



THE DIVERSITY AND ENERGY OF THE EASTERN EUROPEAN THEATRE

**20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe
30 Years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain**

Palgrave Macmillan

2021, (paperback, 311 pp)

ISBN: 9783030529345

eBook ISBN: 9783030529352

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Abstract: In theatre, the twentieth century undoubtedly belongs to the directors, especially European, both as practitioners and theorists. In its last decades however, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, a kind of pole migration took place. After so many years of censorship, it's the turn of Eastern Europe to show its best in theatre. This book presents a subjective-editorial selection of twenty directors who have risen to international stardom thanks to their "ground-breaking" productions that speak to audiences far beyond local borders. It offers informative and in-depth portraits of these artists, written by critics, scholars, and researchers, who shed light on the directors' signature styles, with examples of their emblematic productions. In the last two chapters, the selected directors discuss their artistic family trees, as well as the main stakes theatre faces today. From Romania, the editors selected three names: Andrei Șerban, Silviu Purcărete and Gianina Cărbunariu.

Keywords: East European theatre directors, Andrei Șerban, Silviu Purcărete, Gianina Cărbunariu

How to cite: Zărnescu, Maria (2022). 'The Diversity and Energy of the Eastern European Theatre', *Concept* 1(24)/2022, pp. 289-295.

"I read a book one day and my whole life was changed", confesses Turkish Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk at the beginning of his novel *The New Life* (1994). The writer described

how the energy of the book overtook his soul so strongly, that he felt as if his body was separating from the chair where he sat reading. At the same time, with his every particle, he remained anchored there, feeling the effect of the book not only on his soul, but on everything that made him what he was (p. v).

With such a paraphrase editor Kalina Stefanova chooses to start her confession regarding the composing of the book ***20 Ground-Breaking Directors of Eastern Europe. 30 Years after the Fall of the Iron Curtain***, published in 2021, at the notorious Palgrave Macmillan in Great Britain.

Stefanova argues in the foreword entitled *The Life-Changing Theatre of Eastern Europe*:

This is exactly how I felt watching many productions by the directors included in our book. Their impact was so powerful that it was as if light was surging from the stage, its incandescence dazzling my intellect, but also endowing it with brilliant lucidity (p. v).

Theatre critic and Full Professor of Theatre Studies and Theatre Arts at the National Academy for Theatre and Film Arts in Sofia (Bulgaria), Dr. Stefanova is

the author/ editor of sixteen books on theatre and criticism, many of them reviewed internationally, a few translated and launched in New York and London. The volume *East European Theatre after the Iron Curtain* (Routledge, 2010) is just one proof of her growing interest in the geographical, social and political space where she came from, where she has travelled and seen hundreds of performances.

As a result, the new book dedicated to theatre directors comes as no surprise. In her editorial mission she is accompanied by Marvin Carlson, theatre, drama and performance studies scholar. He is a Distinguished Professor of Theatre, Comparative Literature and Middle Eastern Studies and holder of the Sidney E. Cohn Chair at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York.

The selection of the twenty names belongs to them. The editors underlined that they didn't want a sort of "one to one" representation of the Eastern European countries.

The aim of the book is not to present a detailed analysis of the theatre in each and every country of the region... The directors included here have been major catalysts for a change in the face of Eastern European theatre at large during the last three decades – this is the main criterion of selection (p. xviii).

Consequently, a general picture of the theatre emerges from the book. The directors were obviously selected for their substantial influence on the European theatre as well. Their names have been drawing audiences in their countries, at the international festivals circuit and in theatres beyond national borders.

The twenty directors come from Lithuania, the late Eimuntas Nekrošius, but also Rimas Tuminas and Oskaras Koršunovas; from Latvia, the controversial Alvis Hermanis; from Poland – an impressive presence – Grzegorz Bral, Grzegorz Jarzyna, Jan Klata, Krystian Lupa, Krzysztof Warlikowski; from Hungary, Béla Pintér and Árpád Schilling; from Bulgaria, also directing on Romanian stages, Alexander Morfov; and the list goes on up to the Romanian names, Andrei Șerban, Silviu Purcărete and Gianina Cărbunariu.

"Ground-breaking" is a difficult to translate epithet in Romanian, and probably in other languages as well. Prof. Carlson, the co-editor, offers an alternative: "innovative", which may be

a key term, since closely connected with the concept of the modern director, especially in Europe, has been the idea of innovation, of taking art of the theatre in often surprising new directions... The leading directors of Eastern Europe have for

decades been particularly noted for expanding the boundaries of our theatrical experience (p. xxii).

Not by chance, many of them won the Europa Theatre Prize, an award offered by the European Commission to a personality who has contributed to the realisation of cultural events that promote understanding and the exchange of knowledge between nations. In 1990, an additional award – Europe Prize New Theatrical Realities – was established looking at innovation in theatre.

The book offers informative and in-depth portraits of twenty of these directors, written by leading critics, scholars and researchers, who shed light on the artists' signature styles with examples of their emblematic productions, and outline the reasons for their impact. In addition, in two chapters the selected directors themselves discuss their artistic family tree, as well as the main stakes theatre faces today. The book may be of interest to theatre scholars, students, anybody engaged with theatre on a global scale, and – why not – to any theatre lover.

It is said that theatre is the literature of those who cannot read. The great merit of this volume is the power of words to create images, not just directors' portraits, but also the re-creation of their performances through words to images. Thus, above the critical, objective discourse, the director's subjective eye is doubled by the personal eye of the critic, of the theatre historian. As a result, a subjective map of the Eastern European theatre today is traced.

The questioned directors' answers regarding their assumed artistic ancestry are savoury. Who'd they include in such a family tree? With the exception of Nekrošius, who left us too early (in 2018), all responded to the question. In their typical style. For example, Lithuanian Koršunovas puts his conational Nekrošius first, then Harms, Artaud, Grotowski, Kantor – perhaps a predictable outcome. But less predictable is Bulgarian Morfov's declaration: "I've never been inspired by theatre." But he recognizes the formative role of the following: "classicism, the paradox, irony, anti-classicism, dreams, hatred and love, egotism, altruism, empathy, misanthropy, and the feeling of how important and unnecessary I am in this world!" (p. 271) His portrait and the interview were made by Prof. Kalina Stefanova.

In Romania, those invited to contribute to the book come from academic schools. Professor Ion M. Tomuș, from the "Lucian Blaga" University in Sibiu composed Andrei Șerban's portrait: *The Search for "New Forms"*. The author confesses the strong impression left by two productions included in the

International Theatre Festival Sibiu 2007, when the city was among the European Capitals of Culture: *The Seagull* directed by Șerban, and *Faust* directed by Silviu Purcărete. The story starts here, in order to discover the "character", presented since the '60s, in a somehow open-to-culture Romania, follows his career in the United States, his return with *The Ancient Trilogy* at the National Theatre in Bucharest and his manager position, then, in the last decades, his productions all over the country. Professor Tomuș is not afraid to declare that, in spite of his international route, Andrei Șerban "spiritually belongs to Eastern Europe, with all its peculiarities and specific problems." And his "permanent search for and concern with texts' interpretation is similar to the way all great characters in his productions are searching for their inner truths." (p. 204).

Director Silviu Purcărete, as *The Master of Rich Theatre*, is portrayed in words by Associate Professor Octavian Saiu, from the "I.L. Caragiale" National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest. The author starts from the huge notoriety of *Faust*, the production of the National Theatre in Sibiu, not only the best-known Purcărete performance, but maybe the best-known Romanian production all over the world, due to its longevity and also to its presence at the International Edinburgh Festival. The analysis continues on his great performances, most of them staged at the National Theatre in Craiova: *Ubu Rex*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Phaedra*, *The Danaids*, *The Tempest*. The conclusion is similar to the previous one: "because of this impurity of selfhood permeating his theatre, Purcărete is a Romanian, Eastern European director before being a global one. And indeed, it is for the very same reason that he is not only global, but truly universal." (pp. 182-183).

Among the selected twenty *ground-breaking directors of Eastern Europe* we find Gianina Cărbunariu, whose portrait I was invited to write. I've identified in her structure of "character" a possible descent from the English "angry young men" of the last century. She embraces the mission of re-shaping Romanian theatre through a new way of writing, using the stage to convey comments, and oppose the state and society. Her performances originate from contemporary themes, inspired by present-day topics or by recent history. Her documentation process is followed by improvisation with actors, resulting in a fictional script where real-life elements are sometimes integrated. "Every fiction is EXPERIENCE-DOCUMENTARY-IMAGINATION" (pp. 17-18), emphasises Cărbunariu. The expression "the playwright director" belongs to her. Starting from the beginnings of the dramAcum group and reaching the management of the Youth Theatre in

Piatra Neamț, Gianina Cărbunariu never betrayed her ideals. Her work with young actors, the presence at the famous Festival d'Avignon, the numerous translations of her plays into different languages, the aesthetics of her performances are just some of the artistic features included in the article. "It seems that Gianina Cărbunariu has found the alchemical secret through which she has discovered the philosopher's stone of twenty-first-century theatre." (p. 29).

For the final chapter, the directors included in the book were asked to try to define the issues that contemporary theatre faces today, especially in its relationship with the offstage realities. Polish director Jan Klata sincerely answers: "I don't know, but I keep trying to find that out." (p. 283) It is also the conclusion reached by the editors and authors of the present volume. The book "shouts" for a sequel. Eastern European theatre still has a lot to say and to be told of.