

TabThePAST PROJECT – MEMORY, ETHICS AND PERFORMATIVITY IN THE POST-COMMUNIST CULTURAL SPACE

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Abstract: The article examines how the European project “TabThePAST – Taboo History. Fill the Past to Sense the

Present” (2023–2024) reactivates the past of theatrical censorship in Romania and the former GDR, through an interdisciplinary methodology that combines archival research, pedagogy and artistic creation. Starting from the archives of UNATC and CNSAS (The National Council for Studying the Securitate Archives), the project proposes a model of a “performative archive”, in which documents are recontextualized through educational workshops and performances such as: *Un dovar X/1955*, *Învinsul Învingător*, *Nostalgia UpeşDown*, *Controverse 1961. Cum vă place?*, *Duşmance ale poporului* (artistic approach reactivated by the project).

The analysis uses the concepts formulated by Diana Taylor, Janette Malkin, Rebecca Schneider and Aleida & Jan Assmann to investigate the relationship between archive, memory and performativity. It is argued that TabThePAST develops a form of memory pedagogy that transforms historical research into a participatory and reflective process, activating the past through corporeality, empathy and immersive technology (AR/VR). Finally, the article places the project in the European context of theatre studies, highlighting its contribution to redefining the relationship between art, education and civic responsibility.

Keywords: TabThePAST Project, performativity, archive, censorship, cultural memory, theatre pedagogy, artistic research, AR/VR, post-communism.

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1. INTRODUCTION. THE THEATRE OF MEMORY AND THE RECOVERY OF CENSORSHIP

Censorship during the communist era was one of the most profound forms of control over the collective imagination and artistic production in Eastern Europe. In Romania, between 1948 and 1989, the mechanisms of surveillance, selection and distortion of public discourse shaped not only theatre repertoires, but also the artistic language itself, transforming creation into a permanent exercise of negotiation between direct references and multiple prohibitions. This was a period in which a number of theatre creators developed a metaphorical theatrical language that alluded to the social and political reality of the moment, exploring the potential of coded expressiveness in language; a series of artists who created memorable performances, especially through the staging of classical texts.

Over the last two decades, interest in re-evaluating these phenomena has grown, with the emergence of interdisciplinary projects that propose a revisiting of the past through performative and technological tools. Among these, the European project *TabThePAST – Taboo History. Fill the Past to Sense the Present* (2023–2024),

coordinated by UNATC „I.L. Caragiale”, stands out for its ambition to transform archival research into a form of performative and pedagogical knowledge.

The project, carried out in partnership with the Replika Educational Theatre Centre (Romania) and Citizen.KANE.Kollektiv (Germany), aimed to recover the theatrical memory of the communist era through a tripartite structure – **research, education and artistic creation**. *TabThePAST* provided a framework for investigating how censorship documents, surveillance files and marginalised narratives can be rearticulated scenically and pedagogically.

In the first stage, the multidisciplinary team researched the archives of UNATC and the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), conducted interviews with artists, critics, stage technicians, and theatre professionals who had experienced censorship. The documents consulted included intelligence files, Securitate reports on the „mood of the population,” intercepted correspondence, and investigations by cultural bodies. The interviews with artists, critics and stage technicians were supplemented by analyses of materials from the UNATC archive, which provide an insight into institutional restrictions and the negotiation methods used by theatre professionals. This documentary material became the basis for **educational performance workshops** entitled „The Narratives of Censorship”, in which students, doctoral students and researchers dramatised and subsequently transposed fragments of files and testimonies into stage performances, generating distinct creations: *Controverse 1961*, *How Do You Like It?*, *A File X/1955*, *The Defeated Victor*, *Enemies of the People* (an initiative reactivated through this project).

These exercises in performative reconstruction and re-enactment revolved around some essential questions: how can collective trauma be transposed without fictionalising or aestheticising it excessively? How can the archive become a living space, open to questioning, without losing its historical rigour? In this regard, *TabThePAST* offers a model of **a „performative archive”** that is not limited to preserving the past, but puts it back into circulation through artistic, ethical and educational means. As theorist Diana Taylor observes (2003), the performative „repertoire” can function as a form of living archive, capable of transmitting bodily and emotional knowledge beyond the written or recorded document.

By extending its working methodology to the technological field – through the development of an AR/VR installation (*TabThePAST.IMMERSED*) – the project articulates a reflection on **immersive memory**, offering viewers who did not experience that period a sensory reconstruction of history. The AR/VR installation *TabThePAST.IMMERSED* offers navigation between the real and the virtual through scenarios based on the archive: the activation of „floating” documents, the symbolic gesture of „burning” the file to access the next scene, and the use of a chair marked as a transition point between the planes of the

diegesis. This fusion of archival research, performance and technology renews the tradition of „memory theatre” (Malkin, 1999) and transforms the learning process into an act of critical awareness of traumatic aspects of the past.

Thus, this article aims to investigate **how contemporary theatre can function as a form of pedagogy of memory**, based on the experience of *TabThePAST*. The analysis is based on extensive documentation covering both the pedagogical processes within the workshops and the development of artistic and technological products, as well as the transnational dialogue between Romania and Germany. The article will follow three main directions: (1) the performative methodology of working with archives, (2) the translation of historical research into artistic and educational practices, and (3) the impact of new technologies (AR/VR) on how the public perceives and „reimagines” the past. Finally, it will be argued that *TabThePAST* is not only a recovery project, but also a **laboratory for reconfiguring the relationship between memory, ethics and performativity** in the post-communist cultural space.

The article makes four main contributions to performative studies and post-communist memory research:

1. It proposes an applied model of „performative archive” that demonstrates how archival research can function as both a pedagogical and performative process, overcoming the traditional opposition between document and stage.
2. It integrates immersive technologies (AR/VR) into a framework of memory pedagogy, providing an example of performative museography in which the user becomes a co-author of historical reconstruction.
3. It develops a transnational analysis of the memory of censorship by comparing the contexts of Romania and the former GDR, contributing to the articulation of a European framework for theatre studies on political trauma.
4. It clarifies an ethic of representation in post-communist documentary theatre, demonstrating how to avoid aestheticisation, excessive fictionalisation and the instrumentalisation of emotion when working with traumatic archives.

This synthesis contributes to the consolidation of performative research as a valid methodology for investigating cultural memory in Eastern Europe. By anchoring the analysis in the concrete results of the project – workshops, performances, conferences, AR/VR installations – the article demonstrates the potential of performative research to reconfigure access to cultural memory and transform the archive into a critical space of learning.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: FROM ARCHIVE TO PERFORMATIVE DOCUMENT

If, for historiography, the archive represents a repository of documentary truth, for the performing arts, it becomes a space for **negotiation between memory, forgetting and reactivation**. In the context of contemporary theatre, the archive is no longer just a collection of traces, but a **performative matrix**, fertile ground for reinterpreting the past and reconfiguring the present. Researchers of cultural memory, such as Aleida Assmann (2011) and Jan Assmann (2011), distinguish between „archival memory” – oriented towards conservation and fixation – and „communicative memory”, based on lively and experiential transmission. Within this dichotomy, theatre and the performing arts function as a bridge: they transform the inert document into a relational practice, a “body of memory” capable of activating both the affective and reflexive dimensions of history. The materials consulted within *TabThePAST* confirm this transition: intelligence files, reports on the “mood of the population”, disciplinary investigations of IATC (Institute of Theatre and Cinematographic Art) students, and administrative documents from UNATC are brought back to the present not as fixed objects of archival memory, but as performatively activatable elements, in accordance with what Jan Assmann defines as communicative memory.

In her seminal work *The Archive and the Repertoire* (2003), Diana Taylor proposes a distinction that has become canonical for performative studies: if **the archive** preserves material traces, **the repertoire** preserves ways of doing, speaking and feeling, transmitted corporally and communally. Performativity, from this perspective, becomes a form of living archiving. The repertoire does not contradict the archive, but extends it – giving it an ethical, participatory dimension. Theatre that returns to documents, testimonies and institutional archives thus transforms the past into a present practice, one that questions the way history is written, filtered and transmitted. In the workshops „The Narratives of Censorship”, this archive-repertoire relationship was activated through exercises in representing testimonies: students worked with raw fragments from CNSAS or IATC/UNATC files, reconstructing not only verbally, but also physically, the rhythms of interrogations, silences, hesitations and documentary contradictions. This methodology confirms Taylor’s perspective on the transfer of knowledge from the archive to the repertoire through bodily and relational practices.

In the same vein, Rebecca Schneider (2011) talks about *performing remains* – an aesthetic of return and survival, in which the past is not reproduced, but **returns** in fragmentary and intermittent forms. For Schneider, the performer’s body does not recreate the event, but „keeps it alive” through a series of gestures

of repetition, delay and transformation. This theory of „persistence of remains” provides a fertile framework for analysing the processes of *reenactment* and stage reconstruction in the *TabThePAST* project, where censorship documents are performatively revisited not to illustrate history, but to bring its contradictory, tense aspects and silences back into circulation.

At the same time, the concepts of „**theatre of memory**” and „**performative archive**,” developed by Janette Malkin (1999), introduce a pedagogical dimension to remembrance, defining memory theatre as a space in which „the conflicts and repressed memories of a shared past are re-enacted in order to open up processes of collective remembrance”. In *TabThePAST*, the pedagogical function of the theatre of memory is explicitly manifested: *European Theatre Memory Week* brought together over 500 participants in a series of debates, conferences and performative presentations, confirming the theatrical potential of archives to become a community tool for reflection on trauma and cultural education. From this perspective, the performative reconstruction of the archives of communism is not only an artistic gesture, but also a *sanogenetic* one, intended to free society from unspoken traumas and restore history to its human and emotional dimension.

The *TabThePAST* project fits into this paradigm, articulating a dual function of performativity: *epistemic* (through documentary research of the UNATC and CNSAS archives) and *transformative* (through their transposition into pedagogical exercises and performances). In its internal documents, the project explicitly states its intention to „transform research into a pedagogical tool and generator of innovative practices”.

Therefore, performativity is not only a mode of presentation, but also an **instrument of knowledge**: the archive becomes a laboratory, the stage becomes a space for research, and the actor, student, and spectator become co-participants in a process of learning through the re-constitution of memory.

This vision is close to what Baz Kershaw (2007) called „performative research” – a methodology in which the artistic act produces and validates knowledge. In the logic of *TabThePAST*, the performative archive functions as a **pedagogy of memory**, a form of affective learning that transcends the discursive paradigm of official history. By re-contextualising fragments of files, transcripts and testimonies, the project’s performers and researchers do not reproduce the past, but translate it into the language of a contemporary consciousness, capable of critically reflecting on the continuities between the censorship mechanisms of the past and the subtle, institutional or economic ones of the present. The show *Nostalgia Up&Down* is an eloquent example: created on the basis of research on self-financing policies in the 1980s, it recontextualises these mechanisms in a

contemporary key, highlighting the continuities between the cultural-economic logic of late communism and the current pressures on cultural institutions.

In conclusion, the theoretical framework underpinning the analysis of the *TabThePAST* project is based on a **double hypothesis**:

- (1) the archive becomes performative when it is activated physically, emotionally and communally;
- (2) the performativity of archives opens up a new mode of knowledge – a pedagogy of memory – that combines historical research with artistic experience and public participation.

This dual hypothesis is validated by the multimodal structure of the *TabThePAST* project, which combines physical archives (UNATC, CNSAS), performative activations (readings, installations, performances), pedagogical tools (archive dramatisation workshops) and immersive technologies (*TabThePAST. IMMERSED*). Thus, the archive is understood as a hybrid space — between document and body, between past and present, between analysis and experience. At the same time, it guides the analysis of the case studies presented in the following section, in which the historical document is transformed into stage action, and censorship becomes living material for artistic and social reflection.

3. METHODOLOGY: RESEARCH AS PEDAGOGY

The article adopts an interdisciplinary methodology, situated at the intersection of performative studies, archival analysis, and artistic research. The approach combines: (1) documentary analysis of files from the UNATC and CNSAS archives; (2) methods specific to performative research (Kershaw, Haseman), which capitalise on the creative process as a form of knowledge production; (3) tools of artistic ethnography and pedagogical self-reflexivity, used in „*The Narratives of Censorship*” workshops; and (4) critical analysis of stage productions and AR/VR installations from the perspective of memory studies (Taylor, Assmann, Schneider). Methodologically, the article traces how the archival corpus was transformed into educational practice and performative stage text, using participatory observation, process analysis and creative documentation as tools for investigating cultural memory. In this sense, the article is based on internal documents and implementation reports of the *TabThePAST* project (event files, workshop descriptions, research summaries), as well as on participatory observation carried out during working sessions and public presentations (performative readings, performances, conferences, AR/VR installation).

At the heart of the *TabThePAST – Taboo History. Fill the Past to Sense the Present* project lies an innovative methodological premise: **historical research can become a pedagogical and performative process in itself**. Starting from the triad proposed in the implementation documents – *research / education / artistic creation* – the interdisciplinary team formed at UNATC has built a working model in which the archive, the stage and the classroom overlap, generating a form of applied and reflective knowledge. This triad is not just a declarative formula, but the actual structure of the project: consulting the UNATC and CNSAS archives, organising „*The Narratives of Censorship*” workshops, and developing stage and digital productions (performative readings, installations, shows, AR/VR application) are conceived as interdependent stages of the same process.

This **methodology** is based on two interdependent levels:

- (1) documentary research on institutional archives (UNATC, CNSAS, personal archives) and
- (2) the transposition of archived material into pedagogical exercises, dramatisations and performances/shows.

In the first stage, UNATC researchers – together with doctoral students, master’s students, artists and historians – carried out an extensive archival investigation, reviewing files from the period 1950–1989 and identifying cases relevant to the dynamics of censorship in the Romanian theatre environment (CNSAS) or in the academic environment (UNATC). The selected files covered a wide range of situations: investigations of students proposed for expulsion, files on the surveillance of directors and actors, reports on the „mood of the population”, documents on self-financing policies, and reports on theatre repertoires and criticism.

At the same time, the digitisation of the University’s own archive was initiated, with a view to recovering and making the documents accessible. Interviews with artists, critics, technicians and theatre professionals from the communist period complemented this effort, offering an oral, subjective perspective on how censorship mechanisms influenced the professional and daily lives of those in the performing arts.

What sets this project apart from other similar initiatives is the pedagogical integration of research and the development of an experiential learning methodology, through what we might call *archive embodiment*, in the sense of the body as an archive discussed by Lepecki (2010), the fragmentary return of the past conceptualised by Schneider (2011) and the „repertoire” as embodied memory in Taylor (2003) – that is, a form of knowledge in which

the document becomes experience. The documentary results did not remain at a descriptive level, but were transformed into tools for artistic training. Thus, between November 2023 and February 2024, UNATC organised a series of **educational workshops** under the title „The Narratives of Censorship”. Led by researchers and artists (Răsvana Cernat, Vlad Galer, Radu Crăciun), these workshops combined theoretical reflection with practical exploration, offering participants – students and young creators – a framework for experimenting with the concept of the “performative archive”.

Each working group chose a theme derived from the documentary material:

- **Răsvana Cernat’s group** reactivated a previous theatrical project based on the dramatisation of excerpts from the testimonies of deported women and political prisoners, creating the performative installation *Enemies of the People*;
- **Vlad Galer’s group** worked on the file of a student expelled in 1955 for „relations with Western representatives,” generating the performative reading *Un dosar X/1955* (An X File/1955);
- **Radu Crăciun’s group** created the performance *Învinsul învingător* (The Defeated Victor), based on the Securitate’s investigation of director Crin Teodorescu.
- The performative study-performance **CONTROVERSE. 1961. CUM VĂ PLACE? (CONTROVERSIES. AS YOU LIKE IT)**, created by **Eugen Gyemant and Mihaela Michailov**.

In methodological terms, these groups functioned as micro-laboratories of performative research: each constructed its own working protocol with the document (types of selection, modes of montage, the relationship between raw quotation and stage montage), generating four different models of transforming the archive into a pedagogical and performative experience.

These exercises in dramatising documents were not intended to faithfully reconstruct the past, but to **problematis** it **through responsible stage practice**. Participants were challenged to translate archival material into an artistic form without betraying the veracity of the source, avoiding any tendency towards fictionalisation or sentimentality. For this reason, the methodology also included a component of ethical reflection on the limits of representation: how can suffering be represented without exploiting it aesthetically? How can historical distance be transformed into critical empathy?

After the workshops were completed, the results were presented to the public at the event *Lectures and Performative Workshops*, held at the UNATC headquarters

in February 2024. The event functioned as a form of „open laboratory,” where the research process was exposed and debated in dialogue with the public. The presentations were followed by question and answer sessions, through which the audience became an active part of the act of reinterpretation.

This openness to the public transformed the research into a dialogical process. In the methodological logic of the project, learning is no longer achieved through the unilateral transmission of knowledge, but through a collective experience of discovery. Students, teachers, researchers and spectators are involved in a chain of active remembrance and performative learning. This creates a framework for „performative learning,” in which historical analysis becomes an exercise in civic imagination.

The model was extended to the professional creation phase with the production of the show *Nostalgia Up&Down*, created by the Replika Educational Theatre Centre and presented in both Romania and Germany. In this case, the pedagogical methodology was transformed into a methodology of **applied artistic research** (*practice-as-research*). The interviews, file excerpts and archival materials were integrated into the dramaturgy in a meta-theatrical format that questions the very idea of „artistic autonomy” in relation to contemporary cultural policies.

Therefore, *TabThePAST* proposes a methodological model that transcends the traditional boundaries between research, education and creation. In this model, *the archive becomes a space for experimentation*, and pedagogy becomes a performative act. The relationship with the document is not a passive one, but one of co-authorship: the researcher is no longer an observer, but a participant, an „interpretive witness” who mediates between the past and the present.

This approach resonates with the theories of performative education formulated by Paulo Freire (2007) and Augusto Boal (2014), for whom learning is an act of liberation and dialogue. Similarly, *TabThePAST* revalues the archive as a place of cognitive and affective emancipation, inviting participants to assume the role of *subjects of memory*, not just recipients of history.

The project’s methodology thus demonstrates that **performativity can be a form of knowledge**: not just a mode of representation, but a process of collective reflection that regenerates the meaning of history. In a post-communist context still marked by selective amnesia and institutional silences, this pedagogy of memory takes on an essential critical value.

4. CASE STUDIES: THE ARCHIVE AS SPECTACLE AND PEDAGOGY

The most relevant results of the *TabThePAST* project are not only in the field of historical documentation, but also in **the transposition of research into theatrical and educational forms**. Through a series of workshops, performative readings and performances, the archive has been reactivated as a space for dialogue and critical awareness. Each of these approaches represented a distinct stage in the construction of a **performative pedagogy of memory** – a process through which the traumatic past is relearned, reinterpreted and transmitted through the living body of the actor and the spectator.

4.1. *Women Enemies of the People: female testimonies and the archive of empathy*

The performative installation *Women Enemies of the People*, coordinated by Răsvana Cernat, was based on research conducted in collaboration with the Sighet Memorial and a series of written testimonies by women who were deported or imprisoned for political reasons between 1940 and 1960. The narrative fragmentation was transposed onto the stage through a multimedia installation spread across several rooms of the UNATC library: the audience was invited to follow an immersive route composed of video projections, soundtracks and mime performances.

This spatial fragmentation symbolically reproduced **the dispersion of female identities in official history**, restoring their emotional corporeality. Each visitor received a pair of headphones at the entrance, through which they listened to monologues based on real confessions – voices superimposed over archive sounds, rustles, breaths, metallic noises. Through this “auditory intimacy,” the installation built an ethical relationship between the viewer and the historical subject, avoiding voyeurism of suffering and orienting the experience towards **reflexive empathy**.

From a methodological point of view, *Enemies of the People* represents a form of **„affective archive”**, in which documentary material is transferred into a sensory language. According to theorist Marianne Hirsch (2012), post-traumatic memory is often transmitted through „postmemorial” forms – emotions and images that belong to a later generation but are imbued with the traces of those who experienced the trauma. In this sense, the installation functioned as an exercise in theatrical postmemory: an act of pedagogical empathy through which participants (students and spectators) learned to listen to the archive.

4.2. *An X file/1955: the pedagogy of reconstruction*

As part of the same series of workshops, the group coordinated by Vlad Galer worked on a document discovered in the UNATC archive – the file of a student proposed for expulsion in 1955 for “unacceptable relations” with a representative of the French Legation in Bucharest. This university investigation, orchestrated by the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Romanian Communist Party, illustrates how educational institutions had become instruments of ideological control.

The theatrical reconstruction of the file, entitled *Un dosar X/1955* (An X File/1955), was conceived as a **dramatised reading**, in which the performers (master’s students) simultaneously played the roles of the investigated and the investigators. The stage set – a long table, a desk lamp, a voice-over reading excerpts from the minutes – reproduced the rituals of interrogation, highlighting the mechanisms of disciplining the body and language.

The performance ended with a question and answer session with the audience, inviting them to reflect on the concept of **self-censorship** and how fear becomes a social technique for regulating behaviour. Through this gesture of “history reincarnated”, *Un dosar X/1955* functioned simultaneously as a theatrical act and a **lesson in performative history**, in which learning takes place through experience and direct confrontation with the document.

4.3. *The Victorious Loser: the archive of cultural resistance*

The performance *The Victorious Loser*, coordinated by Radu Crăciun, was based on the criminal file of director Crin Teodorescu, a political prisoner convicted in 1959 for „conspiring against the social order.” The dramaturgy, written by PhD student Sabina Bălan, combined fragments from investigation reports, informative notes and entries from the director’s diary in a montage of voices and interrogations.

The title itself, taken from the paradoxical expression used by Teodorescu to define his own existence, becomes a **metaphor for survival through art**: defeated by the system, but victorious through creation. In the performance, the documentary reading was alternated with musical moments and poetic insertions that broke the narrative rhythm, suggesting the fragility of memory and the impossibility of a linear reconstruction of trauma.

From a pedagogical perspective, this approach introduced students to **the ethics of representation**: how can a fractured biography be reconstructed without simplifying it? How can the dignity of the historical subject be respected in the performative process? *The Defeated Victor* functioned as an exercise in „ethical

translation,” where the stage interpretation did not aim at catharsis, but at critical reflection on the repressive mechanisms of official culture.

4.4. *Nostalgia Up&Down: the politics of memory and re-reading the present*

While the first three approaches were developed in a pedagogical context, the performance ***Nostalgia Up&Down***, created by the Replika Centre and directed by Radu Apostol, marks the translation of the *TabThePAST* methodology into the professional field of theatre creation.

The performance explores the parallels between **the self-financing policies of the 1980s** and the neoliberal logic of contemporary culture. Based on documents from the Securitate archives on the „state of mind of the population” and interviews with artists of the time, the text written by Mihaela Michailov and Radu Apostol becomes a lucid satire on the precariousness of art and the standardisation of public discourse.

Three „impartial experts for trainers of cultural manager trainers” comment on history with an ironic and meta-theatrical tone, superimposing the language of communist propaganda over current managerial jargon. By alternating between documentary and fiction, *Nostalgia Up&Down* offers a contemporary reading of censorship – not as an external prohibition, but as *an internalised mechanism of conformism and economic performance pressure*.

From a performative perspective, the show extends the methodology of the living archive through multimedia technologies and interactive scenography. The text fragment projected on the shiny curtain, the retro-projected archive images and the performers’ voices compose an aesthetic of simultaneity – the past and the present coexist, they communicate and mock each other.

The international reception of the performance, presented in Romania and Germany as part of *the Week of European Theatre Memory*, confirms its transnational relevance: *Nostalgia Up&Down* transforms the communist archive into a critical mirror of current cultural capitalism. Thus, the project closes the circle between research, pedagogy and artistic creation, demonstrating that **memory** is not a static repository, but **a political practice of the present**.

4.5. *Controversies. 1961. How do you like it?*

The show starts from the debate hosted by *Teatrul* magazine in 1962 – „The contemporary valorisation of classical dramaturgy – a discussion on Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*”. This debate, considered a polemical moment in the history of Romanian theatre, was attended by Liviu Ciulei – director of the play *As You Like It*

(which premiered at the Municipal Theatre, Izvor Hall, in June, at the end of the 1960-1961 season), Lucian Pintilie, David Esrig, as well as a number of important critics of the time, including: Andrei Băleanu, B. Elvin, Valentin Silvestru, Mihnea Gheorghiu, Traian Șelmaru. The script for the show *CONTROVERSIES. 1961. AS YOU LIKE IT?*, written by Mihaela Michailov and Eugen Gyemant (performance concept: Eugen Gyemant), includes excerpts from the discussion hosted by *Teatrul* magazine and scenes from the play *As You Like It*, to which the participants in the discussion refer.

4.6. Synthesis: the archive as a space for training and creation

The case studies analysed show that, within *TabThePAST*, the archive becomes simultaneously **a document, pedagogical material and stage text**. The learning process takes place through physicality, emotion and critical reflection – a method of „knowledge through embodiment” that goes beyond the traditional limits of historical study.

By combining archival research, participatory pedagogy and contemporary dramaturgy, the project has generated a sustainable working model for the performing arts: a model in which theatre functions as **an instrument of reconnection between past and present**, between ethics and aesthetics, between academic training and civic consciousness. For the students who participated in its creation, the performance becomes a performative context for studying the history of Romanian theatre, an active applied research of theatrical debate.

5. THE PERFORMATIVITY OF ARCHIVES AND THE POLITICS OF REMEMBRANCE

In post-communist societies, memory is not a simple exercise in evoking the past, but a space for *confrontation* between competing narratives: between official and marginal memory, between institutional discourse and individual testimony, between the authority of recorded history and the marginalisation of decentralised histories, which take their fictional revenge through their aesthetic and political reorganisation. In this context, the archive is no longer just a source of information, but an **arena of memory politics**, where the legitimacy of the past and the right to tell stories are negotiated.

The *TabThePAST* project fits into this paradigm, transforming archival research into a **performative practice of critical reactivation of history**. Through its performances and workshops, the archive becomes an open territory – not an „authority of the document,” but a network of relationships between researchers, artists, spectators, and the technologies that mediate the experience.

This openness redefines the relationship between memory and knowledge, between past and present, inviting a form of **ethical participation** in the process of remembrance.

5.1. The archive as a political act

The performativity of archives in *TabThePAST* goes beyond the aesthetic dimension and enters the political sphere. The re-reading of communist documents – files, transcripts, journals, surveillance records – involves a double movement: disclosure and recontextualisation. In an authoritarian regime, the archive was an instrument of surveillance; in a democratic context, it becomes an instrument of demystification.

Through the public reinterpretation of these documents, the project reverses the direction of the gaze: what was once an instrument of control becomes today an instrument of knowledge and emancipation. In performative reading, the power to “keep track” is transformed into the power to reconstruct meaning; from the police of memory to the pedagogy of memory.

This reversal has profound implications for theatre studies. It suggests that the performativity of the archive is not limited to „showing” the past, but to subjecting it to a new regime of visibility. The spectator is confronted not only with fragments of history, but also with their own mechanisms of perception, with the way they accept or reject certain versions of the past. Thus, the theatrical act becomes a political gesture, an exercise in unmasking the rhetoric of power that continues to shape contemporary cultural discourse.

5.2. The pedagogy of memory and the involvement of the spectator

One of the most original contributions of the *TabThePAST* project is the articulation of a model of performative pedagogy. In this model, memory is not transmitted vertically – from expert to audience – but is constructed participatively, through co-presence and shared reflection.

The viewer is invited to become a witness, but also an interpreter, a co-author of meaning. In *Enemies of the People*, they walk through the installation alone, listening to the voices of female political prisoners, thus being encouraged to engage in a form of reflective intimacy. In *Un dosar X/1955* (An X File/1955), the spectator witnesses a collective investigation and is confronted with their own reactions of fear, judgement or complicity. In *Nostalgia Up&Down*, irony and meta-theatrical humour transform him into a lucid witness of contemporaneity, forced to recognise the echoes of ideological control mechanisms in the neoliberal logic of today’s culture.

This pedagogy of involvement does not aim at reconciliation, but at problematisation. It does not offer definitive answers, but open questions: what does responsibility towards a collective memory mean? Who has the right to represent it? How can we avoid repeating subtle forms of censorship, camouflaged today in the language of efficiency and cultural productivity?

5.3. Technologies of memory: AR/VR as tools of reconstruction

One of the significant methodological innovations of *TabThePAST* is the use of immersive AR/VR technologies, integrated into the *TabThePAST.IMMERSED* installation.

This component of the project transposes fragments of theatrical history into interactive experiences, in which the user becomes part of the reconstruction of the past.

Instead of reproducing documents in a museum-like manner, the VR application creates a form of „experiential archive”: scenes, voices and objects are recontextualised in a three-dimensional environment, allowing them to be explored through gestures, movement and bodily reaction. Thus, the digital environment becomes a space of mediation between research and experience, between data and emotions.

This technological dimension significantly expands the concept of performativity. If traditional theatre activates the archive through the physicality of the actor, the virtual environment activates it through the digital physicality of the user. The AR/VR experience does not replace theatre, but continues it, providing a framework for reflective immersion that combines the past and the present in a shared space of memory.

In this sense, *TabThePAST.IMMERSED* can be perceived as an emerging form of performative museography, in the sense of new curatorial paradigms that propose bodily and participatory interaction with history (Candlin, 2015), in which the spectator is not only an observer, but an „operator of memory”. Through their gestures, they „touch” history, rearrange it and rediscover it, becoming co-authors of the recovery process. This approach marks an increasingly present trend in contemporary performative studies, where memory is understood not as a fixed object, but as an interactive, repeated, augmented process.

5.4. *The transnational dimension: Romania and Germany between two memories*

The partnership between UNATC (Romania) and Citizen.KANE.Kollektiv (Germany) gives the project a comparative value rarely found in recent theatre research. The two historical contexts – Romania and the former GDR – share the common experience of censorship, but differ in **their mechanisms of postmemory** and in the way their societies have processed their authoritarian past. This difference was also visible in the way the project was presented at the Congress of the Society for Theatre Studies in Leipzig, where research on censorship in Romania and the GDR was brought into dialogue in a joint session, followed by the presentation of the two performances.

In *White Elephants*, the performance created by Citizen.KANE.Kollektiv, the experience of censorship in East Germany is addressed through irony and self-reflexivity, while *Nostalgia Up&Down* explores the parallels between late communism and transitional capitalism. Presented together, the two productions configure a **geography of European theatrical memory**, in which the archive becomes a common ground for intercultural dialogue. The format of „two plays in one evening”, accompanied by an exhibition and discussions with the audience, functioned as a transnational device of memory, in which the experiences of the two dictatorships could be directly related, without being subsumed to one.

This transnational dimension demonstrates that the memory of censorship is not a local phenomenon, but a critical European heritage, part of what memory studies define as transnational networks of memory (Erl, 2011), which can be re-signified through artistic collaboration. Theatre thus becomes a common language of reconnection, and the performativity of the archive – a method of building solidarity through knowledge.

5.5. *Synthesis: from memory to action*

By reconstructing the archives of censorship and technologically mediating historical experience, *TabThePAST* reconfigures the relationship between theatre, history and pedagogy. The performativity of archives is not only an instrument of reconstruction, but also a **strategy of cultural resistance**: a way of transforming memory into a critical act, of turning research into a form of action.

In a climate where historical discourse is often politically instrumentalised, such projects bring back to the forefront **the ethical dimension of theatre** – that of a public space of consciousness. Through the stage, the archive and technology, *TabThePAST* proposes a pedagogy of active memory: a memory that does not commemorate, but interrogates; that does not repeat, but transforms.

6. DISCUSSION: THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION AND THE AESTHETIC CHALLENGES OF PERFORMATIVE MEMORY

Any artistic endeavour that works with traumatic documents, testimonies or prosecution files raises a fundamental question: **how can suffering be represented without betraying or aestheticising it?** In the case of the *TabThePAST* project, this question was at the heart of the entire methodology. Censorship and repression are not only historical themes, but also issues of representation. When the archive becomes a performance, it calls for ethical reflection on the distance between document and fiction, between empathy and exposure, between restitution and reinterpretation.

6.1. *The ethics of the stage document*

Documentary theatre, as defined by Carol Martin (2013) and Derek Paget (2010), always operates in an area of tension between fidelity and re-signification. The document is reactivated through performativity, but this reactivation involves selection, organisation and, inevitably, perspective. In *TabThePAST*, the critical reading of the Securitate archives or the minutes and transcripts of the UNATC Senate meetings was accompanied by methodological rigour: avoiding fictionalisation, marking the source and maintaining the documentary character of the language.

However, this rigour did not exclude the poetic dimension. On the contrary, performativity was used to **restore the hidden humanity of the document**, to convey the emotion and fragility of voices previously reduced to mere „cases”. In *The Defeated Victor*, for example, the alternation between fragments of the investigation and songs performed live creates a dual perspective: rational and emotional. The document is no longer just evidence, but also living testimony.

This approach supports the idea that the ethics of documentary theatre do not lie in renouncing emotion, but in responsibly embracing it. Performativity and stage representation do not reconstruct trauma, but accompany it; they do not transform it into spectacle, but open it up to reflection. In this sense, *TabThePAST* builds its ethics of representation on a relationship of care between performer, document and audience.

6.2. *Between empathy and critical distance*

One of the major challenges of memory theatre is the balance between **emotional involvement** and **reflective distance**. If emotion is necessary to activate the viewer's empathy, distance is essential to maintain critical discernment.

In the installation *Duşmance ale poporului* (Women Enemies of the People), emotion is generated through sensory proximity: the voice in the headphones, the recorded breathing, the blurred image. However, the audience is not emotionally manipulated; they are not witnessing a „representation of pain,” but rather a mediation of memory. In contrast, in *Nostalgia Up&Down*, ironic distance becomes a critical tool through which history is reflected in the mirror of the present. Humour, sometimes absurd, functions as a defence strategy against pathos, but also as a way of making an uncomfortable truth audible: **copyright has not disappeared**, but has moved into the economic language of cultural efficiency.

Thus, *TabThePAST* demonstrates that empathy and distance are not mutually exclusive, but can coexist in a dialogical framework. The performativity of archives produces not catharsis, but lucidity: a form of critical sensitivity that invites the viewer to become aware of their own role in perpetuating or contesting dominant historical narratives.

6.3. *The aestheticisation of memory: risks and solutions*

Representing trauma through artistic means always involves the risk of **aestheticising suffering** – transforming tragedy into an aesthetic object of cultural consumption. In contemporary visual culture, this risk is amplified by digital mediation: the image becomes spectacle, and spectacle becomes commodity.

The *TabThePAST* project is aware of this danger and counteracts it through an aesthetic of austerity. The game spaces are minimalist, the stage language is reduced to the essentials, and the technological effects (especially in the AR/VR component) are used not to impress, but to create emotional and spatial proximity. In *TabThePAST.IMMERSED*, the user is not a passive spectator of a virtual past, but a participant in its reconstruction. The act of „touching” virtual objects or navigating historical spaces implies a **bodily responsibility**: the experience is meditative rather than spectacular.

This approach is in line with what Susan Sontag (2003) called an „ethics of seeing” – a critical attitude towards the suffering of others, which rejects aestheticisation and imposes an active relationship with the image. In *TabThePAST*, the viewer’s gaze is guided but not directed; it is invited to interpret, not to admire.

6.4. *The tension between authenticity and fiction*

Another essential aspect of the ethics of representation is the relationship between **authenticity** and **fiction**. Documentary theatre, by its very nature, operates on the border between the two. Any selection, montage or adaptation of an archival

text introduces a level of fictionality. *TabThePAST* does not deny this dimension, but makes it visible, assuming the transparency of the construction process.

In *Un dosar X/1955*, the actors do not ‚play‘ historical characters, but rather ‚present‘ them – alternating between reading the document and meta-theatrical commentary. In *Nostalgia Up&Down*, fiction becomes the very tool for dismantling memorial clichés. This strategy of **reflexive authenticity** (Nicholson, 2011) transforms the performance into a space for critical thinking, where truth is not affirmed, but questioned.

6.5. *Art as a form of symbolic reparation*

The ethics of representation in *TabThePAST* is not limited to historical accuracy; it extends to a **reparative function**. Representation becomes a gesture of symbolic restitution – a recognition of silenced voices, of existences erased by history. In a context marked by the fragility of institutional memory, this reparation has a communal dimension: it rebuilds the link between memory and the present, between theatre and society.

Through each performative representation, the project reaffirms the idea that art can function as a space of symbolic justice, capable of restoring dignity to those excluded from official archives. In this sense, *TabThePAST* becomes not only an artistic programme, but also a civic act of ethical recovery of the past, a plea for collective responsibility towards memory.

6.6. *Synthesis: towards an aesthetic of responsibility*

An analysis of *TabThePAST* practices reveals the emergence of an aesthetics of responsibility, in which the artistic and ethical dimensions intertwine. The archive becomes a living space, and performativity becomes a form of moral reflection. In this context, aesthetics no longer means ornament or style, but a method of ethical knowledge: a way of thinking about history through sensitivity and the body, through socio-politically engaged reflection.

By cultivating critical empathy – in the sense proposed by LaCapra (2014), who distinguishes between ‚acting-out‘ and ‚working-through‘ – and by carefully managing the aesthetics of suffering, in accordance with Susan Sontag’s (2003) warnings about the risk of aestheticising the pain of others (Regarding the Pain of Others), *TabThePAST* constructs an ethical framework for representing trauma. At the same time, the project assumes transparency in relation to the document and the processes of selection and mediation, avoiding both excessive fictionalisation and the transformation of trauma into spectacular images, as noted by Caruth (2016) and Hirsch (2012) when referring to the vulnerability of post-traumatic

memory and the responsibility of its modes of transmission. This „aesthetics of responsibility” reconfigures the status of the artist and researcher as mediators of collective memory – not just authors – capable of activating the archive without instrumentalising it, and transforming the representation of trauma into a critical process of knowledge, not emotional consumption.

In a world saturated with competing images and narratives about the past, such an approach becomes a form of epistemic resistance: a way of protecting meaning without fixing it; of bringing fragments to light without turning them into monuments.

7. Conclusions. The pedagogy of memory and the future of performative research

The *TabThePAST – Taboo History. Fill the Past to Sense the Present* project demonstrates that contemporary theatre can function simultaneously as **an instrument of research, education and critical reflection on history**. In a post-communist context still marked by institutional silences and selective nostalgia, the performativity of archives provides a framework for an ethical and participatory re-evaluation of the past.

Through its integrative methodology – based on archival research, educational workshops, stage creations and immersive technological experiences – *TabThePAST* builds an interdisciplinary model of **memory pedagogy**. This pedagogy is not limited to the transmission of historical information, but cultivates a form of critical consciousness and active empathy, in which learning takes place through bodily experience and collective reflection, through a *triple positioning*: aesthetic, ethical, political.

On a theoretical level, the project contributes to the expansion of the concept of the „performative archive” articulated by Janette Malkin (1999) and Diana Taylor (2003), demonstrating its applicability in a concrete educational context. The archive, in the sense of *TabThePAST*, is not an institution of memory, but a process of reactivating it: an emerging form of knowledge that combines emotion, analysis and action.

7.1. Methodological contributions

The *TabThePAST* methodology provides a replicable framework for artistic research, defined by:

- a. the articulation of a functional triad between **research – education – artistic creation**;
- b. integration **of performative and technological tools** (AR/VR) as extensions of the archival experience;

- c. transforming the educational process into a **public laboratory** for critical reflection.

Through these elements, the project proposes a **democratisation of research**: access to archives and theatre history becomes a collaborative process, open to students, teachers, artists and the public. Instead of a vertical pedagogy based on the transmission of knowledge, a horizontal one based on dialogue, participation and co-creation is affirmed. This democratisation of research is also visible in the way the project has been presented in various contexts – universities, festivals, international conferences – opening up the archive to multiple communities and strengthening the collective nature of memory building.

7.2. *Artistic and civic impact*

From an artistic perspective, the results – *Un dosar X/1955*, *Învinsul învingător*, *Nostalgia Up&Down*, *TabThePAST.IMMERSED*, *Controverse 1961. Cum vă place?*, *Duşmance ale poporului* – demonstrate the potential of theatre to mediate between memory and contemporaneity. These productions do not just “talk about” the past, but “set it in motion”, using the body, voice and technology as forms of living archiving.

At the same time, the project has significant civic value: it contributes to **the construction of an active cultural memory**, in which the recovery of archives is not limited to commemoration, but involves critically assuming responsibility for history. By recontextualising documents and through the direct participation of the public, *TabThePAST* consolidates a public space of memory, in which theatre becomes a mediator between the traumatic past and the democratic present.

7.3. *The European dimension*

The transnational component – the collaboration between UNATC (Romania) and Citizen.KANE.Kollektiv (Germany) – amplifies the impact of the project, offering a comparative perspective on totalitarian memories in Eastern Europe. Through the dialogue between the two contexts, *TabThePAST* proposes a model of solidarity through memory, in which national experiences are mutually reflected, generating a common cartography of cultural traumas and strategies of artistic resistance.

This European perspective confirms that the performativity of archives is not only an aesthetic endeavour, but also a form of *politics of knowledge*: a way of producing meaning, negotiating identities and building bridges between cultures and eras.

7.4. *Towards a future of performative research*

Beyond its immediate results, *TabThePAST* offers a valuable precedent for future artistic research programmes. Its model can be extended to other fields – film, visual studies, performative anthropology – reinforcing the idea that **performativity is a legitimate form of research**.

In a world dominated by information overload and fragmented memory, performative research can offer an epistemological alternative: knowledge through presence, which simultaneously activates reason, body, and empathy. In this sense, *TabThePAST* is not only a project about the past, but also a reflection on the future of artistic research.

7.5. *Instead of a conclusion*

Returning to Janette Malkin's (1999) idea of the theatre of memory as a „process of reopening taboo discourses,“ *TabThePAST* shows that memory is not a relic, but a **living organism** that must be kept in circulation through art, education, and critical dialogue. What is being recovered is not only history, but the collective ability to understand and question it.

Through each stage – from research to performance, from archive to VR – the project builds a form of cultural resilience: a theatre that is not content to evoke the past, but which sets it in motion again in order to understand the present.

In this sense, *TabThePAST* confirms the profoundly European vocation of theatrical art: that of uniting memory and imagination, science and emotion, in the same gesture of knowledge and responsibility.

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