

*National Theatre Festival –
The Identity and Interdisciplinary
Dimension of the Romanian Stage*



INTERVIEW¹ WITH CULTURAL
JOURNALIST AND PLAYWRIGHT
IONUȚ SOCIU

by **CLAUDIAN ȘIMAN**²

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In 2025, the National Theatre Festival is preparing its 35th edition to celebrate the Romanian stage, being one of the most important festivals in the country. The first edition took place in 1990, one year after the Revolution, in a context of cultural effervescence and reaffirmation of national artistic identity. The initiative came from the Romanian Theatre Union (UNITER), chaired by actor Ion Caramitru, and was aimed at promoting the Romanian theatre scene.

Considering that in 2024 we celebrated 35 years since the Revolution of '89, and in 2025 we celebrate the 35th year since the first edition of the National Festival, the interview aims to probe the panoramic picture of the Romanian theatrical landscape through identities, originality, languages and cultural bridges. On the other hand, it illustrates the identity of the National Theatre Festival, created through the curator concept and a modular structure.

The curator – a relatively new concept in Romanian theatre, is the one who offers the selection of performances, as well as a whole chain of actions and activities, which are subsumed under a theme. The novelty of this idea is that the selection of performances is not the responsibility of a single person, but of a curatorial team made up of three representative personalities from the field of theatre. The team that will take on this mission from 2025 to 2028 is made up of Alina Epîngeac, Raluca Cârciumaru and Ionuț Sociu, and, for the first time, an associated artist – Radu Afrim.

Wanting to understand the phenomenon of the National Theatre Festival – a *showcase* of the Romanian stage, as well as the idea of curatorship and the mechanisms behind this construct, we asked Ionuț Sociu – the linking cell, in this context, between the 2021-2024 team (made up of Mihaela Michailov Călin Ciobotari) and the present, a series of questions about what the National Theatre Festival means today.

Ionuț Sociu (b. 1984) is a cultural journalist and playwright. He attended the Faculty of Theatre, Department of Theatre Studies, at UNATC I.L. Caragiale, followed by postgraduate studies at Bard College Berlin. Since 2005, Ionuț Sociu has published articles, reviews, interviews, reports and essays in various publications in Romania. He has authored several translations of contemporary dramaturgy, and as a playwright he has worked with several important directors of the contemporary Romanian stage. For the last six years he has worked as a reporter for *Scena9*, a publication with which he still collaborates on a regular basis. In 2024, he was one of the curators of the National Theatre Festival, 34th edition.

Claudian Șiman: *On a chronological axis, I suggest we start with the recent past. The National Theatre Festival, 34th edition is over. So, what and how was this edition?*

Ionuț Suci: It was winter, late 2023, early 2024, so we „landed”—literally and figuratively, in this formula. I was away in Asia; I had just come back and received the invitation to join the team. The figurative meaning of landed is that I was being invited in a formula that was already at the end of its cycle, i.e. in the third year of my term, and I was joining as the third curator. I joined the curatorial team as a playwright, just like Mihaela Michailov, and not as a theatre critic – I have been more active as a cultural journalist and playwright in recent years, not necessarily as a theatre critic. Of course, this doesn't mean that I have „given up” the idea of being a theatre reviewer, because this universe has also left its mark; I would add to this universe the experience of being a *human* who has watched theatre.

I had been following the National Theatre Festival (NTF) for the last few years and I liked it, I mean, I even saw this change of direction towards a curatorial modular formula; but I was watching from a distance, as a spectator. From the very beginning I was attracted by the people with whom we were to form a team, namely Mihaela Michailov and Călin Ciobotari. Things went very smoothly between us from the beginning because, most importantly, there was a fluid communication and I felt that this was very important to help us carry through a long, complicated process. Another advantage was the energy between us—which is very important.

When we started, I knew nothing about the theme, there was no theme. It was only known that the National Theatre Festival was coming up and we were going to set the theme together, which we did in several meetings. It seemed in a way that it was in the air and that we were moving towards it—towards the dramaturgies of the possible, because it felt like we were adapting to some changes in our theatre, the energy, the atmosphere. It was a theme that we didn't perceive as forced. The focus was on the idea of playwrights, and when I say playwrights, I use the plural because I think it's important. We tried, in a way, to avoid a niche because we are talking about a national festival and the theme must be open to several areas and theories. It mattered, of course, that Mihaela and I have this background of being playwrights - to which Călin's interest was added; but the idea was not to make a festival centred only on contemporary dramaturgy and taken to a radical area. The idea was to identify different aspects, actually to see what it would look like—without „showcasing”, but to follow what is happening, what the transformations are, because it is an ongoing process;

there are certain transformations in Romanian theatre and everything related to these dramaturgies and the mutations around them, which I have been observing for a few years now, I have been observing them from the inside, with people I have worked with on various projects, but also by actually traveling around the country and by seeing performances. And that's how I came to this theme.

C.S.: *So, coming back to the present; you are to take over the curatorial team for the next three years. So, I would like to ask: what is the National Theatre Festival today and what does its image look like?*

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I.S.: I think that the National Theatre Festival is in a process of redefining itself, precisely because this edition will be different, with a different structure, because new elements will appear in its „skeleton”. It's important to see and understand the curatorial process: once you have a theme or a perspective or a lens through which you see things, the way you relate to the idea of a festival or curator, changes. You start to see performances, you go to theatres around the country and see a few performances and you start to surprise yourself with curatorial thinking. Obviously, you have a broader theme that includes many aspects, you base yourself on a reality, you fold yourself into a theatrical reality. This doesn't mean that I come and plant the theme because such a thing is to create an unnatural reality in relation to theatrical reality.

The NTF has transformed over time; I say this as a person who used to go to performances as a student and as a person involved in the festival now, but it is still, first and foremost, a very strong festival and a landmark for the spectators and the theatre community. For me, obviously, it's an honor to be part of the team. Especially because, as a student, I used to go and see performances and it was like a school for me, an alternative school—I had the opportunity to see so many performances from Romania and abroad. Personally, I'm not against the idea of a single selector, in the sense that that is an ideal model. However, there are some transformations that theatre is going through, and not just the festival. For example, I remember the 2000s—I also remember the period when the selectors were Cristina Modreanu, then Marina Constantinescu and so on and so forth, and we had extraordinary international performances brought to the FNT: from

Ostermeier's shows on Ibsen's operas, to Jan Lauwers and Needcompany and so on. As a young theatre person, there was nowhere else to see them. Of course, there were also performances from the country, which you also couldn't see anywhere else, because not everyone went to Piatra Neamț to see them, or to see what the director Tompa Gábor was doing in Cluj and so on. So there was an effervescence around the festival and then – I remember very full auditoriums.

Coming back to identity, of course, it is not defined, but it has possibilities. I think its identity at the moment is clearly modular, with an interdisciplinary dimension. Some things will be the same. Even if we change the theme, for example, it doesn't mean that we stop talking about playwrights / dramaturgy. At the same time, I think that identity is also about the times, it is about the image of the context we live in— and how they are reflected in the theme because, in this way, they also get an identity here. I am not referring here to the „mirror of our times”, but to the fact that theatre itself acquires these values. It doesn't mean that you have to do political theatre, but that you have to be able to capture social transformations through the theatre you do, to „capture” something from the energy of the time: whether energy or anxiety. All these things are transposed, they are interconnected. They are transposed into performances, they are transposed into the way people write, they are transposed into the way people see theatre, they are transposed into everything. Obviously, they also come together in the NTF: there are days full of discussions, there are discussions with the audience during staged readings, there are debates in the morning after the performances and so on. In other words, we'll also see things from the times we are living in, and this is something that is also part of its identity.

C.S.: *We talked about the present and you mentioned change. You are taking over the „leadership” of the curatorial team, but with the experience of one edition alongside Mihaela Michailov and Călin Ciobotari. What was it like working with them in this team and how does this whole selection process happen?*

I.S.: It was fluid. It was chemistry. However, we are people with different sensibilities and where we didn't see eye to eye on certain points, we discussed them. I think the selection process through this three-way or collaborative formula has several advantages. First of all, you have a multi-angled perspective, which gives you a sense of... —“you're not alone in this after all” and that you can rely on more than your own judgment, in

a sense that it gives you the opportunity to check and get checked yourself. There are times when you think or maybe realize that you're not in the right zone or the right way to perceive a performance. You can get excited, for example, right? And you can realize, maybe, that you also need a clear-headed perspective when you're not. You idealize something or somehow lose focus. Or you really resonate with a performance. Yeah, so somewhere I think it balances out, one person's enthusiasm compensates for another person's lucidity or maybe another person's scepticism and so on. From this meeting, from this clash of perspectives, a more... objective result is reached, I would say, although that's putting it too strongly, because it's not necessarily about this. On the other hand, it also dissolves the idea of hierarchy, of authority, and then a more horizontal, more multifaceted way of thinking is created.

There is another phenomenon—the process itself: of traveling, of going around the country, because after all, that's the work, really. Beyond the responsibilities, if we take it at the ground level, the work is going to see performances. Obviously, it's not just about that, it's also about how you see them, i.e. through which lens. You also watch recordings, lots of them, but I've mostly seen live performances. Some of them we saw with the curatorial team, some of them we didn't, but the ones that we didn't see together we would send each other to watch. It was a continuous dialogue, a continuous flow. It happened that one of us would go to a corner of the country, in Satu Mare or Galați, and we would say: „You must see it, go there, it's worth it!” There were also cases where we asked for the performance to be recorded, where it was not possible see them live. In some cases, it was very clear to us because there were performances that you didn't need to discuss too much; what I mean is that it was crystal clear that was a performance worthy of NTF, so much so that... There aren't very many cases like that, obviously, but the ones that are—the few that there are, are very liberating because, in that moment, it's very clear what you have to do. So, strictly speaking, it means going, seeing, discussing—it helps a lot.

For me it was a very beautiful experience in many ways. It helped me a lot, to understand better, to see the Romanian theatrical landscape because the context also speaks for itself. That's why it was important for me to see them and, not only for me, for us, to see them there, in the cities, in the theatres, understanding the context. For me, I was always interested in this part about the audience, about the community: to see how the audience reacts, to see what kind of audience there and to understand a little bit

the big picture—and this, beyond anything else, first of all, as a spectator, to see what it means, to see how the audience changes from one city to another, the stage-audience relationship, the relevance of a performance in a community - whether it makes any sense there or whether it's simply planted, it's just something they do, somebody had an idea, but it has nothing to do with the audience or anything. It also represents a socio-cultural approach here, to see what things look like in situ and to get the vibe a little bit. You realize how many theatres there are that know how to maintain the relationship with the audience, how to maintain the relationship with the community, or others that are completely disconnected from what's going on in that city or that community. I also loved this whole process of being there the whole time because the work is done, when the festival is finished. I mean, the selection ends in summer, you start communicating and you say—"this is what the NTF looks like", this is what the selection of performances looks like; but the whole thing goes on until the last day of the festival. From my point of view, it's important to be there, to be at the show, not to see them all, but to feel the energy it creates.

C.S.: *A long process, therefore, which involves cultural and theatrical trips, a broad X-ray of the Romanian stage. In this context, what is the identity of the National Theatre Festival and what will the new team made up of Alina Epîngeac, Raluca Cărciumaru and Ionuț Sociu do next?*

I.S.: The National Theatre Festival is in a process of transformation, as the Romanian stage is also in a process of transformation. From my point of view, if I think about how it has been, I am more optimistic in general and I am optimistic when I look at the Romanian stage. I'm not so pessimistic about what is happening in Romanian theatre, it seems to me that there is a dynamic, there is an effervescence in terms of the public—there is curiosity. And the fact that there is a certain dynamic, the fact that things are happening in all corners of the country and in their cities, obviously in different ways, but still, there is an energy. And the NTF is about capturing that energy. You have to capture it in order to bring some of it to the audience in Bucharest. As an example, someone who recently came back from Satu Mare told me that he discovered some extraordinary actors there, it was like another world. Well, what I mean is that it is important to open „windows”, even for those in the theatre guild, not just for the public, because we often discover performances about which little is written. I was in such a situation, when I discovered the performance *Pericles* at the

Hungarian Theatre in Timișoara, directed by Philip Parr. And Parr—a Pericles himself, has an international background, has travelled a lot, was trained in a cosmopolitan environment, has done a lot of touring theatre in various places around the world. He came to Romania and worked at the Hungarian Theatre. But he did this performance, which was well received. Most of his colleagues didn't know it, and when I saw it in Timisoara, it was under the radar. I was surprised to see that it was still a good performance that I hadn't heard of. And then I asked myself – how come we don't know among ourselves that such a performance exists? And I looked afterwards and found that there were two reviews written about this performance. Two reviews. That's not much. And what does that show? It means that things are happening in different corners of the country and that we have these „islands”—whether it's Timișoara or whether we're talking about German theatre and so on. Things are happening there and we have to be pay more attention. Our role and also my role is to actually pay attention, because if we don't, then who does?

It's hard for me now to clearly say what NTF's identity is, because we are at the very moment of redefining it, even conceptually, and we will see how these new concepts will actually be illustrated in the festival. The structure will be modular, things are divided; for instance, Mihaela Michailov remains in the new structure and will coordinate the educational theatre module. But it's the three of us who will take care of the selection, and when I say the three of us, I mean myself, Alina Epîngeac and Raluca Cârciumaru.

What I can say is that I like what I see in the country at the moment, I like the energy. It seems to me that things have also changed at management level and that one can see directors who are more involved, who are starting to think more strategically. By the way, I think we all need to think more strategically, that is to say to think in the long term. It seems to me that the NTF is such a thing, it is a strategy that is, in a way, more long-term, but which also has the function or the power to enhance a theatrical landscape with a Romanian image of Romanian theatre, of the Romanian stage. And from this perspective, I think it's important that you curate the festival for a few years. Because you can think from one year to the next, you can see things that didn't work and maybe you can develop a new direction that you couldn't in the first place.

C.Ș.: *I'd like to expand things, because I was talking about the image of the Romanian stage, and I'd like to extend the question: what does a festival mean today? Especially, considering the definitions and theories of theatre, from the Dionysian rites to our times - posthumanist, Anthropocene, digital?*

I.S.: On the one hand, I could say that I sometimes see money being spent on whatever festival, everywhere. And not only theatre, we are talking about a festival debauchery: city days and so on. It's a mechanism, where money is rolling in; I observe this phenomenon as a journalist, I follow and see what's going on in the country, in small towns. In small towns with problems, they spend their money on city days. It's very clear there. I have also noticed this in the field of theatre, i.e. festivals organised just for the sake of doing—just to say that you did it, without any justification; there is no concept, no idea and it's done just for the sake of doing it, because it looks good. They also span ten days. Of course, it's a generalization, an exaggeration, but that's the way it is.

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There's also the flip side: people who have been organising festivals for years; festivals which have a certain structure, which are well thought out, which already have a certain tradition they, have a concept and they have already formed their audience - well, there are not many of them, but they play an important role, like the Sibiu festival for example. They play a role on several levels—in terms of training audiences, even training new artists. I myself come from a small town, from Botoșani, and I was decisively influenced by a high school theatre festival because we were involved—we were doing what we could. But that's how theatre opened its doors to me. And it's the same now. There are very important festivals for high school students, which also have a role—you form an audience and artists come out of there.

I believe the festivals which have an existing concept and a coherence in thinking are meeting spaces and they are very important, especially in the times we live in. Festivals are becoming spaces for meeting and dialogue on an artistic level, just like the NTF, the Sibiu Festival and *Interferences* in Cluj-Napoca have become. They are very important and will become even more important with time, I think, perhaps also because of the digital times

we are living in now. Of course, it is a cliché to say that we are alienated, that we are all day with our noses in our screens, but that is what it is. In that sense, I think they become even more important, because meeting people at the festival, going to the performance, talking to those people, it's a form of collective ritual which helps bring the community together. And then you keep in touch with the theatre community in that city or in that area and you create a certain energy around it, ideally, I think that's what happens.

C.S.: *You were talking about changes, about the image of the Romanian stage and about festivals, and as a playwright, I invite you to talk to us a bit about narratives, because they are increasingly diverse and broader: what languages do we encounter today in theatre both on the national and international stage, especially bearing in mind the theme of the 34th edition of the National Theatre Festival – The Dramaturgies of the Possible?*

I.S.: At the level of language, the mutations are multiple. It's very interesting to observe the mutations at the level of language both as a spectator, and as a playwright, as well as a journalist, because they also manifest in literature, and everywhere, even contemporary poetry is going through transformations, which are—even if you look at Gen Z or so on, there are obviously transformations that have to do with the digital world as well. A new kind of thinking, a new paradigm. You see this also in the way language is articulated differently. You see it in theatre as well, but here it's hard to say or draw clear conclusions. The theme of last year's edition—the dramaturgies of the possible, gave me a hint, watching the performances. It was a trigger for me in the sense that dramaturgies are also about language, and this unfolds on many levels.

For example, in dramaturgy, we say „written, written, word, word, word”, but there are other forms. There are sound dramaturgies, visual dramaturgies, you have so many types of dramaturgies and of looking at things. For example, the performance at the National Theatre „Marin Sorescu” in Craiova, *Anomalia*, created by a Polish team. This is an experimental performance in many ways. When I saw it in Craiova, I was surprised. I didn't know what to expect from the performance. Well, when I saw it I was also pleasantly surprised because it was an experimental performance, but it was still standing in front of an audience—speaking of seeing it in the local context. It wasn't a premiere, it was a regular evening with the theatre in Craiova, with the Craiova audience. The people in the theatre sat, they saw it, their reaction was very good, there was no sense that it was so experimental that people didn't sit through the performance.

I was surprised, first of all, by the type of language used, the fact that they made that choice. They worked a lot on sound, on everything that was technical, but precisely because it was very important for the performance to say what a sound dramaturgy meant, which was not linked in a rational, physical sense, it was not articulated on what dramaturgical logic meant, but it was visual, loud, verbal, and all of this went into a unified whole. It was a kind of experimental performance—you couldn't fit it into an exact pattern, quite uncomfortable, in the sense that it still forces one into a different kind of reception. I felt it was a performance that should have taken place at the NTF. Some people told me that I would be doing it a disservice, since people would leave the auditorium, not being accustomed to this particular type of performance. And then I realized, in a way, what my role is in relation to the audience—have we stopped challenging them altogether? (This, by the way, is also a question of taste, of reception.) And the great plus of this performance was (or is) that it isn't an experiment for the sake of experimenting. It had a foundation and an aesthetic; it wasn't a gratuitous experiment.

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Moreover, this kind of performance belongs to a different aesthetic framework because it employs a different kind of language and, obviously, a different theatrical language. In this equation, our role is to observe, to identify which are the types of languages used, what is happening to them, and to avoid homogenizing them through our selection. We shouldn't merely confirm the expected horizon, especially since I don't see the audience as an amorphous mass. And there's a very satisfying feeling in pleasantly surprising the audience. Of course, it can also be frustrating, because there is also rejection on their part, but that is part of the overall reception mechanism.

Another example from last year was the performance *Dance Me!* by the company She She Pop, which presented an interdisciplinary language and tied things together in a different way—speaking of the dramaturgies of the possible. Furthermore, in addition to what I have described above, I would add that such phenomena address us, the specialists, too, because we are also faced with new forms.

We are witnessing more and more foreign directors working in Romania. There are many—in fact, even more than before—working in various theatres: you have a director from the former Yugoslavia, others from the Balkan region, and we even talk about figures like Neil LaBute, or the Polish team I mentioned just now etc. It is an area worth watching because you see how visions from other regions meet with Romanian creative teams. From this encounter, very interesting things emerge—it doesn't mean that all creations are masterpieces, but a new type of language is born. For example, in the Polish sphere you encounter a different kind of humour, another form of the grotesque, and so on. All of these, I believe, are beneficial for theatres as well. It doesn't imply that the foreign element comes solely from the West—in a civilizing sense, showing us how theatre should be done—but simply that cultures meet. And this can benefit the NTF because it offers a “cosmopolitan” encounter. There is already an impact, a very strong cosmopolitan element, and I return here to the example of *Pericles*. The Hungarian Theatre in Romania, with an English director who has travelled the world and who brings a certain kind of experience. So, you already have an encounter between about three or four types of cultural energies. And from that, some very, very good things can emerge—even new ways of expression.

C.S.: *I believe that the “curator’s” function is much broader than that of a mere selector. It isn’t just about watching performances; it’s about proposing a rhythm, a comprehensive picture that isn’t confined solely to strictly aesthetic criteria, but evolves into an overview—a complex vision that is not only aesthetic but also political and social. So what does it mean, then, to be a curator for the National Theatre Festival from Ionuț’s perspective, who will take on this role for the next three years?*

I.S.: If we think about the origin of the term, it comes from the Latin “curator,-oris” and means “administrator”, “caretaker”; of course, we borrowed it from the visual arts, but it can be applied here even more, because theatre is connected with and relates to the other arts. But above all, it means “to take care of”.

Or, from my point of view—at least that’s how I see myself now and how I saw myself last year—I view myself as someone who must make sure that the selected performances are actually performed. In other words, you need to be present, observe, and make sure that everything works. Just like a curator at an exhibition, you need to know that everything is in order at the moment when every element is exactly where it should be.

The idea of a curator is linked to the visual arts; that is where we're used to finding its roots. For theatre, this is something new. I really liked it when I heard about this a few years ago—when the focus shifted away from the idea of a sole selector (a role in which I wasn't previously involved) to something else entirely. I simply liked that the festival moved toward this modular structure that we will continue to develop further. Especially when it comes to doing things for the long term—instead of doing one thing for two years and then doing the exact opposite afterward. And from this perspective—and here I must insist—I'm glad that there is support from UNITER, precisely because the whole team understands what it means to act with a long-term vision.

The National Theatre Festival is, in itself, a grand showcase. We have to see how things look in the country at that moment, bring in performances and gather contributions from various corners of the nation, so as to maintain a balance with what is happening nationally. In this regard, one-third of the performances come from Bucharest—but that's about it—, because I believe we need to move beyond this. After all, we are talking about a national festival, and you need geographical and cultural representativeness.

The interdisciplinary dimension is another aspect of curatorship—the idea of being open to other arts, of including exhibitions, of what the theoretical part signifies, of hosting a marathon of book launches, so that you are not confined solely to the idea of a performance. An entire network—and that network should be alive—with the energy of the festival being created around it. I liked the energy coming not only from the audience but also from the people who came to Cărturești (note: *Cărturești Modul*, where the book launches at NTF34 took place), for example. It's an energy that isn't merely about attending the performances and then going home.

For instance, I believe that for the National Theatre Festival, in my view, one “problem” comes from the city—that is, ideally, if you have a festival like the one in Sibiu, where everything is concentrated in one splendid city and the festival energy is palpable everywhere; I think that's what the NTF lacks, because it also depends on geography—the fact that you have a larger city with a different social energy. You can't concentrate everything in one place. However, you can still do something about it, and I'm hopeful that even this year we'll manage to design some concrete socializing and meeting spaces. It's hard to do that with any festival, not only theatre, but any kind, in Bucharest. In a way, this is why the big festivals

are, nonetheless, held in small cities rather than everywhere. This does not mean that we should stop staging the National Theatre Festival—it's great that it happens and, ultimately, it has many other advantages—but what I would like is for its energy to be much more cohesive. What you need to consider here is the infrastructure—the festival's infrastructure—because it becomes a space for collective reflection, and that is important even for identity. Moreover, I believe this especially because I'm witnessing a return of the public to theatre; we see this on a massive scale after the pandemic. The live experience is becoming increasingly important—the experience of being alongside other people, of talking with them—because we also realize that sometimes we have conflicting discussions or online arguments, but in reality, when you meet those people, the conversation flows much more effortlessly, more fluidly—it's a dialogue on another level, and that fluidity then extends across many dimensions.

C.S.: *The curator offers the public an entire system—an infrastructure that is connected to the theme—and each action reinforces the central concept. How does this work in its overall infrastructure?*

I.S.: Today's reality is very complex, and it's quite possible to miss things and angles even with a trio-based approach. We are talking about a large theatrical space, vast even in geographical terms. For example, you head to a so-called small town—Sfântu Gheorghe, at the Andrei Mureșanu Theatre, presented a showcase, and suddenly an entire world opened up there—a world made up of layers upon layers. It's not as simple, and things can easily be overlooked; the three-part formula, however, gives you the chance to discuss and reflect as carefully as possible. Here, I want to emphasize something very important—communicating with people, staying open to feedback, and paying extra attention to it.

We can see that the Romanian theatre scene has changed a lot compared to the 2000s, when I was a student. Of course, there is both an experimental side and a mainstream side, and in that context you need to find in the theme a sort of “measure” that is neither too broad, nor too niche, but rather one adapted to reality. Today, Romanian theatres show an openness toward contemporary dramaturgy and new creative teams—something that wasn't happening a few years ago. This isn't to say that there isn't any dynamism around dramaturgy; rather, there is now a greater openness in institutional theatre than there was some time ago. Inevitably, this will also be reflected in the festival.

People who don't know me have the impression that I favor a certain kind of performance—or those belonging to the sphere of political theatre—but I simply enjoy watching performances. If they are good—and by “good” here we mean performances rooted in various aesthetics—they are good. Personally, however, I don't have a mindset that is limited to only one type of theatre. I can watch a very poorly done political theatre piece and be terribly bored, or I might go see *Hamlet* directed by Declan Donnellan and enjoy it immensely. And as a reader, I feel the same way. What I believe is important is not to confine oneself to a single framework or view things exclusively through certain aesthetic lenses. In my view, a key quality of a curator is curiosity; you should be open and ready to assume the role of caring for and following a phenomenon rather than simply judging it—even asking, “What is happening with the artists?!” Instead of judging them in isolation, a curator should observe what is going on with, for example, certain directors during a particular period.

In the same vein, I would add that through the National Theatre Festival you must bring forward people who are creating and doing new things—not based on their status or other considerations—but by taking into account where they currently stand creatively and what directions they are focusing on. There can be comebacks, for example. I know of people who have been absent from the Romanian theatrical landscape or less active and then return, and in that case your role as a curator is to “intervene” by observing how they are at that moment and whether they should be brought back into the discussion.

There were many surprises for me in the NTF34 edition—in the sense that I discovered artists about whom I had the impression that they were blocked or stuck, or that were doing a certain type of theatre—and even that, in turn, has undergone transformations. For that reason, I would emphasize that I don't want to jump to any conclusions. My role is not merely to form immediate, hasty judgments, but to observe, to follow along. In my view, the critic's role is to try to describe what they see, to track it within a broader context.

C.S.: *How does the concept of aesthetic autonomy work for a curator?*

I.S.: Obviously, I do not intend to undermine the idea of the aesthetic. I care about the performance being well-played and presenting a theme—because if it isn't, nothing holds together. There is no point in merely ticking off every element of that theme if it is not well executed or well

written. Thus, the aesthetic is very important. I would also add that, for instance, through the theme and the way you approach it, you can involve the aesthetic right from the start. I draw a parallel here with the festival's theme, because under these conditions you can also see what the aesthetic means in relation to various factors—that is, what innovation and originality signify. The aesthetic remains an essential pillar; however, it genuinely must be considered within a context.

„You—as the curator—can overturn certain perspectives and bring to the forefront or emphasize specific directions... new angles on things that we believe we know...”

I believe that the National Theatre Festival offers the spectator a very interesting interplay of perceptions, as it gives you the opportunity to see very diverse performances and to reflect a variety of aesthetics. And I, as an observer of a performance, may be captivated by a play presented in a post-dramatic, authentic style one day, and the next day see a performance in a more “classic” or conventional mode—and enjoy that one as well, even experiencing a sense of catharsis. These aspects also have to do with curiosity. And I return to another case—*Hedda Gabler*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier at the National Theatre in Bucharest, which sparked many discussions. Ostermeier is a “straightforward” director with a conventional aesthetic in many respects; he works from clear patterns. And... a paradox was created. People expected shock—they wanted a masterpiece!

You can, in fact, emphasize certain points—which, of course, also become aesthetic—in order to shine a spotlight on something, and that is important. As was the case in the previous edition—we had decades in which the role of the playwright, or rather the impression that the idea of dramaturgy was secondary, prevailed. Well, through this concept you essentially underline an importance, an existence. You—as the curator—can overturn certain perspectives and bring to the forefront or emphasize specific directions; I believe that is what a curator can do. Along with these aspects—and we can do this regardless of the theme—you look and find new angles on things that we believe that we know—or perhaps they have been neglected. One thing is when you start talking about dramaturgies in a large context, like at the National Theatre Festival, which is obvious; another is when we discuss them on a micro-level, because that might matter to the audience as well—aside from breaking out of our bubble. There are playwrights, there are directors, and so on, as well as the idea

of hierarchy. It's a way of drawing attention to the fact that there are many people involved in theatre, not just one individual, who also play an important role.

C.Ş.: *Lately, we have been talking about collective or individual memory, immediate or recent. Do you think a festival also has the function of archiving and preserving memory—especially considering that we all know that the performing arts are inherently alive, ephemeral?*

I.S.: Yes, I believe it can incorporate this aspect and do so in various ways. For instance, there was the exhibition dedicated to Miriam Răducanu, organized in collaboration with the National Dance Centre of Bucharest, which took place at *Rezidența9*. It was a memorial exhibition marking the 100th anniversary of the artist's birth. The event was not only dedicated to an extraordinary artist but also served as a time arc, because when you think of Miriam, her biography overlaps with the history of dance in Romania—with the country's first dance school, and we're not just talking about an individual's life, but the life of an entire dance school, an artistic school. Thus, through such events, you clearly establish an element of archiving.

This kind of activity, these actions of archiving and memorializing, occur on multiple levels and in various forms. Another example is the launching of books and theatre translations—or what the theatre journal *Teatrul azi* excellently does—which itself has undergone a process of transformation and redefinition. And yes, I believe that this dimension must also be present. For me, it is very important, and I hope that this year we will also have a strong theoretical dimension. We should have an exhibition component, we should offer everything—not just a performance alone—but, again, an entire range of activities, such as the staged readings module and many others.

As a cultural journalist, I am very interested in archives, and unfortunately, we are not very advanced in this area—let alone digitalization. For example, consider the initiative undertaken by Cristina Modreanu, which is built around memory. So, yes, I believe that the National Theatre Festival can also embrace such a dimension, whether it centers on an artist or a movement. In the same vein, I would like to emphasize that there must be a permanent dialogue with the past, and this holds true also for the curatorial team: to see what those before you have done—be they curators or selectors—in order to create a dialogue.

C.S.: *The National Theatre Festival is a benchmark festival for the Romanian stage, which brings me now, towards the end, to the idea of being a trendsetter. Who sets the trend: the curator, the creative teams, or the public?*

I.S.: Nowadays, things are moving in various directions, and change does not happen overnight. A trend, therefore, I believe, can have an immediate impact but can also lead to structural changes over time—especially if institutional openings are created. For example, in the early 2000s, there was the *DramaAcum* phenomenon. I was a student and had seen their first performances—I didn't really understand what was happening; the idea of a more „flexible” text was not clear to me. The entire work process and the idea that a playwright should not have a passive role was quite difficult for me to grasp. In other words, I only understood it after a few years—not just me, but probably others as well. The influence you can have is much more subtle and unfolds over time. Indeed, you might have a clearly immediate impact, but it's more important to observe the impact in time. Another example would be *documentary theatre* and *political theatre*: initially, we didn't understand them very well, but later I started noticing clichés, other perspectives, mimetic elements, and the raw approaches. All these processes consolidate over time as well as in the audience's perception. Of course, nowadays I can travel around the country and attend political theatre performances, where I can identify various sources and understand where certain influences come from and how they have evolved over the years.

„Theatre must be treated as something alive rather than as a museum piece. Once you've turned something into a museum piece, it's over.”

I think that the mutations that a festival produces can be seen over time because they will manifest in various ways. We will be able to observe over time whether and how what is happening now at NTF, let's say, in recent years, will become relevant or not. The results, the direct or immediate impact are observed through various discussions. But you can see if some real mutations appear over a longer period of time, because they happen gradually. I think we will see them over the years, even when it comes to curatorship. I'm already beginning to notice festivals in the country that want to have a curator, for instance.

I believe that the National Theatre Festival can serve as a trendsetter—a pioneer in certain directions—and I would be delighted if these evolutions were also reflected on a theoretical level. I believe that if you remain consistent, you can establish a certain kind of approach or mode of action—take, for example, *staged readings*. This can become a practice that both the audience and the artists get used to. Lately, I have started noticing full houses at staged readings. In this respect, I think you can create a trend—perhaps someone who attends and sees it might, in turn, organize a festival, whether it’s geared toward students or not. Or perhaps they might adopt a curatorial idea and carry it forward.

There are nowadays so many social and technological transformations, with AI and other advances, that will produce many changes in theatre as well. And yes, I believe we must remain vibrant and curious so that after, say, three years of the National Theatre Festival, you can look back and see what phenomena or movements have emerged—or which ones have not (*laughs*). Ultimately, I believe that theatre must be treated as something alive rather than as a museum piece. I believe this is an essential idea: once you’ve turned something into a museum piece, it’s over.

