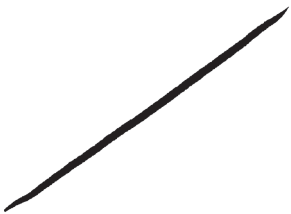


# THE FESTIVAL AS AN INTERCONNECTED NETWORK

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**Abstract:** The article aims to analyze the relevance of the I.L. Caragiale National Theatre Festival and its turning points since 2022. The reflection is meant to contextualize the festival within the landscape of Romanian performing arts, emphasizing the educational dimension, which is viewed as a significant link between theatre and new categories of audiences, thus reshaping the role of theatre nowadays. The text explores the curatorial strategies that connect the selection of shows with a more complex repertoire of cultural gestures that define a festival as a social and cultural network.

**Keywords:** theatre festival, network, curator, cultural policy values, advocacy, I.L. Caragiale National Theatre Festival (FNT), spectacular and pedagogical format.

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The „I.L. Caragiale” National Theatre Festival (FNT) – reaching its 35th edition this year – represents, in terms of national theatrical coverage and scope and socio-cultural construction, the most relevant theatrical event in the local performing arts landscape, as it also brings to Bucharest performances from all over the country. Dozens of performances produced in theaters across the country can be seen, for 10 days, in Bucharest, offering not only the chance to connect with various creations, but also a context for reporting on important moments of the theatrical seasons. The stakes of a national festival that has a history with editions in which hundreds of theatrical creations from the country and the world could be seen, with debates representative of the state of Romanian theater, with exhibitions, book launches, workshops, is, in a local climate that is most often unfavorable to the development of culture, programmatic continuity. Added to this stake is the constant need to revitalize the initial format, to compose and recompose the festival’s conceptual map, to chart new directions and spaces for reflection, to expand the existing framework, in line with important transformations in the performing arts.

A festival is, in my view, a context for the exhibition of representative creations – from multiple perspectives – for a certain moment in which theatrical art finds itself. It is also a propellant for artistic interventions in what could become emblematic for certain artistic searches and experiences. A festival builds its moment and projects its experimental moments, thus also opening a horizon of artistic research through the creations of the immediate. Therefore, its dimension activates three temporal structures: it relates to the history on which it is built, it senses the present in which it defines its construction and it tries to anticipate new ways of creative stimulation. This temporal liminality gives it a constant permeability in relation to new ways of defining itself and in relation to everything

that it could transform into the format it has inherited. A festival accompanies the creators of the moment, intercepting, at the same time, spectacular devices that have not yet found their place in the artistic landscape. Precisely from this point of view, the exploratory nature of a festival seems extremely important to me, all the more so since it is a national one and is expected, perhaps, to certify, through its presence, what is already established. The more it becomes a risk zone, the more it contributes conceptually to less common formats, the more it makes room for interventions and proposals that are located in fluidly moving artistic realms, and the more it can reconfigure existing spectacular maps and intervene in the inherited circuit.

### ***Curating – identifying conceptual connections***

In 2022, at the invitation of the president of UNITER – set designer Dragoş Buhagiar – I took over the artistic thinking direction of the I.L. Caragiale National Theatre Festival. One of the great challenges I took on – together with Oana Cristea Grigorescu, Călin Ciobotari and, in 2024, Ionuţ Sociu – was to structure a multidirectional, networked curatorial concept, in which the main emphasis would shift from the selection to the curation itself. For me, curating a festival means structuring a network of content links between various interconnected components.

It means a conceptual connection thinking, in which the presentation of the performances is only one of the links of the festival. The others come to complement it and have the role of completing the vision, of co-opting several components, integrated into a construction which propels certain directions. A festival is not only a framework for confirming the most valuable and relevant theatrical approaches in a season. It is also a context for the coagulation of creations that do not come with confirmed certainties, but with the (sometimes) destabilizing expressiveness of searches and explorations that are difficult to fit. It is what makes a festival a living cultural ferment, a space not only for *hosting* performances, but also for theatrical action. The shift in emphasis – from the presentation of performances to curation – is based on a configuration of performing arts in Romania, from a perspective less focused on the main module – the one dedicated to the selection of performances – and more focused on the intersection of convergent, complementary directions.

Curating requires a cohesive overall vision of the theatrical landscape, in which several guidelines, several interfering centers of spectacular exploration coexist. This coexistence offers a festival a multimodal concept, in the sense that its structure contains different frameworks for imagining and creating theatrical discourse. Curating emphasizes the stratified propulsion of these varied ways of

thinking about the performing arts today, in which several forms and types of artistic intervention are associated around a unifying axis. That is precisely why it seems to me that the role of a national festival today is less to produce and reproduce hierarchies – which, moreover, it cannot completely cancel – than to make room for spectacular expressiveness as varied as possible and as closely connected to the paradoxes of the surrounding world, to social and political transformations, to educational challenges. A festival is an educational laboratory that broadens its sphere of influence and connection to the audiences of the present. Curating, a propulsive model of *neighborhood thinking* (which brings together connected environments), structures intersections and maps, complementary ways of thinking and making theatre today, of intervening through the performing arts in the world we live in.

### ***Curating – an associative design***

Having emerged in the visual arts, from where it was borrowed by the field of performing arts, the curator began to define his role in a significant way in a period in which artistic creation (the 1970s and 1980s), in order to be understood and decoded, needed a context, as it was almost impossible for it to function in its absence. The curator's function was thus legitimized by a series of relationships and interactions that took place around the work of art and which made it, precisely through their definition, more intelligible and accessible. The idea of art that is sufficient for itself and that no longer needs any context for configuration and to articulate its circuits of signification and propagation began to lose more and more ground. As Florian Malzaher (2010) states, a relevant curatorial work does not consist in reducing the autonomy of artistic creation. On the contrary, it is about emphasizing the significance of the creation in a context that values it, in direct relation to everything that defines it, in order to better understand its connective meanings. The „temporal intensity of the environment” – in our case the performing arts – makes the challenges, when we talk about curatorship, much greater. What the act of curating in a theatre festival proposes is a sum of contexts of experiences connected by an associative design.

Paul O'Neill (2012) speaks in his analyses of the history of the curator and curatorial practices about a type of „discursive turn”, a discursive turn, in the sense that the act of curating comes to mean defining and propelling interactions of an artistic object with other phenomena and constructs, practically dissipating boundaries between territories of expression. Curating thus becomes a construction of assembling intimate connections between spaces of artistic expressiveness linked to each other.

Suzana Milevska (2013) emphasizes the „curatorial power”, the fact that, viewed in this way, the curator is not a passive programmer, but rather a social activator, who contributes decisively to the understanding not only of art, but especially of its role in society. There is no curatorial neutrality in this sense. The curator assumes, through the act of selection and through the events he considers necessary, a position and a certain situation in the cultural field in which he operates. Curators must constantly reconsider the way they look at and relate to the idea of the indisputable and certified, thus also acting through a „demystification” of creators who have earned a prestige and who, regardless of the value of a work at a certain time, are not questioned anymore. Thus, the curator also reflects on the types of artistic constructs that are marginalized because they do not correspond to a certain pattern and perpetuated expectations.

Defined by Rogoff (2012) as an „event of knowledge”, the act of curatorship proposes a learning context, a triple transfer of knowledge between curator, artist and audience. Different forms of knowledge interact with each other to produce a context that transgresses a single form of knowledge and its imposition. The stakes of a curatorial process are, many times, learning, research, the association of multiple perspectives in the circuits of expertise. The curatorial process does not stop at putting an event at the centre – in our case, the performance – but at a permanent connection of knowledge events, which sometimes bring to light incipient ideas, less visible ways of working, references and connections with neighboring artistic territories.

To more clearly define the curatorial concept of the FNT, we chose a theme for each edition. In 2022, the festival theme was *Fragile Borders, Fluid Histories*; in 2023 it was *Laboratories of the Sensitive*; and in 2024 – *Dramaturgies of the Possible*. For each of the three editions, we tried to think of a festival structure in which the proposed themes could be declined on several levels: both at the level of the performances we chose, and at the level of all the modules we proposed. The theme of macro history and micro histories of family was found in several performances viewed in 2022 and seemed relevant to us for the way major social and political events influence life stories. We also wanted to put a necessary emphasis on the hybridity of the spectacular formulas used by some artists, on the approach to areas of artistic creation in which multimediality is at the forefront. We have thus created a space of representation for aesthetic devices in which theatricality is approached differently, thinking of the festival as a network, with ramifications and neighbouring areas. It is precisely this type of structure that allows the understanding of curatorship as an extended action, as a ramified intervention in the theatrical landscape.

During my three-year curatorial mandate, I have constantly thought about the tension between what is considered to qualify as valuable in a National

Theatre Festival and what produces a rupture in the generally accepted order, a crack in the unanimously shared code of perception, while having, at the same time, a quality of disruptive expressiveness. What is framed, what is formidable, and what escapes any framing and can rearticulate new performative relationships to the current territory of the performing arts? Shouldn't a festival propose a liminal situation between these dimensions?

### ***New structures in FNT***

There are two new components that the 2022, 2023 and 2024 editions have brought, completing the existing structure of the festival: the performance-reading module and the Educational FNT module. Both have aimed to diversify the production of knowledge inherent to the complex understanding of the cultural and social role of a festival. By emphasizing this layered production of knowledge, the FNT becomes not only a selective context, but, above all, a context propelling new directions.

***The Performance-Reading Module*** was conceived as a framework for the visibility of playwrights, new forms of writing and dramaturgical curatorship mechanisms, in which texts gain resonance in direct relation to the stage space. In a theatrical landscape in which, in the last 20 years, local dramaturgy has gained more and more exposure, we considered that a festival on the scale of the FNT is the best creator of content for local theatrical writing. That is precisely why we created this module, together with director Bobi Pricop, on two intersecting levels: on the one hand, as a framework that offers exposure to emerging local dramaturgical voices and, on the other hand, as a platform for knowledge of current texts from world dramaturgy. This double perspective created a necessary link, a connection between different specific contexts of writing. In order to give as many authors as possible the chance to be present with texts in the FNT, we chose the short plays formula. From one edition to the next, the number of texts submitted has increased – in 2022, 45 texts entered the competition; in 2023 – 60 texts, and in 2024 – 75 texts, the dramaturgical offer being increasingly varied. We also thought of a mentoring internship, which meant the meeting of the selected playwrights with authors whose texts are played in independent and state theaters. In the three editions, the playwrights who had online meetings with the selected ones, giving them feedback applied to the text, were: Alina Nelega, Peca Ștefan, Maria Manolescu, Elise Wilk, Alexandra Felseghi, Bogdan Georgescu, Petro Ionescu, Csabo Szekely, Elena Vlădăreanu. The need to meet with mentors came from the desire to develop work experiences that are not limited to the model of a drama competition, at the end of which winners are named. The aim was, on the one hand, for those selected to have the chance to have discussions

applied to their texts, alongside experienced authors, to benefit from careful and rigorous readings that would lead to a pertinent development of the short texts. And, on the other hand, for there to be a series of reading performances in the FNT, in which the playwrights would witness the transformation of the written text into a stage text. This transformation process represents an extremely useful stage school for each playwright. The playwrights selected in the three editions were: Alexander Hartmann, Anamaria Feraru, Raluca Mirescu Ungureanu, Teona Galgoțiu, Claudia Iordache, Andrei Radu, Daria Ancuța, Ioana Toloargă, Alex Gorghe, Iulia Enkelana, Sever Bârzan, Teodora Savu and Alma Andreescu. For each of them, the work on the text and the work on stage were essential for understanding the way in which a play develops as a process and how it acquires multiple meanings and new nuances throughout the entire dramaturgical path. The existence within the FNT of such a module dedicated to current texts creates an environment of necessary explorations.

The second module created a vital link between culture and the educational environment, defining a strategic thinking partnership focused on theatrical and educational activities. **FNT Educational** generated a context for reflection on the major role of cultural education for young audiences of today and tomorrow and on the performative explorations that the presence of artists in schools can trigger. The burning desire behind this module was to build a territory of proximity, through which the performing arts would penetrate the educational environment, to become part of the social and cultural experiences of young people. I firmly believe that any festival should have an educational component that means, first and foremost, an extraordinary chance to have access to culture, to understand, in different ways, a multitude of living experiences. Bringing theatre to school is not only a major gesture of democratizing access to art, it is also a vital form of transforming a child's world.

*Mihaela Michailov,*  
FNT 2024 curator,

about the importance of the *Educational module* in the National Theatre Festival:

“Since 2022, when I took over the curatorship of the National Festival, it seemed vital to me to have an Educational module in the structure of the FNT. I believe that a large-scale, multi-layered festival cannot exist without an educational component, without a direct relationship with the young audiences of today and tomorrow. The formative value of a festival is more important than ever. If in 2022 and 2023 we presented theatre performances and organized workshops in mainstream schools and special schools – around 2,000 children and young people

participated in these activities –, this year students aged between 6+ and 16+ will watch performances in theatres in Bucharest. The National Theatre Festival thus becomes a platform of representation and visibility for a theatre of critical thinking formation.”



FNT34. <https://fnt.ro/2024/fnt-educational-modul-dedicat-elevilor/>

*To summarize:*

In 2022, FNT Educational presented performances created by independent associations and state theatres in schools and high schools in the centre and on the outskirts of Bucharest, thus proposing an expanded educational package in schools that do not usually have access to cultural education. Also, important artists – director Radu Apostol, choreographer Florin Fieroiu, author Elise Wilk – coordinated workshops with students.

In 2023, the workshops were expanded to schools with special needs, offering children and adolescents with different types of disabilities access to cultural education, games and exercises that develop their self-confidence, reaction to different external stimuli, emotional intelligence and interaction capacity.

In 2024, eight theatre performances from Bucharest and the country were performed in Bucharest theatres, thus offering young people the opportunity to watch performances for free. After each performance, a discussion with the creative team took place, which allowed children and adolescents to explore the ways in which a performance is created, the artists' interest in certain names.

In 2025, in different formats, both the performance-reading module and the educational module will continue in the FNT, developing new ways of diversifying spectacular and pedagogical formats.

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