

**THEATER OF THE UNDERDOGS OF THE POST-SOCIALIST TRANSITION.**

**ETHICAL AND POLITICAL PERSPECTIVES.**

**SUMMARY**

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## SUMMARY

*Argument. For a theatre of the underdogs. Starting questions, description of the aims and structure of the paper.*

The thesis starts from analysing the author's direct experience in political art projects that involve groups or communities of the local post-socialist transition underdogs – communities affected by evictions and precarious housing; institutionalized elders; communities from the de-industrialized mining towns; refugees. The main stakes of the paper are 1) describing and analysing the respective projects and 2) articulating, based on this analysis, a set of political, ethical and artistic principles for a theatre of the underdogs.

The thesis analysis the specific local historical conditions, framed in the broader international context of similar political theatre projects. The analysis assumes a political perspective, subsumed to the artistic projects' purpose - changing the socio-political context in favour of the subaltern groups and (self)-representing these groups and their views in the public space. The quality and success of the artistic endeavours are discussed according to this analysis filter. Thereupon, the work aims to answer questions such as: what are the successes and failures of the “community arts”, “documentary theatre”, “social intervention” projects? To what extent do these projects challenge the dominant political system and to what extent do they help to perpetuate it? What is the ethical dimension and which are the problems that the “intervention in a community” and the “representation” pose? Finally, based on this analysis, the thesis proposes an expression of a political theatre of the periphery, from a local, Eastern-European perspective.

### ***Methodology. Perspectives and research techniques***

The work consists of three parts, each constructed with different research instruments. The first part represents the historical-theoretical apparatus of the thesis and contains: the argument - the starting questions; a short methodological description; a condensed description of the history of community-based political theatre; a critique of the terminology; the philosophical, ethical and political ground of the argument. The second part includes the chronological description and the analysis of four theatre endeavours, in which the author was directly involved, enacted together with different groups of *underdogs* of the capitalist transition. Finally, the third part of the thesis is dedicated to theoretical and practical conclusions and to the elaboration of a set of working principles that will serve as ground for future projects.

### ***The internationalist decolonial perspective***

Theatre with subaltern groups is a field in which international contributions are balanced between Eastern Europe, Central Europe, Latin America, Africa and the Euro-Atlantic zone. This thesis aims to reflect this diversity and to use it as basis for the local Romanian context analysis. The using of concepts and methods elaborated in different parts of the world, applied to actual local realities and keeping at centre the perspective of the transition's underdogs, will produce a specific discourse, local and connected to the wider international context, separated from the west-euro-centrist paradigm dominant in the local cultural production

### ***The political approach on art***

The perspective from which the artistic projects are analysed is an acknowledged political one, in which the different artistic projects, actions and products will not be evaluated aesthetically, but according to their way of modelling or modifying the political space they act upon. The intention

is not to avoid discussing the “artistic” or “innovation” level of the projects, but to direct the discussions to an analysis paradigm that takes into account the socio-political intentions and stakes of the artist groups that produced them.

### ***The ethic principle – the “other’s” perspective***

The thesis aims to research and reproduce (as much as possible) fragments from the declarations, the artistic products and the testimonies of the people living subaltern positions, so that, according to the principles applied in the analysed artistic projects, the underdogs’ perspective is present and substantial, even when it does not concur with the author’s ideas and opinions.

### ***Research techniques***

The research techniques are different, according to the structure of each part of the thesis. For the historical-theoretical section, a vast quantity of literature is covered, keeping in mind the internationalist principle enounced. The general stake of the first section of the thesis is defining the context and the terms that guide the reading of the second section.

The second part represents the description and the analysis of several theatre/community art/political projects in which the author has been personally involved. Because some of the projects were still ongoing at the beginning of the research, the approach had from the start an important practice as research component. The research work involved several methods of information collection and analysis: investigating and describing the local specific context; a chronological narrative description of the projects’ development processes; self-interviewing; collecting and analysing information from other artists; etc. The analysis and description of the artistic methods and techniques differs for each project, according to the specificities of each endeavour.

## *Historical, ethical and political perspectives*

### *Historical incursion in the political theatre, from “proletarians” to “community art”*

#### *Predecessors. Workers’ anarchist theatre in Latin America. Self-organised theatre groups in Argentine*

First examples of subaltern groups’ theatre occur in Latin America - Mexico, Chile, Uruguay, and most importantly Argentine – late nineteenth century. There took place the first experiments of workers’ theatre, made by workers for the workers, according to self-organising anarchist principles. The anarchist theatre movement was ample, involving the collaboration of professional and amateur artists, workers from different fields that trained together for revolutionary activities.

#### *The first institutionalized experiences – Proletarian theatre in Germany and the Soviet Union*

In Europe, the first experiences of collaboration between artists and oppressed groups, or “proletarians” in the terminology of the time, took place in the second and third decade of the twentieth century and were in direct link with the communist parties’ movements from Central and Eastern Europe.

The emergence of the political theatre and of workers’ theatre experiments is related to Erwin Piscator’s (director) and Bertolt Brecht’s (director and playwright) activities. Piscator’s vision on the political theatre was modelled in the beginning of the twenties, on one hand by the soviet communist ideas and on the other hand by the experience of the political and militant drawings and collage of the Dadaist artists Georg Grosz and John Heartfield. Bertolt Brecht will continue and develop Piscator’s work, by theorising the political stakes of theatre and applying the

Marxist philosophy on theatre – as opposing the theatre in the Aristotelian tradition, whose purpose was representing the world as it is, the epic Brechtian theatre’s purpose becomes representing *the changing world*, the intention to change the world.

In the Soviet Union, which, after the 1917 revolution was involved in a large process of accelerated social change, the new political leadership over-valued, at the discourse level, the worker, the “proletarian”, seen as revolutionary engine and as privileged class, whose vanguard and representative was the Communist Party. This vision gave birth to a series of radical experiments, in which performances with subjects inspired from the history of the revolutionary struggle (strikes, protest, etc.) were played by non-professional artists coming from the working class, who self-organised the entire theatrical production process – from choosing the texts, to building the sets and creating the costumes, and to collective directing – in a similar manner to the anarchist Latin-American projects.

### ***Theatre of the Oppressed – radical participatory Latin-American theatre***

Augusto Boal, director, playwright and politician from Brazil, experimented and developed several participatory theatre methods and techniques, many of them involving local oppressed groups, in the context of poverty, extreme social polarisation and fascist military dictatorships. The practice and theory of Augusto Boal will be partially assumed, reinterpreted and softened, sometimes with the permission of or at the author’s initiative, in the Western world. But, before and interdependently of this taking over, Boal’s theatre is a Marxist one, inspired by the theatrical vision of Brecht and Paulo Freire’s (Brazilian educator) radical pedagogy experiments.

***Self-representation through political theatre in de(colonial) contexts. Nigeria, Mexico, Palestine, Peru***

TFD (*Theatre for Development*) is a theatre method relatively inspired by the *Theatre of the Oppressed* and developed in Nigeria, in the university circles, at the Ahmadu Bello University. The method intends to work with communities who will develop their own performative strategies, inspired by their actual problems and by their local dramatic traditions, strategies that should lead to concrete solutions for specific problems.

*Freedom Theatre* is a political theatre established in the refugee camp in Jenin, in occupied Palestine. The theatre, opened by Jewish-Arab director Juliano Mer Khamis (assassinated in 2011), is defined as a community theatre and cultural centre. Starting from the idea that arts can play a significant role in constructing a free society, *Freedom Theatre* proposes a series of cultural and educational activities: acting, film and photography classes, courses in creative writing and multimedia for Palestinian children and youth from the camp, theatre performances, film screenings, public debates and protests, touring other cities in the Palestinian Territories.

*Sendero Luminoso* movement was a Maoist-inspired paramilitary group, which saw in theatre a proper means of propaganda and involvement of indigenous peasants in guerrilla warfare. Aesthetically, they used classic formulas that they put in service of the revolutionary ideas, similar to the model proposed by the Chinese Cultural Revolution or the one introduced by the Latin-American anarchist theatre. Performances were organised together with members of the movement, artist or (more often) non-professionals and they were played in the mountain villages, for the local peasants.

***Experiences of peasants' and workers' theatre in state socialism – socialist collectives in Cuba and Nicaragua***

The theatrical contexts in post-revolutionary Cuba (after 1959) and under the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua (between 1979 and 1990) have common traits and represent a distinct chapter of the post-bellum peasants' and workers' theatre. In both cases, the newly installed regimes valued the autochthone cultural production and massively invested in the culture of the masses. The examples from Cuba and Nicaragua offer the perspective of a theatre made with oppressed groups – in spite of the revolutionary progresses, peasants remain the poorest classes of the respective countries – realised with financial and logistic support from the socialist states, but distancing itself from the propaganda language and offering innovating stylistic solutions, real involvement of the peasants in the creation process and debates, and even critiques and dissident attitudes against the errors of the political regime.

### ***Community theatre and participatory theatre in the West***

In the Western space there has been a tradition of the workers' theatre, influenced by experiments in Berlin, Hungary and the Soviet Union. After the Second World War, this tradition extended, boosted by the radical political movements in the sixties.

In the United States, some of the most important movements were initiated inside the syndicalist movements and inside the Civil Rights movements of the African-Americans. In the seventies, a *community arts* movement developed in the British theatre, a movement started also on radical leftist positions by artists who believed in the *hippie* philosophy, were vocally anti-war and lived in self-organised communities. But the eighties brought the neo-liberal policies, the beginning of the dismantling of the welfare state and the institutionalisation of the community/participatory art, which conducted to the transformation of the radical revolutionary communities into bureaucrats of a threatened but still strong welfare state. Paradoxically, this situation brings the

Western community theatre closer to the Soviet workers' theatre intentions of educating the impoverished masses (that in the western space are represented mostly by the immigrant communities) in the spirit of the "new society".

***The Romanian context. Fragmentary and dull histories***

In Romania, Unlike other Central and Eastern European countries, more industrialized, the existence of a grass-roots proletarian theatre movement organised by workers or together with them before 1945 is not documented. Instead, when, during the royal dictatorship (1938-1939), student teams lead by Dimitrie Gusti researched the Romanian villages, they discovered in Şanţ, Bistriţa County, a variant of popular theatre, unwritten and transmitted by word of mouth by the collective's members. Although occurred on a large scale, the phenomenon of amateur performances from the socialist period is very poorly researched. In a context of quasi-ignorance of the popular peasants' theatre and of the popular socialist theatre, experiences of collaboration between artists and communities of underdogs of the post-1989 transition were inspired rather by Western theatrical models. The fragmentary and dull character of the history of the local collaboration between the theatre artists and different excluded/oppressed groups is an additional incentive for elaborating this thesis.

***Terminology – defining and criticizing the concepts: popular classes, proletarian, oppressed, excluded, marginalized, the other, the underdogs of transition***

Naming the dominated or subaltern groups/persons took different forms, according to the historical, political and social context. All denominations are open to criticism and have been criticized. Having in mind this theoretical frame and the different definitions and critiques, choosing the denomination for the persons involved in the artistic projects described in the

present work becomes a quite difficult project. The four groups/communities are affected by diverse forms of exclusion and oppressions: economic, cultural and political. What all these groups and communities have in common is the fact that they are historically and geographically localised in the period of capitalist local transition. Therefore, all these persons are actually *underdogs of the transition capitalist regime*.

***Political and ethical perspectives. The theory of recognition critique and its ethical ground.***

***The theory of recognition critique and its application in the contemporary political field***

Hegel's theory of recognition influenced decisively the discourse about the relation oppressor-oppressed, the theories about the work relations and the identity politics. On the one hand, the theories about work relations and emancipation are conforming to Hegel's theory that to function, the capitalist system needs a moral ground – recognition and self-respect for the workers and an ensuring of their subsistence. On the other hand, the recognition perspective offered by the master-servant dialectic received critiques from the decolonial perspective, but it is in the same time the starting point of the identity politics. Nancy Fraser notes that the danger of the socio-political struggles subsumed to the paradigm of recognition is the danger of marginalisation or even exclusion of the struggle for economic redistribution. As Fraser states, in the capitalist system, the status/prestige (conferred by recognition) does not completely overlap the economic situation. As Fraser states, in the capitalist system, the status/prestige (conferred by recognition) does not completely overlap the economic situation. Therefore, the recognition battles, although central, will not guarantee social justice and vice versa. Rather there are subtle links between the status and the economic situations, and the recognition and redistribution struggles should go together, in a paradigm that Fraser calls *the status model*.

***Applying the utilitarian ethics and the virtue of understanding the „other“. The critique of approaching the „other“ in the Western philosophical, cultural and political field***

One of the most important debates concerning the political art, which assumes social change stakes, is the one about achieving the goal, about the extent to which the artistic enterprise produces the intended change. According to Bertrand Russell, an adept of the utilitarian ethic, a deed is not automatically good because the intention behind it was good, but only to the extent that it produces a good result. The ethical rules are the ones guiding us to do Good, which is the ultimate goal. To be able to carry through the analysis of the Good, defined as above, it is mandatory to include the Other's perspective, the perspective of the oppressed. Emmanuel Levinas argues that equality towards the Other can only exist in the presence of responsibility, of welcoming the other. But, says Levinas, particularly influenced by the experience of the Holocaust, the "universality" concept specific to modernity's philosophy and culture, excludes the possibility to treat the other, the different one, as an equal member of the same humanity (human race).

***Critiques of artistic approaches. Political perspectives***

***The Marxist critique. The after-effect of abandoning the historical materialist perspective, the pathologicalization of the „oppression“ and the taming of the theatre of the oppressed in its Western version***

Deborah Mutnik brings a number of important critiques to the ontological-hermeneutical paradigm on the phenomenon of oppression, specific to the multiculturalist position and to the identity politics, which fragment the diverse forms of social exclusion based on gender, ethnicity, etc. The consequence of such an approach is on the one hand the fragmentation of the struggles

and the antagonism within oppressed groups and on the other hand the permanency of power relations (treated as consequences of ontological, immutable differences between certain groups). Such a fragmentary approach obscures what should be the key to any revolutionary process – the critical analysis and the contesting of the systemic structure and of the way the capitalism functions.

### ***The critique of the representation of the „other”. The ethical witness***

Representation is a problem that occurs in any kind of public communication done together with excluded/oppressed groups, or with the intention of transmitting their perspectives. One of the main problems, the one of the ethical witness, is extensively discussed by Julie Salverson, who proposes a series of ethical rules to guide the collaboration between the person who is sharing violent, traumatic experiences and the person who listens. The artistic process and the artistic product must represent both of them and must serve to the common purpose of making public the injustice and, in the long run, to produce the changing of the context and of the system which perpetrate or permit the traumatising action.

### ***The critique of the „artist as saviour”. Arguments against the „messianic” approach***

Authors as M. Etherton or L. Spry criticise the “saviour” approaches of some artists or social workers, convinced, on one hand, that the „oppressed” are helpless and dependent people, unable to fend for themselves, that need to be „helped” and even „saved”, and on the other hand that they hold the ultimate political truth and will show the „oppressed” the way to resolve their problems. This approach does not leave room for collective actions, for working together and in any way for the idea that the artists themselves could have something to learn from the communities with whom they work. The condescending view towards these persons, visible in

many "social" projects, including the Romanian local context, leads only to the reaffirming of the antagonised positions and of the privileged situation of the artists.

***The critique of abandoning the aesthetic and the political in favour of the ethical dimension.***

***The limits of the aesthetic autonomy.***

The critique of the ethical-only approach to art, done by Rancière and Bishop, is based on what Rancière names the „ethical turn”, the using of the ethical arguments to avoid the political disruptive discourse, the contradictory and surprising one, the discourse that has the potential to create breeches and to shed light on the contradictions of the contemporary capitalist system. Both Bishop and Rancière go further and consider the aesthetic autonomy a political weapon in its self, using historical and psychoanalytic arguments. The critiques formulated by Rancière and Bishop are especially useful for analysing the contradictions and the limitations of the Western community or participatory arts and as a warning against burying the political dimension under the ethical perspective. At the same time, these critiques are limited precisely because they refuse to assume an analysis political perspective, insisting on the “autonomy of the aesthetic” as an ahistorical value.

## PART II – THEATRE OF THE UNDERDOGS. EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE

### ***1. The Offensive of Generosity, 2006-2012. Community arts and social intervention projects in Rahova-Uranus-Sabinelor area, Bucharest.***

The *Offensive of Generosity* initiative was started in 2006 by Maria Drăghici (visual artist) and Bogdan Georgescu (theatre director) as a result of experiences in relatively similar projects in the

United States. The first *O.G.* projects took place in Rahova-Uranus-Sabinelor area, in Bucharest, responding to a call of I.C.C.A. (International Centre for Contemporary Art) to develop projects in the neighbourhood. Officially, the call was motivated by the recent movement of the organisation in the vicinity. In theory, in the initial proposal, O.G projects had the political purpose of preventing or at least slowing down the imminent process of gentrification in the area, with its disastrous consequences for the local community members, and the social purpose of allowing the people to fight more efficiently, on the long run, with the gentrifying agents and with the corrupt and passive administration.

### ***Rahova-Uranus neighbourhood – the geographical, historical and social context***

Historically, Rahova neighbourhood was always seen as an ill-famed place, a place of the excluded and the marginalised. At the moment, the perimeter is still covered by noble or industrial old buildings, most of them constructed before the Second World War, which have been or will be retroceded. The historical factor of identifying the area as an “ill-famed”, “poor”, “dangerous” one is essential because it conducts to the so-called necessity of „cleaning” the image of the neighbourhood, an idea that actually facilitates the process of gentrification. In 2006, in the perimeter Rahova-Uranus-Sabinelor lived over one hundred families, both Rroma and non-Rroma ethnics, most of them at or under the poverty line. Many of them were already passing through eviction processes.

### ***The Offensive of Generosity: Principles and structure***

O.G. aimed for an inter- and trans-disciplinary approach that would join together, around the concept of community arts, artists and practitioners from various fields (visual arts, theatre, film, music, architecture, sociology, anthropology, law, political activism etc.).

In the definition embraced by the O.G. team, community arts represented the art form developed together with a specific community, where the community participates, on an equal position with the artists, in the whole process of creation of an artistic product.

***Rahova-NonStop – a 25 hour performance (October 2006)***

The theatre marathon *Rahova-NonStop* consisted in a *site-specific* performance, in the Rahova-Uranus perimeter, designed to be played only once and realised integrally - from scriptwriting, through set design and the choice of spaces to play in, casting, conducting rehearsals, the actual performance - in 25 hours.

Although conceived as an artistic event, the performance had an important political and popular contribution through its content and perspective on local issues; by testing the boundaries between public and artists, encouraging spectators' involvement and debate on social discontent; through decentralization and offering to a marginal public access to an act of culture where they could feel engaged and re-presented.

***The O2G Association and “Build your community!” Project (December 2006 / April-October 2007).***

“*Build your community*” included several activities that run for seven months: documenting and researching the situation and the stories from Rahova-Uranus neighbourhood and from other involved communities; creative education workshops with the children from Rahova-Uranus community; public debates of *Speaker's Corner* type, concerning the problems of the communities involved; a summer cinema, with movie screenings, for the people that lived in Rahova-Uranus-Sabinelor area; a workshop dedicated to archiving the documented stories; theatre rehearsals and performance. Overall, beyond its success as artistic project and as a

vehicle to draw attention to the community's issues, "*Build your community*" project failed to accomplish its objectives and irreversibly degraded relations within the *O.G.* group.

### ***BILUNA concerts and LaBomba Community Center***

In 2007-2013, the activity in the neighbourhood continued with the BILUNA Concerts, which involved the children in the community and various professional musicians. Following the success of the concerts and of the educational workshops, the project team obtained for the children a rehearsal space in the former disco *Bomba*, in the neighbourhood. The closer and closer relations between the artists and Eremia family (owners of the space) facilitated the emergence of *LaBomba Community Centre*.

After five years of artistic activity, there were significant benefits in terms of education through art, an increase in the self-esteem of children in the community and the coagulation of the community, but no significant steps have been made towards concrete solving of the increasingly urgent housing problems. Thus, the main political stakes of the project - the fight against gentrification and finding collective solutions for the entire community to the issue of evacuation – was, at least temporarily, overshadowed.

### ***The performance „Fără Sprijin” (Without Support) – The community's women perform the eviction experience***

The performance staged at Green Hours in 2011 created an extra dose of interest on issues of evacuation and reached beyond the traditional theatre audience, in alternative media (social networking sites, etc.). The most important achievement has been the encouraging and empowering of the community women. People (about to be) evacuated take control of their

personal stories, stories that are actually collective and belong to very many people in similar situations.

***Underdogs' perspective. The social and human situation of the people in the area and their positioning towards the Offensive of Generosity artistic projects***

The experience of 7 years of community art projects has increased the degree of community cohesion and social empowerment, especially for the women in the community, who have taken active leadership role. They also experienced an increased degree of self-determination, people gradually understanding and forming their own opinion about what might be their advantages in carrying out cultural and educational activities. Art projects in the area were an important factor in these changes, but residents have gained quite a lot of solidarity and mutual help also because of the extreme situation in which they find themselves.

***The present day. Regaining the political stake. The Common Front for the Right to Housing and "La Harneală" performance. Artistic and political actions initiated by the community.***

The multiplying number of evacuations in Rahova-Uranus area determined the community, together with a group of activists, to start a support group for evacuees: The Common Front for the Right to Housing. The group aims to find evacuees or people in danger of being evicted and unite them in a group with a strong and visible voice and with common social and political actions - a sort of syndication of the evicted people. Realizing the importance of the artistic message, the community wanted to make a new theatre performance. Thus, at the initiative of women and children in the community, it started the work on "La Harneală" performance, a show developed through a collaborative method: mothers and children in the community - performers in the show - have actively contributed to choosing the subject, to writing the text and designing the scenes.

## ***Conclusions***

The relative success of the whole *O.G* endeavour, particularly in the period 2007-2012, has rather prepared people to face evictions instead of acting against gentrification, by pressing authorities to find a solution for resettlement in the same area. The emphasis put on the artistic work, especially with children, and too little on the political dimension of the anti-gentrification, anti-corporate fight made that the chain of evictions started during 2013 found people rather poorly prepared, though more united than they were in 2007.

The solution found was the urgent regaining of the political dimension of actions in the area, by relinquishing any artistic endeavour that is not subsumed to the strategies of protest and pressure on the authorities. The emergence of the Common Front for the Right to Housing and of the *La Harneală* performance, directly related to the Front's activities, seems to trace the path of such a strategy. What was gained in the seven years is a type of cohesion, especially of the women in the community, and a relative civic education, which can lead to the multiplication and refining of the means of struggle. Another merit is the media coverage that the evacuees' problems had, gaining considerable resonance in the public discourse in recent years.

### ***2. Vârsta4 Community Arts Programme (2009-2014). Changing the view towards aging***

*Vârsta4* program is designed and conducted by an interdisciplinary team of artists (playwrights, directors, actresses, choreographers) together with some of the elderly residents of the Retirement Home "Amalia and Chief Rabbi dr. Moses Rosen" in Bucharest. The program started in 2009 as an attempt to exercise a community arts project together with another community, building on the experience of the *Offensive of Generosity* in Rahova-Uranus perimeter.

***The context. Aging as a social phenomenon and the specific situation of the elderly nursing. Community arts as action that opens the possibility of a „fulfilled retirement”***

A community arts project in a retirement home can revitalize an entire community of elderly residents, reactivating them and helping them to become again involved citizens, first in the community life of the retirement home, and then in society in general. The main problems the residents are facing and the artists will also confront are the passivity and the impossibility of actively spending their leisure time. Apathy is perfectly explained by the depression caused by their very admission in the retirement home, which for many people equals to the exclusion from social and economic life. The two are interrelated and can occur together with depression in different stages and gradual degradation of intelligence, memory and vital functions.

***The specific context – The history, geography and sociology of „Moses Rosen” Retirement Home (MSRH) and the personal and community history of the residents***

MSRH is Romanian Jewish community’s retirement home and represents a very diverse community, made up of people from different generations, different areas of the country, with multiple traumas and disorders, related to ethnic or political persecutions but also to the failure to adapt to the capitalist transition after 1989. Beyond these issues, the community is characterized by an extraordinary wealth of experiences, information, skills and abilities.

***Methodology. Social sculpturing and community arts – applying and adapting the Offensive of Generosity principles to the Vârsta4 programme***

The working methodology for Vârsta4 program was built over time, based on previous theoretical and practical experiences, but also on the direct experience of meeting and working with the residents. Underlying the methods were the concept of social sculpture, developed by

Joseph Beuys, and the practical and theoretical experience acquired in previous projects within the *Offensive of Generosity*.

***Project history. Types of activities***

In the six years of the programme, diverse and complementary activities took place: creating five theatre and dance performances; realising three documentaries; film screenings, discussions, debates, drawing and collage workshops; community parties and celebrations organized together.

***Case study 1. Transforming the political and historical experience in performative material.***

***Performing Recent History - August 23, 1944***

*23 august 1944* was a performance held as an ad-hoc story-circle that the residents and the invited public contributed to with personal testimonies. Around the actual debate, a series of collateral actions took place: the publication of an event newspaper, which featured excerpts from testimonies of the residents; an exhibition of personal maps of the day of August 23, 1944, with texts and drawings of the residents – days, actions, objects, slogans, experiences they lived and translated graphically.

***Case study 2. From personal story to community self-representation - Moses Stories***

The performance was built as a series of successive monologues, written and performed by the residents, resulting from story-telling and scenario workshops based on personal experiences. .

***Case study 3. The residents and the personal from MSRH are interacting and working together. Closer than Close - Community Dance Project***

*Closer than Close* was a community dance show, performed after a series of workshops on movement, dance and personal stories, based on the concept of caring. The performance involved both residents of the home and part of the staff, who have performed together.

***The underdogs' perspective. The boundary between personal, professional and political. Self-representation***

Collaboration between artists and residents has a triple value - personal, given by the very close relations that were built; professional, complying with the rules for implementation of joint artistic products; political, on two levels: because of the power relations inherent in the relationships between artists and residents, which must be constantly acknowledged, addressed and challenged; and because of the project's stake, that of giving back dignity and capacity for public affirmation as autonomous individuals to the elders, who are holders of a very important creative and experiential capital. To fulfil this political function of self-representation as autonomous, dignified, valuable individuals, with major contributions to the whole society, is what gives content and stake to the whole project and what makes it a political project realised with artistic means, and **not** a "humanitarian" or "welfare" project.

***The project's reception outside the MSRH. Large-scale promoting, exoticization and depoliticising. The problem with volunteer work***

At first glance, it would seem that, through a large-scale promotion, the stakes of "changing the perception of old age" are likely to be reached. But there are some reception difficulties: an exotic effect inherent in media advertising; stereotypes concerning the humanitarian, social assistance component of the project at the expense of the political and

cultural components. These stereotypes were reinforced by the fact that many of the activities took place on a voluntary basis, which made them look even more like relief or charity projects.

***Expansion possibilities. Nation level action plan for a responsible policy concerning the elders and the institutionalised people***

The optimal solution for the program *Vârsta4* to approach its major goal – set, with a dose of over-appreciation of the actual means, in 2009 –, that of changing the perception of old age in Romanian society, is to replicate its methods of intervention at national level. In this way, the program can overcome both its exceptional status and the inherent exoticism. This expansion approach requires the co-involvement of the authorities, which should understand the importance of creative and intellectual activities at any age, the enormous potential of experiences and knowledge that the elderly have and the social and community duty that we all have towards these groups.

***Conclusions – limitations and shortcomings of the project. The political significance and the reciprocal self-education process. Constructing a self-organised social sculpture collective***

In an approach such as *Vârsta4*, the artists engage in a programme to give back the lost dignity to some silenced individuals, which do not have access to public self-representation. Together with these people, the artists build a community of *social sculpture*, which aims at the *self-transformation of everyday life*. This community is based on sharing experiences and skills, on working together, and starts from the idea that every person is an artist and that any self-emancipatory intervention is in itself a work of art. In this sense, the program has a fundamental artistic and political component and must be presented as such in all public communications. To continuously promote this type of speech should dynamite, or at least discourage, the project's categorisation as a humanitarian or charity project.

### ***3. Under Ground and out of time. The experience of subPământ project – Jiu Valley after 1989***

This chapter is structured along the subPământ (Under Ground) project's history and its main stake is discussing and analysing the interaction between the artists involved and a group of underdogs that can be extended to the level of entire social categories in capitalist post-socialist society, including but not limited to the Romanian space. The focus is on the workers groups that were active in industry, had a steady job and a valued social status before 1989, and they have lost both of them during the transition period from 1990-2000.

#### ***Researching about the „mineriad” and redefining the mining communities as victims of the events in June 13-15, 1990***

The experience begins with the first period of research in the Jiu Valley - for the show Heated Minds – of an entire area abandoned by both the state and private investors, with mines that are closed, people left without work, where the only salvation is leaving to work abroad, with all inherent divisions and decay in family relationships. This experience directly leads to the idea that the most important (at least numerically) victims of the so-called "mineriads" were actually the miners themselves and other residents of the miners' communities, in particular in Jiu Valley. All the subsequent research and activities, including the performance *subPământ*, have developed from the ferment of this idea.

#### ***The mining communities in Jiu Valley – the historical, social and economic context***

This section outlines the history of Jiu Valley, from the opening of the first mine during the Austro-Hungarian Empire, through strikes and riots in the interwar period and the socialist period, to social disintegration and economic decline after 1989.

*Preliminary research. Modifying the performance „Capete înfierbântate” (Heated Minds) according to the experiences of the performance in Jiu Valley and of the public events „Capetele din spatele capetelor” (The Minds behind the Minds)*

The performance of “Heated Minds” in the Jiu Valley and the discussions about actual political and economic situation of the mining communities led to the changing and expanding of the performance with a monologue of a miner and a video about the situation of Jiu Valley after the "mineriads". Also, following these events, the “Heated Minds” team decided to continue the research and to produce a performance focused exclusively on the situation in the Jiu Valley.

*Theatre Under Ground – the first research stage. June-July*

The first research phase was conducted in a team of three artists, was held for four weeks and was focused on two directions: interview-based documentation and participatory workshops with children from Petrița. This section describes the experiences of the research process.

*subPământ – Jiu Valley after 1989 – the purpose and the developing of the theatre performance*

The project was designed to have several components: the creation of a theater performance from existing documentary material; a series of performances in Bucharest, followed by debates with the public about the social and economic situation of mining areas in the post-socialist period; a tour of the performance and public debates in the six mining cities from Jiu Valley. The project aimed to "change perception and self-perception over Jiu Valley, an area whose image and general reception was negatively affected by the events of the nineties”.

*The performance and the Bucharest audience. Empathy vs. understanding and the after-show discussions. Transmitting the story of the underdogs*

The positive impact of the project, that of changing the perception of miners and the Jiu Valley, has to be considered at the level of over 3000 spectators but also beyond the show itself, by bringing in the public discourse – through art – the culture, the problems and the political and economic situation of the working class, from a non-intrusive and non-pejorative perspective, as close as possible to the way the representatives of that class construct their narratives. This was done not so much (or not exclusively) through actual performance as through the entire media campaign, articles and press reviews, TV appearances, interviews with team members, show presentations made on different occasions at conferences or festivals, etc.

***Meeting the underdogs –the history of the performances with subPământ in Jiu Valley – the first tour experience***

During 2012 the team undertook three tours with the performance, one in the Jiu Valley, one in industrial cities from Hațeg area, and a third one in the former mining cities in Baia Mare basin. The section describes and analyses the context, the public feedback and the experiences of the first tournament with *subPământ* that took place in the early summer of 2012 in 6 mining cities miners in Jiu Valley.

***„Jobs should become public goods” – the second tour, in mining and industrial towns***

This section describes the experience, context and audience reactions to the second part of the tour, in mining and industrial towns in Transylvania, which took place in autumn 2012. There were played nine performances, two in the Jiu Valley, three in the north area of Hunedoara County, four in Baia Mare mining basin.

***Conclusions. Reaching the project's purposes. Opening new theatrical and political possibilities***

The most important part of the project subPământ is linked to the experience of the tournaments, especially the first one in the Jiu Valley. First-hand, in a direct, unmediated experience, artists were faced with a series of events, reactions, types of participation and questioning, which, beyond the inherent difficulties that have demanded solutions specific to each place, opened new directions of approach to the problems related to exclusion and oppression, and can be the basis of future actions *together* with members of the groups directly affected by the problems of capitalist transition.

***Continuation – the stakes, description and possibilities of a project of intervention through theatre in one of the mining cities***

A possible continuation of the project should ideally take place in a single city in the Jiu Valley, most likely in one of the cities in which the artists already have more connections with the locals. The shape may be that of some theatre, arts, political debate and mutual learning workshops, a process of self-education through which artists and locals try to explain together the social and political context of the local people and imagine possible solutions to overcome/challenge/resist to various types of existing oppression. The main purpose of such a project would be engaging and stimulating people to continue the work of self-emancipatory education in the long term, including after the artists leave. Once the working method is experienced, crystallized and theorized it could be used by other artists in similar efforts and expansion possibilities exist. But everything depends on adequate infrastructure, and should be part of a curriculum at regional or national level.

***Born to run. Art and political activism in support of immigrants and refugees***

This chapter aims to describe the personal and political experience of a collective of artists interested in the struggles and situation of the refugees and migrants in Romania. Four directions are followed: 1) the struggles of immigrants and refugees – the personal, local, historical, political, international context; 2) the artistic experience with the benefits and limits of supporting the respective groups through artistic means 3) the involvement in social-political activism and its connection with the artistic practice 4) the “other’s” perspective of the migrants and refugees and the relation between artists and these communities.

***From personal experience to research process – Meeting Ahmad and Paradise, Afghani refugees in Dushanbe, Tajikistan***

The idea of the project developed following the encounter between the artists and Ahmad and Paradise, Afghani refugees in Dushanbe, Tajikistan, who have shared their struggles as refugees with Afghani passports. Starting from this experience, the artists developed a research process regarding the situation and struggles of the refugees in Romania. The starting point has been writing a theatre script based on the research process, but eventually the text and performance became only a component of a broader artistic and political long term initiative.

***Historical and social context – immigrants in post-socialist Romania and the status of refugees***

The number of refugees in Romania is relatively low in comparison with other countries – a few thousand persons. The majority of them originate from countries affected by violent and sectarian conflicts – especially Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria or Libya. Although in theory the refugees should have (almost) the same rights as local citizens, their effective situation is often much more complicated. The laws of the EU are supposed to protect them, but most of the times the laws are interpretable and the bureaucracy overwhelming. Beyond the humanitarian

problem of the struggles of the refugees, learning their opinions gives a frame for a broader historical-political perspective towards the dynamics of the capitalist world system, towards the relation between the Euro-Atlantic power center and the several peripheries and demi-peripheries, towards the consequences of the imperial and expansionist politics disguised as “wars for democracy”, towards the Western “new racism” that reframes the “foreigner”.

***“Euro-centrism” and “Orientalism” – Western racist discourse copycatted in the Romanian context***

In order to explain and contextualize both the empirical situations which affect the immigrants and refugees, as well as the historical-political origin of the racist discourse and behavior, we need to analyze the history of the West-East relations in the capitalist (post-Renaissance) period and of the way alterity has been shaped in the context of modernity. Therefore, this chapter describes and makes use of the concepts of *euro-centrism* and *orientalism*, as defined by the Egyptian economist Samir Amin, and the Palestinian-American literary theoretician Edward Said, respectively.

***The Research process and the elaboration of the text “Born in the wrong place”. The problem of “representation” vs. the vulnerability of the refugees***

The preliminary research stage developed on several levels: a series of recorded personal interviews, informal discussions and meetings with refugees and former refugees; meetings and discussions with sociologists and social workers collaborating with migrants and refugees; reading various legal and theoretical texts that frame the situation of refugees. From the beginning appeared a problem that would be in the center of the artists’ concerns – the fear of many refugee persons to speak out. Therefore, the need to develop a project that would make their struggles visible became even more urgent. At the same time, a self-representation-through-

theatre project would have been very problematic. Hence, the text has been build based on the testimonies of the refugees and taking to account their feed-back, and would be performend by professional actors.

***“Am falschen Ort”. The international premiere of the text in Karlsruhe, Germania. The Western perspective on the foreign refugees in Romania***

In 2012, the text “Born in the Wrong Place” won the contest “Talking about Borders”, international prize that included the staging of the text, in international premiere, at Baadisches Staatstheater, the municipal theatre in Karlsruhe. This chapter describes the experience, the problems and deficiencies encountered at the staging in Germany.

***“Migration Stories” – Project for making visible the stories and struggles of refugees. The involvement and collaboration between artists and storytellers in the creative process***

The project Migration Stories consisted in developing the performance Born in the Wrong Place, performed six times in Bucharest for the general audience and three times for communities of asylum seekers. The main stake of the project was promoting in the public sphere, in the cultural and media environment, the struggles of the refugees. Another important aim was developing a critical analysis of the geopolitical power relations which structure the contemporary capitalist world system.

***The reception of the performance – The involvement of the refugees in the working process and their opinions about the performance***

According to the opinions of the refugees involved as story-tellers, the performance transmitted not only their words, but rather their points of view, the perspectives which they find important, which they consider that should not be silenced. From this perspective, the

performance and text achieved their goal – building a frame in which the life stories and perspectives of the refugees would be transmitted as authentic, complete and detailed as possible.

***The reception of the performance inside the migrants' community – identification and struggle***

Refugees, asylum seekers and immigrants took part in most of the performances. Though most of them stayed silent or just assured the audience that the performance resembled their experiences, there have been persons who shared concrete experiences. Other migrants asked specific questions, regarding their rights and bureaucratic situation. Another interesting point has been the intersection between the questions and problems stated by the migrants and those of the general audience – basically the contribution of the migrants shaped the debates in an openly political direction. The debates became about fundamental rights, about discrimination according to passport and nationality, about the suffering generated by arbitrary borders and anti-immigration policies.

***The reception of the performance by the general public – from the difficulty of identification to message interpretation difficulties***

As a general impression, following the feed-back from the audience, the public remained sort of distanced from the stories depicted in the performance. A certain level of empathy and understanding existed, but it seemed there was a lack of “identification” with the stories, unlike other performances such as *Under Ground*. The audience found the performance interesting, found the situation severe, but also found the context rather heavy, difficult to comprehend. The density of both technical and emotional information was big, hard to follow and encompass.

***Migration Stories project aftermath: „Home: dialoguing with migrants” – premises and realities. The collaboration with the Austrian Cultural Forum and the critiques***

This chapter describes the experience of collaborating with Austrian Cultural Forum, for the organization of a cultural event with the aim of promoting the rights and struggles of migrants, as well as the differences of strategic and political vision between the artists and the respective institution.

***„Border stories” – Self-representation workshop with Syrian refugee children***

The work-shop was developed for six weeks, together with a group of children coming from refugee families from the Syrian civil war. The outputs of the work-shop have been a series of written texts, photographs and drawings, which form together a map of community self-representation with an important documentary and social meaning. The collective artistic product represents a *Children's Gazette*, in the direction experimented by Janusz Korczak.

***Conclusions: artistic activity as part of a broader political struggle. The protests in 2012 and 2014; supporting the migrants' initiatives***

The theatre performance and the debates generated by it are part of a broader strategy of promoting in the public sphere the situation of hyper-vulnerable groups and persons, with a very low degree of access to representation, excluded on several levels – because of their citizenship, legal status, sometimes because of their ethnicity, color or religion. The artistic actions are part of the struggle of progressive activist groups for supporting the rights of these persons and their capacity of self-organizing. The transmission of these persons' voices and perspectives and the support of their self-organized struggles are the main long-term stakes of this artistic and political activity.

### **PART III. CONCLUSIONS**

#### ***The current situation of the analyzed undertakings. Successes, failures, further prospects***

This chapter analyses the current situation of the four artistic-political projects described in the second part of the paper and indicates the development perspectives / possibilities for each project.

#### ***The status and position of the artists involved – the financial aspect***

In the local peripheral context, shaped by the neoliberal and conservative discourse, the work and collaboration with groups and people considered “marginal” or “un-desirable” does not bring a consistent image capital. Furthermore, from the financial point of view, even when the projects are financed, the differences between the fees of the artists in the independent sphere compared to the public theatres remains huge. The work in the independent system brings ongoing underpayment. The problem of adequate payment remains important and difficult to solve. From a political perspective, negotiating and imposing better fees is mandatory. Working for free or for very small fees in projects which receive financial support from the state or private institutions should not be acceptable.

#### ***About different public categories and the emancipatory valences of the theatre of the underdogs***

An important direction of improving, from a political perspective, the theatre performances resides in the clarity and complexity of the anti-system message – in articulating as precise as possible a call to action, a call to produce change. For an adequate articulation of this message, a deep and complex understanding of the several different audiences is mandatory. For

an engaged theatre, the exact knowledge of the expectations and opinions of the audience is fundamental.

### ***From the theatre of the underdogs to a theatre of the periphery***

A very important aspect, both at a theoretical level as well as at the level of practical organizing and promoting, is dropping the dichotomy between artists and oppressed persons, and immersing the position and experiences of the artists in a common paradigm – that of a political theatre of the periphery, of a space ruled by specific forms of hierarchy and exclusion.

### ***Arguments for integrating the theatre in wider political movements and the role of the state***

In the context of the periphery and demi-periphery, with the scarcity of resources to be distributed by a welfare state, the only solution for redistribution is in the frame of a radical socialist state regime. The political theatre can only function at its full potential, with impact at the national or at least regional level, in this kind of frame.

### ***„The third theatre” – poetics for a political theatre of the periphery***

In conclusion, the paper aims the articulation of a manifest political theatre, direct in its content, which should reflect upon the contradictions of the periphery and imagine emancipatory resolutions; a radical and coherent theatre from an ethical point of view, in which the group dynamics and the relations between all the persons involved are based on justice and equality principles; a theatre which does not make alliances with oppressive agents; a popular theatre at the aesthetic level, which experiments with consecrated art genres and appropriates them to the benefit of the political message; a theatre with a participative structure that allows for expressing different points of view, questions and critiques from the audience. A theatre which, in a peripheral and subaltern context, aims to take part in various trans-autonomous networks and to contribute to the liberating political processes.