre-existing doctrine. These are processes that we all learn and still have to learn. Feminism is also a process, with a long journey ahead of it,” says Nicoleta Esinencu, finally referring to the main theme that currently infuses the creative work of the Laundry-Theatre:

There are things that come together at a given time in society, in life, in politics, in each one’s personal stories. The feminist perspective added to the critique of capitalism from one point to another; from the theme, it became a construction framework. I think that the condition of women is a sub-theme that is found in many (other) topics and it is difficult to avoid it, to not mention it. So is the LGBT theme, which appears over many years in the Laundry shows.

Although the themes in question are a constant in Nicoleta Esinencu’s work, the social condition of femininity and the confrontation of patriarchy, from a feminist perspective, have become dominant in the last about five years – in a radical and explicit forms in productions such as *Requiem for Europe* (2018), *The Gospel According to Maria* (2018), *Ballads of Memory* (2019), *The Abolition of Family* (2019) – in an extremely personal context, her mother’s stroke and subsequent death:

Mothers Without Cunt was talking just about it (*i.e.*: about feminism), but it was 12 years ago⁷. I personally choose the topics as much as I can personally. The fact that I had this experience with my mother who was ill influenced me a lot, and her death, as well. I talk a lot about it and maybe even obsessively, because my mother was not able to speak about it, to speak in general, and I try to do it for her, as much as I can.

The most recent production of the (deterritorialized) Laundry-Theatre, *The Abolition of Family*, is the meeting point on the one hand of Nicoleta Esinencu’ long-running themes – gender identity and sexual orientation, racism and discrimination, the influence of economic conditions on the social structure –, in a synthesis that marks the moment of historicization (therefore, analysis) of the transition in the Republic of Moldova. On the other hand, it is the culmination of the forming and development of an artistic practice in close

⁷ The monodrama *Mothers Without Cunt* was commissioned by and had its premiere at the Swiss Cultural Centre in Paris, in 2007. It was not presented in the Republic of Moldova until the end of 2009, following the April 2009 political protests in Kishinev, whose repression by the authorities included gender-based violence.

connection with personal events and subjective transformations exemplary for the type of involvement and individual commitment implied by the theatre of the real. A relating mode that includes not only the concept of the political relevance of the personal, but also the constant treatment of the autobiographical experience as socially relevant (hence replicable):

In *The Abolition of Family*, the idolising of the father, especially of a father who is a writer, is very present, dominant. Once the awareness process has surfaced, we will face it a lot. I will face it first of all; how the public will do it is the next step. *Abolition...* is a show about families, not just mine, with the common point being the destruction of the Soviet Union and the coming of a new world that destroyed them: through economic migration, poverty, the collapse of the medical and social protection systems...

In her early days as a playwright, especially after the European success of the play *Fuck you, Eu.ro.pa!* (2004), the Nicoleta Esinencu's relationship with her own father, one of the most well-known authors of the Republic of Moldova ("whose name, in the feminine version, she has", a recurring mention in press materials), has been the object of interest to practically all those who interviewed her.⁸ It is quite possible that part of the journalists' interest was generated by the fact that *Fuck you ...*, a passionate and poetic denunciation of the condition of Moldova, between the refusal of the Soviet past and the hypocritical European aspirations, is structured as a monologue addressed to a generic father, hypothesizing a metaphorical intergenerational conflict (and between gender roles – the monodrama addresses the sub-topic of sexuality and gender normativity in Soviet/post-Soviet Moldova). Conflict that, in fact, Esinencu has always expressed ambiguously in interviews, in which the need for public fictionalization of a relationship felt as deeply private leads to various dissimulation strategies⁹, the constant being the reference to the freedom she felt in her family¹⁰.

⁸ See Mihail Vakulovski, "«For A Theatre Text, It Is More Important To See It Staged Than Published In A Book», Interview With Nicoleta Esinencu", <http://www.tiuk.reea.net/8/esinencu.html>: "There was still no interview in which I was not asked about my father."

⁹ An example, in the M. Vakulovski's quoted interview: "Just last week I was talking about this with a Swedish artist, Lene Berg. She says the most appropriate answer to this question is – I love my father. Society loves answers like that. Yes, I say, but in my country no one misses an opportunity to say that they loves their parents. Then, she says, you have to say that you are in conflict with him, a conflict of generations. (...) I am in conflict with my father and for this reason I cannot answer how being his daughter influenced me."

¹⁰ See "«Dad, I Have To Tell You Something». Interview With Nicoleta Esinencu, A Young Playwright, The Daughter of Writer Nicolae Esinencu", *Ziarul de Gardă*, Kishinev, 12 August. 2004; "Nicoleta ESINENCU. Esinencu's Enfant Terrible", *VIP Magazine*, Kishinev, no. 17, September 2005.

The context, as Nicoleta Esinencu says, is important, and this discussion about her family is not, it should be specified, an amateur exercise in Freudian (or Jungian) psychology, slipped on the back door in the analysis of a theatrical practice. This theatrical practice itself has from the beginning been marked by Esinencu's public hyperexposure, in her quality as the daughter of a literary star in a small country, where the local gossip plays the role of public space, empowering even the light of a flashlight to the power of a stage limelight. The context is equally important when it directly concerns the artistic practices – in this case, the hybridized forms of documentary theatre/theatre of the real experimented at the Laundry, which replace the argument of legitimacy of the stage-exposed documents and the stage representation of the real persons/characters, identifiable by their own idiosyncrasies, either with the choral multiplication of the assumed personal testimonies, or with the denial of the function of representing the real character, in favour of the strict representation of the story.

The terminological laxity in the field of the theatre of the real makes it possible to extend the conceptual area of the autobiographical performance beyond the precisely delimited area of productions in which the authors perform their own life story, towards hybrid formulas of collaboration as presented here. In performances like *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?* (2013), *Ballads of Memory* (2019, produced by Reactor of Creation and Experiment from Cluj) or *The Abolition of Family* (2019), the performative condition does not imply that the actors “perform simultaneously as themselves and as the real characters they represent” (Martin, 2006:10), for the good reason that they themselves are the real characters represented (we will return to the practice of expert performers in the theatre of the real and the differences from the “outsourcing of authenticity” in the delegate performance, theorized by researcher Claire Bishop).

At the same time that this public visibility offered Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic ventures an increased potential for attention, it imposed ethical limits on artistic practices increasingly based on personal realities – the limit to which the universe of everyone touched by these realities becomes inevitably involved in these performances (the first autobiographical production of the Laundry-Theatre – which, however, do not include Esinencu directly – date from around 2013, the year of *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?*, whose theme was the condition of the gay community in Moldova).

It is one of the fundamental deontological aspects for Nicoleta Esinencu even today – considering the recurrence, in the Laundry-Theatre performances, of performers' autobiographical representations: “What are the ethical limits of representing one's story, when it concerns and touches other people? This is a very difficult question, since there is no pre-set process.”

The question is difficult enough that, in general, the answer not only varies from artist to artist, but the question itself is often avoided. In her analysis of a legendary autobiographical performance, *Rumstick Road* (The Wooster Group, 1977), the result of Spalding Gray's collaboration with Elizabeth LeCompte in the theatrical investigation of Gray's mother's suicide, Carol Martin does not discuss at any moment the ethical dimension of some decisions such as reproduction on stage of recorded conversations with Gray's father, still alive, or with his mother's (also very much alive) psychiatrist (Martin, 2013: 45-58). Likewise, the question of the impact of this performance on Gray's larger family circle remains unchallenged – certainly, at the time when *Rumstick Road* was produced, any concern for the ethical consequences of the show was non-existent.¹¹

Most likely, on the other hand, the ethical problem of how an autobiographical approach reflects uncontrollably (in the Moldovan context, especially) over one's own family, from the point of view of spectatorship, is the reason why the first such performance, where Esinencu is appearing on stage for the first time as a performer of her own family story, dates from 2019, after the death of both her parents – it being *The Abolition of Family*, whose premiere took place in Hebbel am Ufer (Berlin) and not Kishinev. An important detail: in full coherence with her own ethical system, even in *The Abolition of Family*, the references to collateral persons/characters in Esinencu's autobiographical story are vague and indirect, hence not allowing their (precise) identification.

A collateral effect of these inaccuracy options is the erosion of the "impression of the real" in the performance, a role that, however, is intentionally relegated to the physical presence of the performers and not to the dramatic construction itself – *The Abolition of Family* is a choral score made up of the autobiographical testimonies of performers (of which only Doriana Talmazan, the constant collaborator of Nicoleta Esinencu and one of the co-founders of the Laundry-Theatre, is a professional actress), who present themselves as witnesses, confessors and experts of their own lives¹², but also representatives of their communities (ethnic, linguistic, racial ...) of origin.

Despite the fact that the public interest for the filial relationship has diminished as Nicoleta Esinencu's artistic identity has strengthened distinctly from that of her father, not at all paradoxically, the most recent interview in which Nicoleta's relationship with Nicolae Esinencu is addressed dates from 2017¹³, a

¹¹ Moreover, even the more concrete subject of the ethics of representation in the theatre of the real continues to be little analysed in the academic literature. See Young, 2017: 22-23.

¹² Position related, but not identical to that of "experts in everyday life", put into practice and theorized by the German collective Rimini Protokoll.

¹³ Oana Stoica, "«Ăștia care fac spectacole pe scăunele» – portret – Nicoleta Esinencu" ["«Those who make performances on little chairs» – portrait – Nicoleta Esinencu"], *Dilema veche* no. 699, 13-19 July 2017, <https://dilemaveche.ro/sectiune/arte-performative/articol/astia-care-fac-spectacole-pe-scaunele-portret-nicoleta-esinencu>.

year after her father's death. The loss of both her parents changed her perspective on reporting to this filial legacy, for one obvious reason: the trauma gives rise to a reconsideration of their role in her own formation (and the bricks are coherently laid in Esinencu's view of the world as marked by inequities and randomly distributed social imbalances: her childhood was privileged), of family memory, of family itself and, above all, of the way in which her mother's assumed role shaped her relationship with her father:

I grew up like that, I grew up and I still live in a deeply patriarchal world. I grew up like millions of women in this world have. Obviously, we are marked and we realize certain things in certain periods of life. As about identifying with either the father or the mother, who wants to see herself as a tormented woman for the next 20 years? Of course you imagine yourself as the father, why would I imagine myself as my mother, carrying nets all day? Logically, it's simple. For me, it is important to understand my mother's choices, to discuss what family means, what love means, the responsibilities of a family, who, what they dream about, who, what is left with. I might even not have been on stage, it's my story anyway. And I come from a family that, in the context of the Republic of Moldova, is quite well known, an important enough aspect for me.

At the same time, the death of her parents brings with it a modification of the ethical burden – the moral responsibility towards the memory of people is different and with far more imprecise limits than that towards people whose life can be directly influenced by artistic decisions. In one of the few theoretical texts on the ethics of representation in documentary performances, Stuart Young draws upon Emmanuel Levinas to assert the “unlimited”, “irreducible” and “infinite” responsibility towards the Other, under the conditions of a theatre – of the real – which states to be speaking for/on behalf of the Other, those who cannot represent themselves (from the legendary authors of tribunal theatre in the UK to the Romanian artists involved in the documentary, this “being the voice of the voiceless” is a recurring and fundamental principle, especially in motivational terms). This assertion (or “claim”) being usually attacked, Young explains, as arrogant and politically illegitimate (Young, 2017: 23).

What Young does not discuss, however – probably because the terrain is uncertain and with too many variables – is the ethical dimension of the autobiographical theatre, in which the narrator-performer participates fully consciously and in full control in representing their own life story, with their own body and personal memory serving as a living archive – in the absence of mediation of other instances, such as the actor, playwright or director (the title of Carol Martin's quoted article, “Bodies of Evidence”, is in itself a metaphor for the vocation of stage documentary to embody a memory, an archive).

For the most part, the process of direct documentation, of “story collection”, follows, in the Nicoleta Esinencu’s case, the dynamics charted by Young (who, in his article, synthesizes a consistent bibliography of working practices): building a trusting relationship, partly personal, partly based on the presumption of the documentary artistic approach as morally superior and dedicated to the cause of its own “subjects”. Despite the fact that a whole line (the verbatim one) of the theatre of the real states its privileged relationship with its sources through the fidelity of the representation, this seems to count less than the fidelity to the cause of the source.

This trusting relationship, in the case of the theatre that investigates contemporary realities, is essential and, often, ethically charged, by highlighting the artist’s long-term emotional involvement:

I don’t know if I can really answer the question of how you do the documentation without betraying the story, says Nicoleta Esinencu. There are practitioners of documentary theatre who do not connect in any way with people, they take the stories, they make the performances, and the relationships are strictly professional. I am not a fan of this system, it seems to me like a factory model. I’m alive, I am sensitive and emotional enough that I can’t work like that. I cannot say that I have built close relationships and friendships with everyone I worked with, but I have always tried to maintain a long-term mutual communication and understanding.

The pact that the documentary theatremaker concludes with their source, closely linked to the commitment to give “a voice to the voiceless”, is one less related to the accuracy of the details and more to respecting the point of view of the source – the trust is based on the source’s expectation of being represented as they see themselves. The distance from this expectation makes the difference between a documentary and a fictional performance inspired by real events.¹⁴

And for Nicoleta Esinencu, the representation of the real is a matter first of trust and then not of fidelity to an objective truth, but of loyalty to the sources’ subjectivity:

If we are to speak about how we do so that we do not betray the trust of those who give us their stories, it is a very complex process and we do not always succeed. I don’t think I have had any negative experiences, in which to

¹⁴ This is the case of *Triple Point* by Bogdan Georgescu (National Theatre Tîrgu-Mureş/Colectiv A, Cluj, 2013), based on the case of a father who committed suicide by throwing himself in a lake together with his two young children. The show does not follow the mother’s point of view and did not have her consent.

have negative reactions from those whose stories I represented. I think it's a process developed over time, in which one tries to be faithful to the purpose – the reason why one does a certain performance, how one brings the story on stage.

Although the term “purpose” may seem vague, it is central to the performative approach in the theatre of the real: the purpose is never the representation itself, as it is neither entering into a dialogue with a certain representational tradition, nor the hermeneutic competition (the latter being the engine of restaging of the classical repertory). In the theatre of the real, the general purpose is “to persuade spectators to understand specific events in particular ways”, which makes this theatre to be seen as a “political affiliation in and of itself” (Martin, 2006: 11). “The particular ways” in which the artist seeks to present situations or events constitute the individual purpose of the process of working with the documentary material.

The experiences in the field (the practice of the theatre of the real) show how different are the documentation tools used in the case of the theatre of the real (Hammond and Steward, 2008; Cantrell, 2013; Martin, 2013; Popovici, 2016: 115-142; Young, 2017) and how little are they subject to rules, norms, standards, even when their repertoire is borrowed from deontologically codified fields (qualitative sociological research, oral history/life history, journalism, etc.). The theatre of the real may use pre-existing archive materials, produced by state institutions (court files and criminal investigations, in the case of the tribunal theatre, surveillance files of the communist political police, in shows such as *X mm of Y km* and *Typographic Majuscule* by Gianina Cărbunariu¹⁵), other types of historical documents (news articles, brochures, correspondence, books published at the moment of the events – an example from Romania is *Trilogy 2018*, produced by a team animated by director David Schwartz¹⁶), pre-existing films and audio or video materials (the reenactment of the Ceausescu's process in *In the Last Days of Ceausescu's Life* – directed by Milo Rau, International Institute for Political Crimes, Berlin¹⁷; *ROGVAIV*, created by Bogdan Georgescu at the Laundry-Theatre in 2011, a succession of reenactments of TV shows), contemporary press materials (news, interviews, reports, investigations),

¹⁵ The first, a Colectiv A production, Cluj, 2011, the second, a dramAcum and Odeon Theatre co-production, Bucharest, 2014. Both are made exclusively out of surveillance file documents, for which Cărbunariu uses the term “ready-made”.

¹⁶ Unlike the aforementioned performances by Gianina Cărbunariu, the three productions in this series also include fictional dramatic reenactments.

¹⁷ Translation of the German title. In Romanian, also known as *The Last Hours of Ceausescu's life*. In the performance, Milo Rau reenacts, in fact, the video recording of the trial, as it was broadcast by the Romanian Television in December 1989.

blog posts, Facebook and/or sociological research materials, statistics, reports, surveys, speeches, historiography, etc. (a performance like *Frontal* by Gianina Cărbunariu¹⁸ uses press materials and statistics, dramatizing them without exposing the direct source; *Because You Deserve It* by Bogdan Georgescu¹⁹ reproduces two press articles and a series of Facebook posts, with the partial stage disclosure of the sources), direct interviews with “persons of interest”, carried out by the artistic team and (audio/video) recorded or not, with attention paid to the paralinguistic elements or not (the overwhelming majority of verbatim shows, including a whole series of productions by the team animated by David Schwartz – *Hot Heads*, 2010, *Under the Ground*, *Jiu Valley after 1989*, 2012, etc.), self-documentation (personal stories of the artistic team – of the playwright or performers, professionals or not: *I Declare On My Own Responsibility* by Alina Șerban and David Schwartz²⁰, the autobiographical monodrama *Good for Export* by Alex Tocilescu, directed by Catinca Drăgănescu²¹).

At the limit of ethics, there are also situations of using so-called involuntary recordings – materials recorded without the participants’ knowledge and reproduced without their agreement: in the already mentioned *Because You Deserve It*, the artistic team made the secret recording of a pre-abortion counselling session, held at a clinic affiliated with the pro-life movement (in fact, the press articles, and Facebook posts in this performance were used without the consent of the authors, which led to negative reactions from at least one of them and to threats with taking the artists to the courts for copyright infringement²²). Given that, in general, in the theatre of the real, the use agreement is rarely required when it comes to living public persons (politicians, civil servants, journalists ...), although I am not aware of examples of non-agreed use of (not already public) materials, when it comes to other categories of people, the uninformed use of such involuntary recordings is absolutely exceptional. It is also quite clear that the possibility of doing it deeply depends on the local legal framework (in

¹⁸ The Youth Theatre, Piatra Neamț, 2019. The theme of the performance is the marginalization of the poor by identifying their precariousness as being the result of the lack of desire to work.

¹⁹ Produced by O2G, Bucharest, 2015; a performance about abortion and social control over the female body.

²⁰ Monday Theatre at Green Hours, 2011.

²¹ Point Theatre, Bucharest, 2017. Tocilescu dramatizes a family history, which gains documentary character through the fact that both Tocilescu and his father (a character in the show) are recognizable public persons, whose existential path is familiar to the audience, leading to the identification of the dramatic elements as real-documentary.

²² See the online comment of the respective author in my review of the performance, <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/teatru-corpul-femeii-ca-teren-de-ocupatie/>; also, the author in question sent a whole series of private messages addressed to me, at least, about his right to image and the breaching of intellectual rights by the artists involved in the theatre production.

Romania, it is perfectly legal to record conversations in which one has participated and there are no legal precedents regarding the prohibition or conditioning of public communication of such recordings, but things are quite different in the United States, for example).

With few exceptions (the staging of materials from the Securitatea surveillance files, made by Gianina Cărbunariu, are such an example, as are some of the verbatim shows animated by David Schwartz, based entirely on direct interviews, and, in an international context, the tribunal plays created by Trycycle Theatre²³, reenactments of official criminal investigations), the texts and the individual productions of the theatre of the real use free combinations of sources and documentary materials. Although there are intrinsically artistic reasons (avoiding monotony and predictability, formal challenges related to the representation of various sources), the reason is, first of all, that most events or realities represented by this theatre are declined, in terms of information, in various environments, and the theatre of the real is constantly concerned with the multiplication of arguments and “evidence” that it brings forward.

The way the documentation operates may, of course, be different depending on the chosen theme (one thing is a performance about the Securitate, and another thing a performance about the daily life of LGBT people in Moldova), and most of the documentation never reaches the final product: Gianina Cărbunariu spent several months in the archives of the National Council for the Study of Security Archives (CNSAS), using, in the end, for both the *X mm s of Y km* and *Typographic Majuscule* performances, exclusively already public materials, which she did not consult at CNSAS and which she knew beforehand. In the case of Gianina Cărbunariu, her research at CNSAS initially focused on the documentation for another performance, *Sold Out*²⁴, on the sale of the Romanian Germans to Federal Germany, not the topics addressed in the next two productions.

The CNSAS experience had strictly the role to make her familiar with the working mode of the Securitate and the structure of the files²⁵, a role of internal archiving, which adds information in a subjective process of observing the outside world. Most of this process does not have an immediate artistic objective and, as Nicoleta Esinencu openly says, it is not specific exclusively to the theatre of the real, but a constant of the art that tackles contemporary subjects:

²³ For example, *The Colour of Justice*, 1999, the theatrical reenactment of the investigation into the racism of the British Police in investigating the death of the young black man Stephen Lawrence.

²⁴ Produced by Kammerspielle Munich, 2010.

²⁵ See Gianina Cărbunariu, “*X mm din Y km – Despre o posibilă arhivă performativă*” [“*X mm din Y km – About a Possible Performative Archive*”], February 2018, *Scena.ro*, <https://revistascena.ro/arte/x-mm-din-y-km-despre-o-posibila-arhiva-performativa/>.

I am always connected to the world around me, and if I were to do fiction, I would bring the themes around me, from television, from the street, from the online, from the speeches of politicians or the daily lives of people. The documentary process also exists in fiction, not just in the documentary approach. But it's not like one wakes up in the morning with the idea of «what I'm documenting today.» In this whole process, one simply has an external archive, with folders of interviews, videos, audio material, etc., but one also builds an internal archive, a very living one, which needs to be completed. It gives rise to questions and causes one to look for something else, to read something else, to clarify things. The inner living archive raises constant questions, it is confronted with my inner changes, because obviously I saw things quite differently 20 years ago and even five years ago. Memory is a hard disk that must always be charged.

Given that the objective documentary material (the one that does not constitute personal testimony) tends to be pretextual, given the allergy of the theatre (not only the theatre of the real, but especially it) to the impersonal and abstract, the demonstration staged by the documentary performance is selective and intensively edited (Martin, 2006), from the diversity of available sources, in a type of process that is never objective:

This inner archive, the conscious and the affective memory, on the one hand, is very well structured, and on the other hand, it contains many themes and sub-themes. What happens when I access all this information (of which part is, of course, personal) is related to intersectionality. To the intersection of the stories of many people. And that helps me work on performances.

The hybrid character of the documentary sources in the theatre of the real is perfectly illustrated in the way Nicoleta Esinencu describes the working process for *Requiem for Europe* (Laundry-Theatre/Schauspielhaus Graz, 2018), a performance about the exploitation of work, especially of women (who make up, as everywhere, the bulk of the workforce in this industry), in the Moldavian garment factories:

We didn't have a clearly defined theme when we started working. We got to the table and made a drawing of all the topics we would be interested in, a scheme, and in discussions, which took quite a long time, this theme of the exploitation of the work emerged. Documentation was a complicated process, it's not like factories would wait for you with open doors to show you how they exploit people. We used a lot of pre-existing materials, since

there is this Clean Clothes Campaign²⁶, which had already done many interviews with workers from Romania and Moldova. We also talked to people who, in general, had worked in these textile factories and had already left. Only they were willing to talk, those still employed refused, out of fear. We also used quite complex studies and materials of some journalists from Moldova. And personal stories and migration stories already documented (by us or in the press).

In a previous interview, Esinencu described the sources in similar terms, but emphasizing the collaborative nature of the work process:

It's a written text, but based on a thorough and rigorous documentation. As I said, we worked as a team – each of us researched, some talked to workers, made interviews, others read materials. We also worked with existing materials – such as Corina Ajder's article, «Women of Moldova – cheap and convenient work for Europe's billionaires»²⁷ (...), then other materials taken from the Clean Clothes Campaign. We gathered the materials, put them together, worked with personal stories.²⁸

How important is personal experience, the direct knowledge of the (social and political) context in which the documentary artist works (but also the attachment to the concept of continuous documentation) is also obvious in the challenges that Esinencu had in the case of *Ballads of Memory*, the only text-performance (investigating the 1990s transition, in Cluj, from a women's perspective) for which she delegated part of the documentary decision:

Women will always come out from my archives. As long as the time allowed, I think I connected to the realities of *Ballads of Memory*. The Reactor experience was unique, from many points of view, because it is very difficult not to live in the city you working, to not have the necessary connections, to not know the place (in my case, in Cluj, to not know neither the city nor the country). It was, however, a super team that was involved in documenting, in workshops, in choosing people. I would come and leave, they would stay in place and continue working. Besides, the performance is showing without me. I have

²⁶ CCC is not a campaign in itself, but the largest international collaborative network of unions and NGOs active in combating labor exploitation in the garment industry. The research (the report) on the clothing industry in post-socialist countries, including Moldova, was published in 2014, under the title "Stitched Up" – <https://www.cleanclothes.org/resources/publications/stitched-up-1>.

²⁷ Corina Ajder is an expert for Clean Clothes Campaign.

²⁸ Vitalie Sprânceană, "Requiem for Europe, A Show About Work, Exploitation and Lack of Hope on the Outskirts of Europe, interview with Nicoleta Esinencu", *Platzforma*, 13 March 2018, <http://www.platzforma.md/archive/37886>.

the experience of my texts being performed without me, but not of the performances themselves. I am part of the team at all my performances, I am involved technically and so I can see the production process and we can always make small changes.

In *Ballads of Memory*, but also before, in *Dear Moldova, Can We Kiss a Little Bit?* (for which Esinencu worked with German artist Jessica Glause) and, more recently, in *The Abolition of Family*, the performance is autobiographical – even the professional actors in the show (Oana Hodade and Doru Talos, in *Ballads...*, Doriana Talmazan, in *The Abolition...*) represent their own personal histories, as do the non-professional performers themselves.

In performance art, delegation involves „the act of hiring non-professionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions” (Bishop, 2012) – the purpose being to mediate the performance artist's speech (originally, performance art being an author-based art per se, as opposed to theatre, which intrinsically implies mediation and collaboration) by amplifying the impression of authenticity offered by „civilian” performers representing various social groups. The emergence of the delegate performance, which Claire Bishop places in the 1990s, is linked, Bishop says, to three performative traditions: body art, Judson Dance (responsible for introducing the everyday movement into contemporary dance and known for working with non-trained performers) and Fluxus (Fluxus events recurrently involved the audience), and docudrama (through docudrama, she understands reality TV, a television genre, and not necessarily a performative documentary tradition).

Unlike performance art, including non-professionals in the documentary performance does not imply that they act on stage in the name of the playwright/director, but, on the contrary, to give a more authentic and immediate evidence on reality, representing themselves and their own exemplary experience, not an artistic discourse, alien to them (of course, authenticity itself is a convention). The practice of working with non-professionals is, in fact, as old as the documentary tradition, and the childhood (and first glorious period) of the theatre of the real, in the 1920s (until 1932), is marked by this practice, integral to denouncing artistic professionalism as artificial, false, disconnected from the truths of life, a common anti-theatrical philosophy common to both the documentary movement in post-October Revolution Russia, and to Erwin Piscator etc. Moreover, reminiscences of this anti-theatricality – manifested not through the denial of stage naturalism and the performative insistence on the faithful representation of

real people's paralinguism (as in the case of David Schwartz's performances²⁹), but especially through the denial of this type of mimetism, through the denial of interpretive realism – found in Nicoleta Esinencu's words when she says that „I am not interested in telling the actor how to move on stage. I want to work with people who want to live their own experience.”

The authenticity claimed by the theatre of the real by including non-professionals is translated in different ways by practitioners. The term „experts” became known through its use by the German collective Rimini Protokoll: these performers are „experts with particular experiences, knowledge and skills. A concept that consciously opposed amateur theatre; those on stage should not be judged on what they do (*i.e.* act), but rather on the reason for their presence on stage” (Malzacher, 2008: 22). In the case of Rimini Protokoll, which never works with professional actors, this reason does not necessarily mean belonging to a community or having a distinct expertise (for example, being a muezzin or a Marx specialist), but sometimes extends to more superficial aspects, such as reproducing the age and gender structure of the German Parliament or simply having a distinct corporality (Malzacher, 2008). As for Nicoleta Esinencu, however, in whose performances non-actor performers are always the bearers of a marginal or specific identity experience, the reason for their presence is intimately linked to an authenticity of emotion as a form of social manifestation:

There are emotions that we are taught as children not to show. When you make documentaries, you talk to people who sometimes tell their story out loud for the first time. Emotion plays an important role not in the theatre, but in life. If we understood this at the level of society, the emotion would be normal in the theatre. Emotion is not perceived as something common in everyday life. And it works differently in traditional societies than in contemporary capitalism. That is why, for me, both the intimacy and the emotion are deeply political, because we are not allowed to have them, it is not OK to talk about them. We live in societies where we do not talk about ourselves and what we feel or what society tells us to feel.

The question of representation (of people, situations, real communities) is thorny in the theatre of the real because, in essence, the history of the theatre is itself a succession of conflicting traditions animated by different conceptions, often antagonistic, regarding representation, many of which coexist in time and space in a creative tension (Stanislavski and Brecht, psychological realism and the distancing practice, are the most notorious examples)³⁰.

²⁹ See Popovici, 2016.

³⁰ The bibliography is extensive, considering the multiple sides of the concept of “representation” (“what” is represented, “how” is represented, “who” represents it and for whom they do it, etc.). Among other sources, for representation as acting, see Alison Hodge (Eds.), (2000), *Twentieth Century Actor Training* (New York: Routledge).

The Nicoleta Esinencu' theoretical option, in those productions of the Laundry-Theatre that discuss identity issues (commonly a marginal cultural identity, as opposed to the political majority, being the factor of defining and coagulating gender, LGBT or ethnic communities), goes towards self-representation – which is, however, conditioned by external factors:

It is also complicated who represents us on stage. As much as we wish, we cannot always have the communities directly represented in the performance. *The Abolition of Family* is not the absolute exception (we had the communities directly represented in *Dear Moldova, can we kiss a little bit?*), but when we talk about the Laundry-Theatre, we must also talk about the context in which we worked and work.

Far from being, nowadays, a dominant one in the theatre of the real (among other reasons, also because, at the opposite to delegated performance, the presence of the non-professionals in the theatre limits their circulation and life span), the non-professional performers often indicate (and always does it in the case of Nicoleta Esinencu) the affinity of the performances in which they are present with the community theatre (which, like the social or political theatre, may be documentary or may not be).³¹

Paradoxically, somehow, although the act of using actors in the representation of real people depends on the nature of the theatrical art, in the theatre of the real there may be situations of delegation – generated, at least in the cases we discuss, by ethical imperatives in the specific contexts mentioned by Esinencu. In *Dear Moldova, can we kiss a little bit?*, the vast majority of performers are non-professionals called to testify about the social effects of the public and institutional attitude in the Republic of Moldova towards LGBT people and their families: parents of a gay person, an elderly gay man, a lesbian woman and an 18-year-old boy, son of a lesbian mother.

One performer is, however, an actor whose stage part combines elements of personal history belonging to several LGBT people – similar to the delegated performance, the actor in question does not represent himself nor does he mediate, as in theatre, the representation of recognizable real people, for whose (real) existence the show guarantees. His role in the show is precisely to anonymize the real people whose stories he mediates and to speak for them and on their

³¹ Community theatre is the one created by, with or for a community, with or without the direct participation, theatrically speaking, of the community members – and which, unlike the amateur theatre, assumes a professional character (irrespective of the formation, professional or otherwise, of the performers). V. McGrath, John (1981), *A Good Night Out: Popular Theatre: Audience, Class and Form* (London: Nick Hern Books); Van Erven, Eugene (2001), *Community Theatre: Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge).

behalf. There is no fictional character, nor a documentary one, he was delegated the function of representing real people who, in the aggressive homophobic context of the Republic of Moldova, cannot be exposed, for ethical reasons, to the control of authenticity and real.

Fundamental for the documentary theatrical approach and in response to journalistic, sociological or legal practices, for which the subjective perspective of the person must be corroborated, and may often be contradicted, with data and facts (aspect discussed in multiple theoretical analyses on documentary – Young, 2017; Feldman, 2018), the individual testimony is almost always, in the theatre of the real, supremely credible – and the alternative sources are not allowed to contradict the subjective narrative. Their role is one of strict confirmation – first of all, of the character’s extra-scenic reality: in Carol Martin’s terms, which represents the actor on stage as being “not a fictional character, but a person who actually existed or exists”, “(t)he proof of this existence, whether past or present, is verified by documents, audiotape, film, videotape, and general public knowledge” (Martin, 2013: 10).

As a matter of principle, even the individual witnesses are not allowed to undermine the truth value of the testimonies of others, although there are exceptions, some generated by the nature of the documentary approach (the tribunal plays contain contradictory statements due to their own procedural structure), others by the artistic option of subjective multiplication of perspectives (in *Who killed Szomna Granca?*³², a show about the suicide of a Roma teenager whom the parents did not allow to attend school, the contradictions between the explanations and the narratives of the characters lead to a calculated *Rashomon* effect³³).

In the absence of a “neutrality pact” and an obligation of the artist’s objectivity (in other words, given the absence of ethical standards similar to the ones in research), what the documentation in the theatre of the real seeks is neither “finding out the truth” nor a discovery or the epistemic demonstration itself. The thesis pre-exists the theatrical product, and the documentation process focuses on the confirmation of the thesis (a demonstration by avoiding or eliminating the factors that can counteract or alter it) – by getting as familiar as possible with its circuits of argumentation. The work process and the show itself are epistemic experiences, but strictly within an already established, politically engaged framework, as Carol Martin puts it – “As staged politics, specific instances of documentary theatre construct the past in service of a future the authors would like to create” (Martin, 2006: 10), and as Nicoleta Esinencu explains:

³² A Giuvlipen production, 2017, directed by Mihai Lukacs.

³³ Different interpretations of the same event, made by different, equally credible eyewitnesses; a kaleidoscope effect. See Stephen Prince, “The *Rashomon* Effect”, *The Criterion Collection*, 6 November 2012, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/195-the-rashomon-effect>.

One will always find new things during the documentation, issues that one did not expect, but that does not change the direction, it does not change one's perspective. It's not that one doesn't discover aspects that might contradict one's starting point. It's about doing a show *for* that starting point. Which is also the point of arrival. The theatre doesn't deal with the truth, it is not objective nor does it deal with changing the world. The important part is the process, in which a team faces, learns and challenges the people around, not just the audience. It is a process of learning in a certain social and political context.

From here comes also the continuous subjective nature of the documentation as an epistemic process, in which the artist invests himself, personally, in an existential way, something about which the Moldovan artist also speaks:

When one documents something, such as the Holocaust, it's not like one worked once, did the performance and that's where it ended. Documentation becomes part of my ongoing process of working, collecting, talking to people, carrying on things even after I made the performance. The documentation does not end with the premiere. The same thing happens with all the topics I tackle (LGBT, feminism, exploitation of work ...).

In the only one Laundry-Theatre performance that she considers "pure documentary" and which she refers to, in the quoted above, mentioning the Holocaust – *Clear History*³⁴ (2012), the public exposure of the Romanian Army's contribution to the pogroms in Bessarabia during the of the Second World War, completely hidden in the history books of present-day Moldova –, Esinencu uses, in a fluid continuum where the actors expose the documented materials without assuming identity roles, using testimonies of participants and survivors (dating from different periods) and war orders – among them, a well-known order-speech of Marshal Ion Antonescu. For the first part of this speech (unidentified, at that time, as belonging to Antonescu), which takes the form of a "pledge to the country," the actors asked the spectators to repeat the words, the speech slowly transforming into a deeply anti-Semitic message of elimination of Jews from the country's fibre.

When she says, however, that:

The ethical limits of representation are a very delicate subject. Ten years ago (or less), there was a practice, in the documentary theatre, of reproducing extremist, racist discourses, to denounce them as dangerous or ridiculous.

³⁴ The title refers, metaphorically, to the operation of clearing the browsing data on a computer.

In time, there has been a mutation, related to the ethical appreciation of the types of discourse that the artist gives space to for scenic representation, and personally I wouldn't do it anymore. I would no longer give space to an already over-represented discourse, especially a dangerous one. What used to be OK before or still is for some theatre authors, for many people it is no longer OK. And this is part of the decisions we make in time,

Esinencu does not refer to Marshal Antonescu's speech (she would make the same option now, for the simple reason that from that speech only the first part is always publicly quoted), but to other performances of her, such as *radical.md* (2008), her only verbatim text, made out of chat conversations of blatant racism and xenophobia (exposing racist discourse was previously present also in *A (II) Rh +*, 2007).

In fact, for those (documentary) theatre artists in Romania³⁵ who choose not to offer space for the representation not so much of extremist, racist, oppressive discourses, etc., as of the bearers of such discourses, the motivation has two components: the (already mentioned) function of exclusive representation of groups or categories lacking the possibility of self-representation and the general ethical obligation towards the represented character, which would place the actors in the uncomfortable position of finding, in essence, moral justifications for negative characters. In addition, there are situations in which the representation of the speech of such characters, under similar conditions of fidelity and epistemic crediting of their testimony, would lead to contradictory perspectives (which, as we have already discussed, the theatre of the real often seeks to avoid).

Alex Fifea, performer and co-author of *You Have Not Seen Anything*³⁶ – formally, a production that integrates a criminal investigation and a court trial:

At the post-performance discussions, I was asked if I had interviews with the cops. And I said no, I didn't want to. We wanted to deconstruct the system, and, in short, the human behaviour. And from the beginning we have assumed that we are the voice of the troubled (Popovici, 2016: 132).

³⁵ In the available (especially linguistically) research on the theatre of the real from other cultural areas (mainly Anglo-Saxon or French, but from personal theatrical experience, from Hungary, Poland or Bulgaria), there are no indications of practical, programmatic and explicit exclusion of such types of discourse. Also, there is no analysis on the effect of normalizing them through theatrical representation, although it is perfectly possible that such effect does exist.

³⁶ Documentary performance for which Alex Fifea worked with director David Schwartz and musician Cătălin Rulea; produced by the Project Salon, Bucharest, 2015. The subject is the story of the suspicious death, in the arrest of a police station, probably following the beatings administered by the police, of a Roma man.

Actress Katia Pascariu, participant in numerous documentary productions, most of them being of verbatim theatre:

(...) with the negative characters, the villains, it is really difficult, because that person gave you the interview. I could play a «bad» character if it serves the show, but I couldn't use against them what they agreed to tell me in an interview. I can't make them look bad (*ibid.*).

In response, somehow, with this position of Katia Pascariu is the fact that (it is true, after the quoted interview was made) she played, in the performance *Yiddish?* by Peca Ștefan, directed by Andreea Vălean³⁷, one of the most hated female real characters in Romanian history, the communist leader Ana Pauker. The key seems to consist, on the one hand, of the fact that Ana Pauker is presented in her old age (so, as a demoted victim, not an omnipotent evil figure), and on the other, in the political decision to ignore the standard representations of Pauker in the Romanian public imaginary. Of course, as a former politician, Pauker is not in a position to express negative discursive positions, but the scenic boycott of discriminatory discourses is far from unanimous in the Romanian theatre (the latest example: the reenactment of a TV show aggressive towards social workers, in *Frontal* by Gianina Cărbunariu).

“Everyone has their own way of talking about the world in which they live,” summarizes Nicoleta Esinencu the infinite variations of the theatre of the real and, in the same sentence, the similarities and oppositions between this theatre and sociology, journalism or activism. The profound idiosyncrasy of documentary theatrical practices – which I have tried to exemplify in this comparative analysis – shows the theatre of the real as, apparently, incompatible with the main codification, in unanimously accepted sets of methodological and deontological standards, in which other fields of the social work – those with whom the documentary shares its sources and instrumentation. Which does not mean, by far, that their worlds are different, but that the efficiency of the theatre is an artistic one, depending on the individuality of each practitioner.

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