

*Theatre Networking for the BABEL
International Performing Arts
Festival Târgoviște, Romania*



@Maria Ștefănescu

INTERVIEW¹ WITH ACTOR,
CURATOR, AND PRODUCER
LIVIU CHELOIU

by **RUXANDRA VERA ENACHE**

¹ Translated by Cornel Huțanu.

Liviu Cheloiu is a multifaceted actor, not only on stage or in films—where he excels in both dramatic and comedic roles—but also behind the scenes, where he frequently takes on leadership roles within organizational teams. He effortlessly connects with people from all walks of life and across the globe. Liviu possesses a remarkable ability to communicate even when there is no common language shared between him and others. In his role as curator and producer of the Babel Festival, he often finds himself switching between English, French, Italian, a bit of Polish, Korean, and Greek—all in the same conversation. Fearless in his approach, he will not hesitate to reach out to complete strangers, consistently securing positive responses. Liviu defies the stereotype of artists as unreliable; instead, he is the go-to person for resolving crisis situations. His combination of talent and hard work has earned him widespread recognition and respect, not only in Târgoviște and Bucharest but throughout Romania and in many other countries where he participates in festivals as an actor, jury member, workshop trainer, or curator.

Among his most famous roles are: Othello and Richard the IIIrd from the homonymous Shakespeare's plays; Juan Perón from a dramatization of the life of Evita Peron; Andrei Prozorov from *Three Sisters* and Andrei Efimovici from *Ward no. 6*, both by A.P. Chekhov; Sir Toby, Petruccio, Caliban, Capulet, Claudius, all five Shakespearian roles from *Twelfth night*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*; Stanley Kowalski from *A Streetcar named Desire*; Penteu from *The Bacchae* by Euripides; Iang Sun, a jobless aviator from *The Good Person of Szechwan* by Bertolt Brecht. As an actor, he worked with important directors such as Silviu Purcărete, Laurian Oniga, Mihai Măniuțiu, Michael Divine from Canada, Di Trevis from United Kingdom, Adonis Filipi from Albania, Kemal Başar from Turkey, Michele Modesto Casarin from Italy, Suren Shahverdyan from Armenia, Dumitru Acriș from The Republic of Moldova, Mc Ranin, Alexander Hausvater, Szabó K. István, Cristian Juncu, Sorin Militaru.

Vera Enache²: *How did the Babel Festival come to be? Have you been on his team from the beginning?*

2 **Ruxandra Vera Enache** graduated from the “I.L. Caragiale” National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, with a MA in Theatre Studies – Cultural Management & Marketing. She collaborated with various Romanian theatre festivals, published articles in *Teatrul azi*, *LiterNet*, *Yorick and Concept* academic journal. She was part of the Literary Management Department of the “Nottara” Theatre, “Ion Creangă” Theatre in Bucharest and is nowadays a literary manager of “Tony Bulandra” Theatre in Târgoviște. In 2022 she successfully defended her PhD Thesis at UNATC, where she also worked as an associate professor and research assistant.

Liviu Cheloiu: Yes, the festival was born after an idea by Mihai Constantin Ranin after he collaborated with a theatre in Jerusalem; he is the best person to tell the full story. After that collaboration, he came up with the idea of creating a festival that would involve cities or countries that have a tower, whether it's a historical edifice or a water tower, a television tower. At that time, we had some very bold ideas, we wanted to *live stream* the festival on a few towers in Europe and the world. While talking, we came up with the idea of the Tower of Babel and arts brought together. Basically, in 2024 the team that started in 2007 reunited, bringing back Adrian Mărgineanu (graphic designer among many other tasks).

V.E.: *How has your involvement in organizing this festival evolved over the years? Were you a selector from the beginning?*

L.C.: Yes, I was a selector in 2007. I did the selection for a pilot edition themed "Elements". We each put our professional connections to work, and gathered, at that time, about 19 or 20 participating countries.

V.E.: *Right from the first edition?*

L.C.: Yes, yes, yes. We also had a lot of observers who, later, over time, became members of the board, or, in the following years, came up with performances, with ideas. For example, in the first edition, directors Dumitru Acriș, Suren Shahverdyan, Oskaras Koršunovas were our guests... their ideas were implemented in the next edition, in 2008, which is said to have been one of the most successful, except for this year's edition, 2024... The 2008 edition was really a daring one, with the Volksbühne from Germany, with the Kaze Theater from Tokyo, Japan, with the company of Oskaras Koršunovas from Vilnius, Lithuania. In 2009, a zero-budget edition followed. I wrote to my partners presenting the situation and asking them if they wanted and could come and play for free... and they came.

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V.E.: *How did all these observers find out about the festival and how did you get in touch with these great companies, given that social media was not as developed as it is today? Had you collaborated with them before?*

L.C.: This networking that is done every year is like a spider's web, with not just one spider working, with a lot of contributors, and the more there are, the bigger the web, it develops and covers a wider theatrical universe. That's how we reached people we didn't think we could ever reach. For example, the relationship with South Korea was formed in 2007. The relationship with Poland, with *Biuro Podróży*, developed the relationship with the Grotowski Institute, also started in 2007. The relationship with South Korea was formed in 2007, it developed in 2014, 2015, and in 2016 it already grew, and we went to visit them.

***“We try to bring all the arts together;
The concept of the festival is based precisely
on this mix of arts.”***

V.E.: *How hard is it to be a festival selector? Because you don't just have this task, your basic commitment is that of an actor. You play in most of the productions of the “Tony Bulandra” Theatre and not only.*

L.C.: I've mentioned this before. I don't just do the work of a selector. That's why I also became a producer, because I negotiate the financial aspects and I had to take on a more difficult job, but it's a pleasant job, precisely because it gives you the opportunity to meet people. At first you get to know them through an email conversation, followed by a phone number... more recently, the conversation can also move to WhatsApp or KakaoTalk with South Korea, after which the conversations are held by phone. It's very interesting. I said at one point that it is like a *dumdum* bullet, designed to expand on impact. It's a bullet that penetrates and only then explodes, with a double or maybe triple explosion, so to speak. You have a very pragmatic email exchange, no one sits to read *literary novels* after which the moment comes when you hear their voice. When they comes to the festival, you also meet them in person. Lately, conferences have also been held on the Zoom platform. A lot of companies wanted to communicate this way, to get to know each other better and to establish technical aspects. I also attend these virtual meetings as the technical director, alongside colleagues responsible for each technical segment that needs to be discussed.

You get to know a lot of people this way. Later, through each of the participants, you create new connections. That spider web I was telling you about earlier is always expanding. That's what networking is all about.



That Round Thing, Direction: Fyodor Makarov & Losha Gavrielov,
Babel International Festival 2024, @Maria Ștefănescu
Source: <https://www.babel2024.tonybulandra.ro/media/foto-babel-conexiuni/nggallery/conexiuni-cu-maria-stefanescu/accel-lucru-rotund>

V.E.: ... about a theatrical world wide web.

L.C.: Of course, you also have disappointments, failures, but most of the time we enjoy success.

V.E.: How do you manage to sort the increased number of proposals received lately due to the presence on the EFFE platform? How do you manage this maze?

L.C.: I always have Mihai Constantin Ranin by my side in decisions. Actually, I don't have him, he has me. Most of the time, the decisions are his, because he is the president of the festival. But let's not forget that the festival has a team, as small as it is. We consult, everyone can come up with proposals. We divide our work. It's a team effort. I probably propose

the most performances, because I also travel to a lot of festivals, and I see a lot of theatre performances. But decisions are made together with the team. *Babel* is not a festival that is based on the exclusive selection of a judge and executioner. If someone does the judging and execution, that is not the selector... (*laughs*) I would also add that each edition has a theme that due to its limitations facilitates selection. Anyway, usually the themes of the editions are quite vast, welcoming, there is room for deviation from the “rule”.

V.E.: *Is the Babel Festival different from similar festivals in the country or abroad?*

“I’ve been to many festivals, but I haven’t found the atmosphere of our festival elsewhere. Probably as a small town, the world is together.”

L.C.: Our festival is different from other festivals because it has a concept. We try to bring all the arts together; the concept is based precisely on this mix of arts. Maybe there is a visible addition from one edition to another; we add something because this artistic universe is very vast and very difficult to cover. We have developed the *Film* section, maybe next year we will develop the *Babel Sport* section... but sports in art, we aren’t planning the EURO Championship in Târgoviște (*laughs*), although we will have two stadiums, probably next year. We try to bring anything related to arts, to connect them. We bring, let’s say, a book launch strictly related to the theme of the festival. We bring a photo exhibition, a fine arts exhibition strictly related to the theme. We also have this section of *research* and *networking* through conferences, where we leave room for new, innovative ideas. We make friends and sign memoranda with other similar institutions, i.e. festivals. I’ve been to many festivals, but I haven’t found the atmosphere of our festival elsewhere. Probably as a small town, the world is *together*. You have four, five performance venues, two hotels for accommodation, a single restaurant where you eat, a single festival club and that’s why the world is together. I think that this cannot happen in Seoul, one of the largest metropolitan agglomerations in the world. I have the impression that it is in second or third, with about 26 million inhabitants. You go from one city to another without realizing it. In such a place I don’t think you can have that artistic emulation on the streets, the friendship, the relationships that are built here in 7-10 days.

V.E.: *Therefore, there is always a need for “together”, speaking of the theme of the last edition of the festival?*

L.C.: Yes, of course, the “Connections” theme. Next year’s edition will be cantered on “Space/Spaces”. It is a research topic, because in the meantime we are discovering other spaces in the city of Târgoviște where performances, events will be held for the 2025 edition. We want to fill the city. I come back to spider’s web analogy. We want to involve the surrounding neighbourhoods as well, not just the city centre. We aim for disused thermal or electric power plants, industrial halls, the Chindia Park, the lake in this park. We want to create spaces, tents, etc.

V.E.: *Is Târgoviște ready? How do the citizens of the city respond to the call of the festival each edition?*

L.C.: The 2024 edition was a surprising one from the point of view of the audience. Suddenly, Târgoviște became a city of events. A lot of events happened in the second week of June 2024. There were even three large overlapping events. However, the theatre halls were full, the street performances had many spectators. The Târgoviște locals are ready. They are waiting to be offered artistic products, and we must be careful to have events for each taste. That is, Babel does not aim for a target audience of 20-40 years old, it does not aim to bring performances only for intellectuals.



Rafla, Direction: Katerina Repponen & Pasi Nousiainen
Babel International Festival 2024, @Augustina Iohan

Source: <https://www.babel2024.tonybulandra.ro/media/foto-babel-conexiuni/nggallery/conexiuni-cu-augostina-iohan/rafla>

V.E.: *How successful was the involvement of educational institutions in this festival? Did they meet the organizers half-way, or does this area of partnership needs to be developed?*

L.C.: Basically, what we must do is to find a common denominator. There is a lot of talk about the fact that theatre educates. But it does not educate in the way that institutions with a traditional educational profile do—schools, high schools, faculties within the University of Wallachia. We must give them the opportunity to get involved. We must meet them with events to their liking.

V.E.: *Babel has the contribution of volunteers...*

L.C.: This is a topic I wanted to reach. We already have high schools involved. The highschools in Târgoviște have always been by our side... also the School Inspectorate, the University in several editions. Let's not forget, however, that the festival takes place at a time of the year when there are exams. It's harder for them to get involved. But, by involving them in advance, they will surely be by our side more and more.

V.E.: *Has the Babel Festival increased the tourist potential of the municipality?*

L.C.: Of course. Let's not forget that the "Tony Bulandra" Theatre, during the theatre season, brings spectators from other neighbouring cities. Spectators come from Ploiesti, from Pitesti, from the cities of Dâmbovița County (Moreni, Găești, Pucioasa, Titu), and, most often, we see spectators from Bucharest. Very often, I met at the theatre reception with spectators from Bucharest who said they were staying for a weekend. They arrive on Friday, they stay for two nights, and they see all three performances that we play on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. Of course, they pay attention to the selection of the weekend, that is, they choose certain kind of performances. I met a group that was coming for the fourth time to a certain performance, which is gratifying.

V.E.: *Are there such groups present at the festival?*

L.C.: They are. The city's logistics are starting to show promise, because a few new, chic, maybe not so affordable hotels have already been built... But look, we think we should get involved in this area as well. Let's create some

packages with accommodation included. It is necessary to talk to the hotel owners so that, during the festival, they provide accommodation, and the theatre offers tickets at an advantageous price. We can do a barter.

V.E.: *Did the Babel Festival manage to be part of a festival network? I am referring to the Memorandum signed in 2017 with South Korea, to AMASIA.*

“The Babel Festival is defined by consistency and innovation at the same time.”

L.C.: *The Babel Festival*, implicitly the “Tony Bulandra” Theatre is the creator of such a network. We came up with the idea of creating a bigger festival, involving several festivals, five from Asia and five from Europe. In relation to this idea, Mr. Mc Ranin can give more details. In addition, we already have many co-productions, we had a co-production with Portugal, two co-productions with South Korea, a Romanian-Moldovan-Korean co-production is coming. For next year, we have another surprise—an even bigger co-production. We entered a network with the National Theatre in Debrecen, Hungary. We are now networking with the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland. Every time we invite a certain company, we try to move forward, to take a step forward. The *Babel Festival* is defined by consistency and innovation at the same time. At the beginning, in 2007, when Koreans first came to the festival, they presented very tough performances, sometimes based on shamanism. One performer ate a fish from the aquarium on stage.

V.E.: *Lately they haven’t come up with such performances...*

L.C.: No, no, no... I have the impression that that company doesn’t even exist anymore. I know that the initiator of this company is very old. I went for another kind of Korean theatre, which combines the traditional with comedy and with historical performances, with a historical subject, about the tense relations between North and South Korea, which generated real dramas.

V.E.: *Are there any new genres of performances at Babel?*

L.C.: Yes, an example is what I told you earlier about Korean performances. I also remember a Russian company, founded by director Dmitry

Aryupin, which also staged a performance (*Woyzeck*) in our country before the pandemic. He was building a kind of theatre that you don't know exactly where to fit it in. It was based on movement; the stage images were fractionated by a strobe. His performances surprised you by the way the actors moved from one side to another. Everything happened very quickly, in a fraction of a second. Probably this sensation was created precisely by the play of lights.

V.E.: *Does the Babel Festival have a role in social inclusion?*

“We produced performances that involved people with disabilities in various ways.”

L.C.: Yes, our collaboration with ANSR (The National Association of Hearing-Impaired Persons in Romania), Târgoviște branch, testifies to this. They have been our partners for several editions now, at least for 5-6 editions. We produced performances that involved people with disabilities in various ways—*Greuceanu*, for example, in which the storyteller was Ioan Grecu, at that time a student at the Special High School for the Visually Impaired in Buzău. In 2014, we brought to the festival a company from Italy that had people with disabilities, we were in negotiations with a company from Poland, *Nowy Teatr*, for *One gesture*—a performance with people with hearing impairments.

V.E.: *Who defines the current trends in theatre, film, and new media? Are festivals expected to set the new trends? Should Babel set new trends?*

“I think it’s a cycle that repeats itself. Every time, after each full rotation, we return to classics or to the story, and these concepts take on other nuances.”

L.C.: I don't think so, because there are a lot of niche festivals, so basically the trends are fulfilled from the start, they are covered by this array of other festivals. In our case, very often, the trend is to pursue *Beauty*, aesthetics, innovation, even the classic. I think it's a cycle that repeats itself. Every time, after each full rotation, we return to classics or to the story, and these concepts take on other nuances. This is the trend of *Babel*. I am convinced and I believe that there are festivals that give rise to the idea of trends. I

notice that we are trying to go back to origins, which we have already done in the 2024 edition, and we will continue in the 2025 edition.

V.E.: *Do you think that the impact of a festival can be measured differently than in figures?*

“The figures increase with impact, and impact increases with figures. Babel has become a brand. Maybe not nationally, but certainly internationally.”

L.C.: It’s a question we get very often, especially at press conferences. We are asked about figures. We don’t shy away from answers. Nobody hides the figures, financial figures especially can be seen on the website of the theatre, of the City Hall. At the same time, you need numbers to attract sponsors. But figures increase with impact, and impact increases with figures. It is a fair relationship, an ever growing balance, I would argue, because *Babel* has become a brand. Maybe not nationally, but certainly internationally.

Plus, it has a very big impact on young people in Târgoviște. I say this because, when we announce the registrations for volunteers, a lot of them sign up. There were a few years when we didn’t select them. I remember that we had 300 or so volunteers in one year. They wanted to come and they did! But we started selecting them, introducing minimum age restrictions. We focus on the 16-18 age segment. From the age of 18 onwards, they go to college, but there are many who take the time to come back to the festival as volunteers. Even some of those who have finished college still come. This volunteering has created actors, directors... Therefore, the impact is actually measured in how many people the festival has influenced, and this impact increases each year, with each generation. If at the beginning we were talking about 5,000 spectators, now we are talking about 20,000 live spectators and many more indirect spectators.

V.E.: *Post-pandemic, does Babel use the hybrid performance format? Is artificial intelligence involved in any way?*

L.C.: At the 2024 edition there was a hilarious situation related to AI and Morgan Freeman’s voice. I leave this situation its aura of mystery, this is not the time or the place to talk about it. (*laughs*)

We don’t use the hybrid performance format because we believe in the direct performer-spectator relationship. And, from my position as

selector, I can offer examples. When you see a recorded performance, it is not the same as seeing it live. But, over time, I learned to transform the recorded form of a performance into its live form. Also, we are not a festival that can generate income through *live streaming*.

V.E.: *That idea you mentioned in the beginning, the fact that you wanted to project the festival on different towers in different cities, was it continued?*

L.C.: No, it wasn't. It was something else anyway. It would have become a media festival. Anyway, we wouldn't have streamed everything, we would have only streamed one event at a time. For example, the parade or a certain performance.

V.E.: *You still had a pioneering way of thinking.. The idea came to you long before the pandemic, before live streaming of theatre became a recurrence...*

L.C.: We would end up selling the festival on Netflix, on streaming platforms or developing a *streaming platform* specifically dedicated to festivals.

V.E.: *How can we overcome the ephemerality of these festivals? How can they be stored?*

L.C.: Every year we try to make a documentary. We co-opt a director or a television station that creates a *brief* of the edition. This is how we archive. Otherwise, a festival has its charm precisely because it happens in a limited segment of time. I think a festival must be ephemeral, because that's when emulation, emotion happens... I can no longer describe what feelings I had 10 editions ago, because in the meantime I experienced an array of other feelings. I think that the ephemeral is nevertheless combated by the fact that we take all these steps, we develop lasting relationships with the invited companies, we create co-productions, exchange of directors, actors.

V.E.: *If the Babel Festival was no longer organized, as it happened during the period when the president of the festival, Mr. Mc Ranin, became manager at the Deva Theatre, or during the two years of the pandemic, who would miss it?*

L.C.: The city. We created a Pavlov effect. Somewhere around March-April, everyone asks us, "When is *Babel*? When is *Babel*?" They also see us, as a team, more together, because by organizing everything, we meet more often. People know the team, the city is small, and then they start

asking us when does *Babel* start. So, first of all, the city... Not to mention us, because we would clearly miss it. Why would we do it again otherwise?! I think about the silence after the festival... Nobody speaks, it's also a kind of sadness, nostalgia. This year many felt this state of longing immediately after the end of the festival, "What a pity it's over!", "It's like it's over too quickly." For a week there is a special energy in each of the participants, whether they are organizers, technicians, actors, spectators, guests, volunteers... Everyone has an overflowing, *oversized* energy, which of course you later miss. All these energies unite towards the same goal and from here a burst of joy is born. The city is quiet after the festival. You meet some acquaintances, and they ask you, "Is the festival over?" When you say yes, they reply, "Ah, what a pity! I felt that it was too quiet in the city."



Babel Festival Parade 2024, @Maria Ștefănescu

Source: <https://www.babel2024.tonybulandra.ro/media/foto-babel-conexiuni/nggallery/conexiuni-cu-maria-stefanescu/parada>