

**PERFORMING THE UNSPOKEN:
DOCUMENTARY THEATRE, CULTURAL
MEMORY, AND THE POST-HOLOCAUST
HISTORIES OF ROMANIAN JEWS SOLD
UNDER COMMUNISM**

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Abstract: This article examines how documentary theatre can function as a counter-archive for suppressed post-Holocaust histories, focusing on the secret state-controlled sale of Romanian Jews to Israel between 1965 and 1989. While historians such as Ioanid (2005) and Deletant (1995) have documented the political and economic mechanisms of this human-trade system, the lived experiences of those who were priced, negotiated, or deemed “unprofitable” remain largely absent from cultural memory. Drawing on a decade of fieldwork across Romania, Israel, and the United States, this project transforms 27 life-story interviews into a dramaturgical structure that foregrounds the emotional and ethical dimensions of this displacement. Through verbatim micro-scenes, interactive valuation games, and participatory dramaturgies developed in performances in Bucharest at the Odeon Theatre and the State Jewish Theatre, in New York the Lark Theatre, and the Center for Jewish History, the project exposes the bureaucratic logic that reduced human lives to political currency. Crucially, the documentary performance renders intelligible what is otherwise difficult to assimilate in archival form: the testimonies, historical data, and statistical realities. In performance, these materials become comprehensible through the affective mechanisms of empathy and catharsis, enabling spectators to engage with history both emotionally and cognitively. Ultimately, the article argues that staging these testimonies constitutes an act of symbolic justice that restores agency to marginalized voices and fosters new forms of collective witnessing.

Keywords: Documentary theatre, memory studies, postmemory, Romanian Jews, collective trauma, performance as counter-archive, witnessing, communism, emigration, ethics of representation.

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Introduction: Theatre, memory and the afterlives of trauma

The relationship between theatre and memory, particularly traumatic memory, constitutes one of the most generative intersections in contemporary performance studies. Theatre, by virtue of its liveness, its embodied presence, and its capacity to gather communities in shared time, has long been understood as a privileged medium for the transmission of memory. As Paul Ricoeur notes, memory is always entangled with “the dialectic of remembering and forgetting” (Ricoeur 2004, p. 412), a dialectic that becomes especially charged in contexts marked by political repression, historical violence, and institutionalized silence.

A crucial dimension of this project is the recognition that post-Holocaust histories remain dramatically underrepresented on stage. While the Holocaust itself has generated a substantial body of theatrical, cinematic, and literary works, the decades that followed—marked by displacement, negotiation, trauma,

and political manipulation—have received far less attention. The sale of Romanian Jews is emblematic of this gap: a post-Holocaust phenomenon that is historically documented but theatrically invisible. The absence of such narratives from the stage contributes to a broader cultural amnesia, reinforcing the silence that authoritarian regimes once imposed.

Documentary theatre occupies a central place within this landscape. Defined by its use of archival materials, testimonies, interviews, and factual documents, it operates at the intersection of aesthetics and historiography. Carol Martin argues that documentary theatre “produces knowledge by staging bodies of evidence” (Martin, 2006, p. 9), while Diana Taylor conceptualizes performance as a repertoire that transmits embodied knowledge across generations, complementing and sometimes challenging the written archive (Taylor, 2003, p. 20). In this sense, documentary theatre is not merely a representational form but a mode of witnessing—an active and immediate engagement with historical reality.

This theoretical framework becomes particularly relevant in the Romanian context, where the secret state “Securitate”-controlled sale of Romanian Jews to Israel during the communist regime—especially between 1965 and 1989—remains an unsettling and insufficiently explored episode of recent history. While historians such as Radu Ioanid (2005) and Dennis Deletant (1995) have documented the political, diplomatic, and economic mechanisms behind this human-trade system, the lived experiences of those who were themselves “the goods” exchanged between states have remained largely absent from public discourse.

My engagement with this subject is rooted in personal history and extended research. My grandfather—the last Jew from Sighișoara, a survivor of the Transnistrian deportations—once told me, with a mixture of irony and resignation, that no one had wanted to “buy” him in the last thirty years of communism. “I was too rusty,” he said, referring to the years he had spent in the Transnistria concentration camp—too damaged, in his view, for anyone to pay money for him. His bitter humor revealed a profound wound and opened a question that has shaped my research: What happens to people whose lives are reduced to political currency?

Over the past decade, I have conducted extensive fieldwork with Romanian Jews who emigrated during the Ceaușescu era. My research includes interviews in Bucharest, Cluj, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and New York—more than twenty-three individuals whose life stories illuminate the human dimension of this historical process. Their testimonies reveal not only the bureaucratic violence of the emigration system but also the emotional ruptures it produced: families separated, love stories interrupted, friendships dissolved, identities fractured between nostalgia and resentment.

These interviews formed the basis of several documentary theatre performances, workshops and presentations: at the Odeon Theatre (Bucharest, 2012), the State Jewish Theatre (Bucharest, 2017), the Lark Theatre (New York, 2014), and the Center for Jewish History (New York, 2014). These performances and workshops demonstrated both the necessity and the value of bringing these testimonies to the stage, particularly in the context of contemporary Bucharest and more broadly Romania where a persistent phenomenon of “antisemitism without Jews” continues to shape public discourse.

By staging these testimonies, the documentary performance exposes and deconstructs such narratives, revealing how documentary theatre offers a uniquely effective medium for translating difficult, fragmented, or emotionally overwhelming historical material into forms that can be collectively understood and critically re-evaluated.



A group of Romanian Jews departs Vienna for Israel in 1950.
Credit: David Rubinger/Corbis Via Getty Images
Image source: <https://www.jpost.com/diaspora/article-864170>

1. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this project draws on a constellation of concepts from performance studies, memory studies, trauma theory, and historiography.

Together, these perspectives illuminate how documentary theatre can activate forms of knowledge that remain inaccessible through archival documents alone, and how performance can function as a counter-archive for histories marked by repression and displacement.

1.1 Taylor and the embodied repertoire

Diana Taylor's distinction between the archive and the repertoire provides a foundational lens for understanding the methodological and artistic stakes of this project. The archive—composed of documents, files, and institutional records—preserves knowledge in durable, material forms. The repertoire, by contrast, transmits knowledge through embodied practices: gesture, voice, storytelling, silence, hesitation, and the affective textures of interpersonal encounter. As Taylor writes, “the repertoire enacts embodied memory” (Taylor, 2003, p. 20).

The history of the Romanian state's sale of Jewish citizens survives unevenly across these two domains. Archival traces—Securitate reports, diplomatic correspondence, financial records detailing the “prices” assigned to individuals—offer a bureaucratic perspective that captures the mechanics of the transactions but not their human consequences. The emotional, ethical, and psychological dimensions of this history persist primarily in the repertoire: in the lived memories of those who experienced humiliation, displacement, or the shock of discovering that their emigration had been purchased.

The interviews conducted in Bucharest, Cluj, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and New York exemplify this dynamic. Their most significant insights often emerged not through factual statements but through embodied forms of expression: pauses, fragmented recollections, ironic asides, or the tonal shifts that accompanied memories of fear, nostalgia, or resentment. By translating these embodied memories into verbatim scenes and performative structures, the project activates precisely the repertoire that Taylor identifies as essential for histories shaped by censorship and erasure. Performance becomes a medium through which these fragile forms of knowledge can be transmitted, shared, and critically apprehended.

1.2 Hirsch and postmemory: A positionality statement

Marianne Hirsch's concept of postmemory provides a second crucial framework, particularly for articulating the researcher's positionality. Postmemory describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the traumatic experiences of their predecessors—experiences transmitted not through direct recollection but through stories, silences, photographs, and affective residues. These inherited memories, Hirsch argues, are “so powerful, so overwhelming that they constitute the primary identity of those who inherit them” (Hirsch, 2012, p. 5).

My own entry point into this history is postmemorial. Although my grandfather rarely spoke about his Holocaust experience, he narrated repeatedly the trauma of attempting to emigrate during the 1960s: the dismissal from his job, the year of unemployment, the forced withdrawal of his application, and the public self-criticism required for reinstatement. These stories—told with bitter irony and suppressed anger—were not framed as Holocaust testimony, yet they belong to the same continuum of coercion and humiliation that shaped Jewish life in Romania across the twentieth century.

This postmemorial inheritance shaped the research process in ways that require methodological transparency. The interviews were not neutral data-gathering exercises, but encounters shaped by the ethical and affective position of someone belonging to the “generation after.” As oral history scholars such as Portelli (1997) and Frisch (1990) argue, the researcher’s positionality is not a contamination of testimony but a constitutive element of the encounter. In the Romanian context, this dynamic is amplified by what scholars have termed “antisemitism without Jews”: a cultural landscape in which antisemitic narratives persist despite the near-absence of a Jewish population. Postmemory thus becomes not only a mode of inheritance but a mode of resistance—a practice of counter-narration that challenges the distortions of official and popular memory.

1.3 LaCapra and empathic unsettlement

Dominick LaCapra’s distinction between “acting out” and “working through” (LaCapra 2001, p. 70) informs the dramaturgical strategies employed in this project. Rather than reenacting traumatic events or inviting sentimental identification, the performances expose the mechanisms that produced trauma. Interactive valuation games, auctions in which spectators assigned prices to themselves, and scenes in which a pregnant actress offered to “sell” her unborn child are not simulations of historical suffering. They are critical structures designed to produce what LaCapra terms “empathic unsettlement” (p. 41): a mode of engagement that resists both emotional collapse and detached observation.

This approach enables audiences to confront the ethical implications of the historical material without collapsing the distance between their experience and that of the witnesses. The dramaturgy thus becomes a form of “working through,” fostering reflection rather than repetition and inviting spectators to inhabit the discomfort of historical knowledge.

1.4 Agamben and the limits of representation

Giorgio Agamben’s reflections on testimony—particularly his analysis of the Muselmann—highlight the ethical limits of representing extreme suffering.

For Agamben, the witness is “the one who speaks for the one who cannot speak” (Agamben, 1999, p. 34). This project does not attempt to represent the Muselmann or the extremity of camp experience. Instead, it stages the post-camp violence of being priced, negotiated, or deemed “unprofitable,” foregrounding the bureaucratic mechanisms that dehumanize individuals.

By preserving the witnesses’ words in verbatim scenes and revealing the logic of commodification through interactive structures, the project aligns with Agamben’s ethical imperative: to acknowledge the limits of representation while insisting on the necessity of testimony. The stage becomes a space where the unspeakable is approached through structure rather than imitation.

1.5 Assmann and cultural memory

Jan Assmann’s theory of cultural memory emphasizes that collective remembrance is sustained not only through archives but through rituals, performances, and embodied practices (Assmann 2011, p. 37). The workshops at the State Jewish Theatre and the Center for Jewish History functioned precisely as such practices. Jewish actors performing Jewish testimonies in a Jewish theatre reactivated a cultural memory fragmented by migration, assimilation, and political repression. Presenting Romanian Jewish stories in New York situated these testimonies within a broader transnational memory framework, allowing Romanian, Israeli, and American Jewish histories to intersect and illuminate one another.

1.6 Rothberg and multidirectional memory

Michael Rothberg’s concept of multidirectional memory challenges the assumption that memories of different traumas compete for recognition. Instead, he argues that they illuminate and expand one another (Rothberg, 2009, p. 3). This project embodies multidirectional memory in practice. The testimonies of Romanian Jews intersect with Holocaust memory, communist repression, Cold War geopolitics, Israeli nation-building, and American migration narratives. These layers do not dilute one another; they deepen the ethical and historical resonance of the project.

2. Historical context: The sale of Romanian Jews (1949–1989)

Between 1949 and 1989, approximately 300,000 Romanian Jews emigrated to Israel, a demographic transformation shaped not only by post-war displacement but also by a covert system of state-managed transactions. Under successive communist governments—and with increasing sophistication during the Ceaușescu era—the Romanian state negotiated the emigration of its Jewish citizens

in exchange for financial and political benefits. These negotiations, conducted through secret channels involving the Securitate, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and intermediaries in Israel and the Federal Republic of Germany, transformed human mobility into a form of geopolitical currency.

Historians such as Radu Ioanid (2005) and Dennis Deletant (1995) have documented the mechanisms of this system in detail. Payments varied according to age, education, profession, and perceived “utility” to the receiving state. Highly educated individuals, medical professionals, engineers, and young people commanded higher prices, while the elderly, the ill, or those deemed “unproductive” were categorized as low-value or, in some cases, “unprofitable.” Ioanid records instances in which the price of a single person reached tens of thousands of dollars (Ioanid, 2005, pp. 112–115), while Deletant demonstrates how Ceaușescu leveraged these transactions to cultivate political capital in the West, presenting Romania as a pragmatic and cooperative partner despite its authoritarian governance (Deletant, 1995). The opacity of the system was central to its operation. Individuals were rarely informed that their departure had been purchased, and many discovered the financial arrangements surrounding their emigration only decades later. Others—like my grandfather—learned that they had been rejected as “unprofitable,” a categorization that compounded the humiliation already embedded in the emigration process. The bureaucratic logic of valuation—assigning monetary worth to human lives—produced emotional afterlives that extended far beyond the moment of departure.

The grotesque mixture of cynicism and opportunism that characterized the system is illustrated in numerous archival accounts. Elie Wiesel recounts the surreal episode of a Romanian intelligence officer who misplaced a suitcase containing one million dollars intended for the purchase of human lives (Wiesel in Ioanid, 2005, p. xii). Such incidents reveal the moral dissonance at the heart of the regime: a state that publicly celebrated socialist egalitarianism while privately engaging in the commodification of its own citizens.

Yet beyond the geopolitical calculations and financial transactions lies the human dimension that forms the core of this project. The sale of Romanian Jews fractured families, reshaped identities, and produced enduring emotional ambivalences. For many, emigration was experienced simultaneously as liberation and loss, as an escape from persecution and as a rupture from homeland, language, and community. Nostalgia, resentment, gratitude, and disorientation coexist in the testimonies collected during fieldwork, revealing the complex emotional topography of a history that is often reduced to statistics or diplomatic correspondence.

3. Methodology: Interviews and the construction of a testimonial corpus

The methodological framework of this project integrates qualitative interviewing, ethnographic observation, and performance-based research. This multimodal approach was necessary to capture the complexity of a history that survives unevenly across archival traces, embodied memories, and postmemorial narratives. The resulting testimonial corpus—comprising twenty-three life-story interviews conducted over more than a decade—constitutes both a research archive and the dramaturgical foundation of the performances.

The interviews were conducted in three primary geographical contexts—Romania, Israel, and the United States—each of which revealed distinct emotional, social, and historical layers of the emigration experience. While the historical mechanisms of the Romanian state’s human-trade system have been documented by scholars, the interviews illuminate the subjective dimensions of this process: nostalgia, humiliation, bureaucratic fear, ambivalent belonging, and the long-term psychological effects of being “priced” by the state.

3.1 Romania: Nostalgia and social trauma

Interviews conducted in Bucharest and Cluj foregrounded the ambivalent emotional landscape of those who remained in Romania or emigrated late. Many interviewees described childhood memories marked by warmth, cultural richness, and community ties, juxtaposed with experiences of humiliation, antisemitism, and the pervasive fear of the Securitate. The decision to emigrate—or the impossibility of doing so—was often narrated as a moment of profound rupture, shaped by both personal aspirations and state-imposed constraints.

3.2 Israel: Displacement and ambivalent belonging

Interviews in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem revealed a different set of emotional dynamics. Many participants expressed gratitude toward Israel and a sense of relief at having escaped the constraints of communist Romania. Yet these narratives were frequently accompanied by shock, anger, or disbelief upon discovering that their emigration had been purchased. The revelation that one’s life had been assigned a monetary value—often learned decades later—produced a complex mixture of resentment, and retrospective vulnerability. For some, this knowledge reframed their entire migration story.

3.3 United States: Double displacement

Interviews conducted in New York illuminated the experiences of those who re-emigrated from Israel to the United States. These narratives were marked by layered identities shaped by multiple migrations, linguistic transitions, and shifting senses of belonging. Participants described a form of “double displacement,” in which the emotional residues of Romanian antisemitism intersected with the challenges of integration into Israeli society and the subsequent adaptation to American cultural contexts.

3.4 Recurring themes

Despite their differences, the interviews revealed several recurring themes:

- nostalgia for a vanished world
- humiliation and bureaucratic violence
- fear of surveillance and denunciation
- the struggle to adapt to new cultural and linguistic environments
- fractured identities shaped by migration and memory

These themes informed both the analytical framework of the article and the dramaturgical strategies of the performances.

3.5. Collaborative dramaturgy: Witnesses as co-creators

A distinctive methodological dimension of this project lies in the decision to involve interviewees not merely as sources of testimony but as *active co-creators* in the dramaturgical process. This collaborative approach emerged organically during fieldwork, as many participants expressed a desire to shape how their stories would be transmitted to future audiences. Rather than treating testimony as raw material to be adapted by the artist, the project embraced a model of *shared authorship*, in which witnesses contributed directly to the conceptual, textual, and performative architecture of the work.

Interviewees were invited to participate in multiple creative capacities. Some chose to write short texts addressed to future spectators, articulating reflections, warnings, or questions they hoped the performance would provoke. Others contributed to the invention of performative situations, proposing scenes, dilemmas, or emotional dynamics that they felt captured the essence of their experiences. Several participants collaborated in designing interactive activities, imagining games, debates, or audience challenges that would expose the ethical tensions embedded in the historical material.

This co-creative process transformed the dramaturgy in significant ways. First, it redistributed agency: witnesses were not positioned as passive subjects of

representation but as active agents shaping the modes through which their histories would circulate. Second, it generated a dramaturgical vocabulary grounded in lived experience rather than external interpretation. The games, debates, and performative structures proposed by participants often revealed nuances of memory, irony, and emotional complexity that would have been difficult to access through interviews alone. Third, the collaborative model fostered a form of *ethical reciprocity*, acknowledging the asymmetry inherent in testimonial research and counterbalancing it through shared creative ownership.

From a methodological perspective, this approach aligns with performance-based research paradigms that view artistic creation as a site of knowledge production. The involvement of witnesses as co-creators not only enriched the dramaturgy but also expanded the epistemic scope of the project. Their contributions functioned as a form of *embodied theorizing*, articulating insights into memory, identity, and historical violence through performative imagination rather than analytical discourse.



Interview, Sighișoara, 2000. Personal archive.

4. From testimony to performance: Dramaturgical strategies

Transforming the testimonial corpus into performance required a dramaturgical approach capable of preserving the specificity of individual voices while exposing the systemic mechanisms that shaped their experiences. Rather than illustrating historical events or reenacting trauma, the performances sought to reveal the structures—bureaucratic, ideological, and affective—that governed the Romanian state’s commodification of Jewish citizens. This section outlines the dramaturgical strategies that enabled the project to translate archival absence and embodied memory into a performative counter-archive.

4.1 Verbatim micro-scenes

The use of verbatim micro-scenes draws on established traditions within documentary theatre, including the work of Peter Weiss (1965) and Alecky Blythe (2011). These scenes preserve the linguistic texture, rhythm, and emotional cadence of each interview, allowing the audience to encounter the witnesses’ voices without interpretive mediation. The micro-scene format—short, concentrated, and sharply focused—foregrounds the fragmentary nature of memory and the uneven distribution of historical knowledge.

4.2 Interactive performance at the Odeon Theatre

The interactive performance developed at the Odeon Theatre introduced spectators into the logic of valuation that structured the Romanian state’s human-trade system. A quiz-based game assigned “value” to audience members based on age, profession, and education—criteria directly drawn from archival documents. Elderly spectators, for example, were designated as “most valuable,” mirroring the paradoxical valuation systems of the communist regime, in which older individuals were sometimes priced higher due to family reunification policies or diplomatic considerations.

This interactive structure did not aim to recreate historical suffering but to expose the mechanisms that produced it. By implicating spectators in the act of valuation, the performance generated a form of experiential knowledge that cannot be conveyed through documents alone. The audience’s discomfort—oscillating between playfulness and ethical unease—constituted a central component of the dramaturgy, producing what LaCapra terms “empathic unsettlement.”

4.3 Auctions and self-valuation exercises

Auctions and self-valuation exercises further illuminated the bureaucratic logic of commodification. In these scenes, spectators were invited to assign monetary worth to themselves or to fictional characters based on criteria derived from Securitate files. These dramaturgical devices foregrounded the absurdity and violence of reducing human lives to negotiable assets, while also revealing the internalization of such logics in contemporary contexts.

The goal was not to simulate historical trauma but to create a critical distance through which audiences could reflect on the ethical implications of valuation. By transforming spectators into participants, the performance disrupted passive modes of reception and activated a form of collective witnessing grounded in embodied cognition.

4.4 The State Jewish Theatre: Cultural resonance and embodied memory

The workshops and performances at the State Jewish Theatre in Bucharest introduced an additional layer of cultural resonance. Jewish actors performing Jewish testimonies within a Jewish institution reactivated a cultural memory fragmented by decades of migration, assimilation, and political repression. The theatre became a site where linguistic, generational, and historical continuities could be re-embodied, allowing the testimonies to circulate within a community historically shaped by the very processes the project investigates.

This setting also foregrounded the tension between presence and absence that characterizes contemporary Romanian Jewish identity. Performing these testimonies in a space historically associated with Jewish cultural life underscored the persistence of what scholars have termed “antisemitism without Jews,” while simultaneously challenging it through embodied visibility.

4.5 New York workshops: Transnational memory and the dramaturgy of the real

The workshops at the Lark Theatre and the Center for Jewish History in New York situated the material within a transnational memory framework. Here, the testimonies entered into dialogue with broader Jewish migration narratives, Cold War histories, and American discourses on human rights. This context amplified the multidirectional dimensions of the project, allowing audiences to perceive connections between Romanian Jewish experiences and other histories of displacement and state violence.

5. Ethics and representation: Visuality, witnessing, and the politics of performing History

5.1 Visuality and the ethics of looking (Bleeker)

Maaïke Bleeker's theorization of theatrical visuality reframes spectatorship as an active, interpretive practice rather than a passive act of seeing. For Bleeker, the theatre is a "locus of looking" in which the gaze is always situated, mediated, and ethically charged (Bleeker, 2008). In the context of performing the histories of Romanian Jews sold under communism, this framework underscores the necessity of constructing visual regimes that resist voyeurism and spectacle.

The performances developed in this project deliberately avoid reproducing scenes of suffering or bureaucratic humiliation. Instead, they foreground the mechanisms of valuation—documents, numbers, classifications, and the absurdity of assigning monetary worth to human lives. This aligns with Bleeker's insistence that ethical spectatorship emerges when the gaze becomes aware of its own positionality and limitations.

5.2 Testimony and the co-production of witnessing (Felman & Laub)

Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that testimony is not a self-contained act but a relational event in which the listener becomes a "co-witness" (Felman & Laub, 1992). Testimony requires a listener capable of receiving, interpreting, and ethically responding to what is spoken. In this project, the stage becomes precisely such a relational space.

Verbatim scenes do not simply transmit information; they create conditions in which spectators must assume the ethical burden of listening. The fragmented narratives, tonal hesitations, and emotional ruptures embedded in the testimonies foreground the vulnerability of the speakers and the responsibility of the audience. The performances thus enact what Felman and Laub describe as the "crisis of witnessing": the moment when the listener must confront the limits of comprehension while remaining accountable to the testimony received.

5.3 Radical performance and the exposure of power (Kershaw)

Baz Kershaw's analysis of radical performance emphasizes theatre's capacity to disrupt dominant ideologies and expose the operations of power (Kershaw, 1999). For Kershaw, radical performance intervenes in the social field by unsettling normative assumptions and revealing the political structures that shape everyday life.

The dramaturgical strategies employed in this project—particularly the interactive valuation exercises—operate within this radical tradition. By inviting spectators to assign value to themselves or others based on criteria derived from Securitate files, the performance exposes the internal logic of the Romanian state's human-trade system. This is not a reenactment but a critical re-enactment: a performative device that reveals the ideological machinery of commodification.

5.4 Witnessing beyond recognition (Oliver)

Kelly Oliver's concept of "witnessing beyond recognition" challenges models of empathy that rely on identification with the other (Oliver, 2001). For Oliver, ethical witnessing requires acknowledging the irreducible difference of the other rather than assimilating their experience into one's own.

This perspective is crucial for a project that stages testimonies of displacement, humiliation, and commodification. The performances do not invite spectators to imagine themselves as the witnesses or to "feel what they felt." Instead, they cultivate a mode of ethical relation grounded in responsibility rather than identification.

5.5 Performing History and the theatricality of the past (Rokem)

Freddie Rokem's work on performing history argues that theatre does not merely represent the past but stages the encounter between past and present (Rokem, 2000). Historical performance is a dialogic process in which actors and spectators negotiate the meaning of events that continue to shape contemporary life.

In this project, the stage becomes a site where the bureaucratic violence of the Romanian communist regime is re-examined through embodied practices. The testimonies of Romanian Jews intersect with the present-day realities of postmemory, cultural amnesia, and the persistence of antisemitic narratives in Romania. Rokem's framework highlights how the performance creates a temporal bridge: the past is not reconstructed but reactivated, allowing spectators to perceive its ongoing ethical and political implications.

Conclusion: Theatre as ethical discovery

This article has demonstrated that documentary theatre possesses a singular capacity to activate suppressed histories and to engender novel modalities of collective witnessing. By mobilising Diana Taylor's seminal formulation that "the repertoire enacts embodied memory" (Taylor, 2003, p. 20) alongside Marianne Hirsch's notion of postmemory as a profound "imaginative investment" (Hirsch

2012, p. 5), the analysis reveals how the intergenerational transmission of trauma continues to shape the testimonies of Romanian Jews who were commodified and sold under the communist regime.

The historical apparatus that systematically reduced Jewish citizens to negotiable assets—an apparatus exhaustively documented by Radu Ioanid (2005) and Dennis Deletant (1995)—left in its wake a constellation of enduring emotional afterlives: profound humiliation, radical displacement, and identities fractured between longing and resentment. Yet the raw archival substrate of this history—diplomatic cables, Securitate dossiers, demographic ledgers, and the often-fragmented, non-linear recollections of survivors—proves notoriously recalcitrant to assimilation. Testimonies harvested through more than a decade of fieldwork confront us with experiences that are simultaneously emotionally overwhelming, ethically destabilising, and historically intricate. Abstract figures such as the tens of thousands of dollars extracted for a single life, or the staggering total of approximately 300,000 Romanian Jews who emigrated between 1949 and 1989, remain stubbornly opaque when encountered solely as inert statistical data.

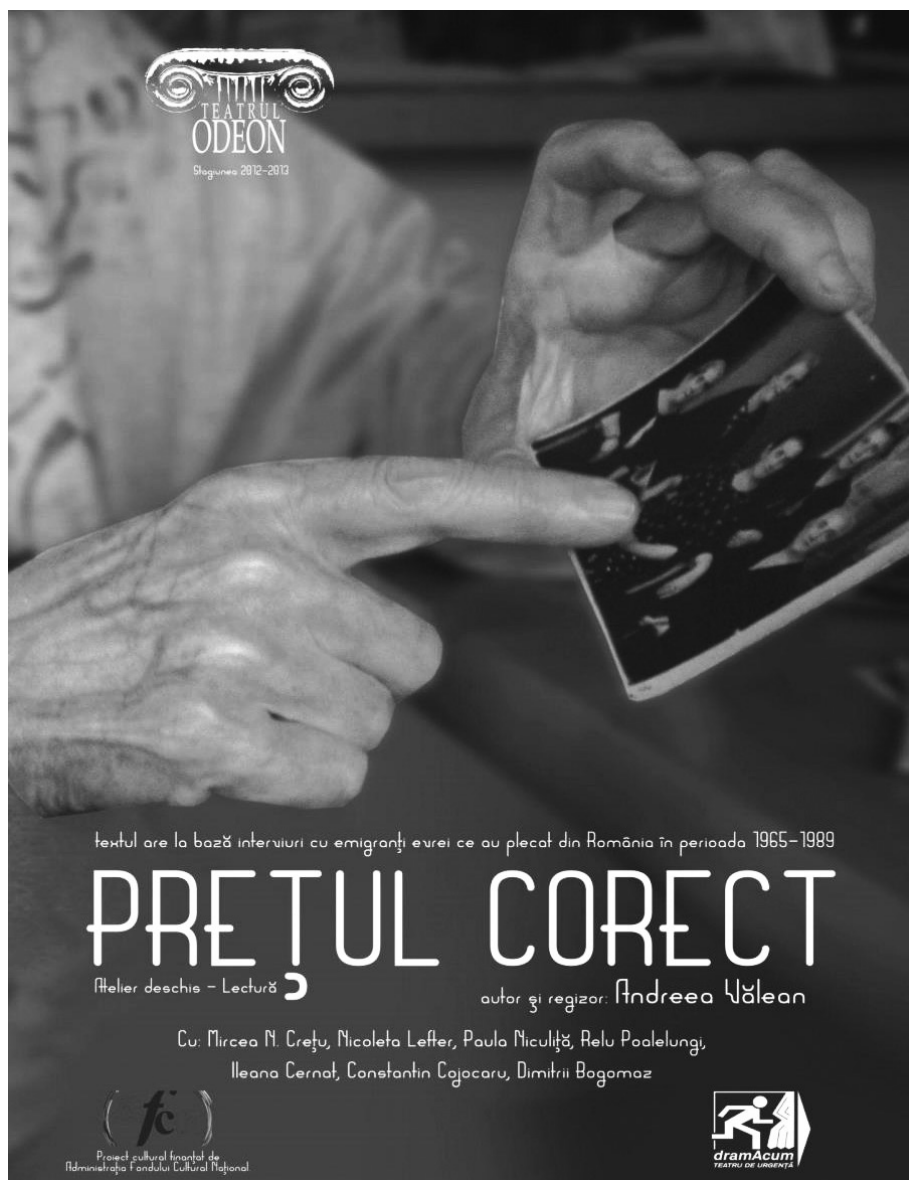
It is precisely here that the project's dramaturgical intervention acquires its transformative force. Through meticulously crafted verbatim micro-scenes, interactive valuation games, and participatory structures, the work has transmuted these testimonies and historical records into a living counter-archive—one that actively resists the erasures imposed by both state bureaucracy and subsequent cultural amnesia. In performance, the lived realities of those interviewed—narratives of familial separation, bureaucratic absurdity, ambivalent belonging, and improbable survival—cease to be distant or unintelligible. Instead, they become experientially legible through an embodied mode of comprehension that refuses reductive simplification. Theatre thus forges a unique epistemic space in which audiences may apprehend, at once affectively and cognitively, that which remains stubbornly opaque within conventional documentary or statistical registers. Empathy and catharsis, far from functioning as mere sentimental expedients, operate here as rigorous epistemological instruments: they enable spectators to internalise the profoundly human significance of historical mechanisms that would otherwise linger in the realm of the abstract and the inassimilable.

A pivotal contribution of this research resides in its deliberately collaborative methodology, which reconceptualised witnesses not as passive repositories of testimony but as co-creators of the dramaturgical architecture itself. By inviting interviewees to compose texts expressly addressed to future spectators, to propose performative scenarios, and to conceptualise interactive frameworks, the project deliberately redistributed authorial agency. The resultant performances emerged as genuine spaces of shared authorship, generating dramaturgical forms that were

grounded in lived experience rather than imposed through external interpretation. This process may be understood as a form of embodied theorising, wherein the witnesses' own creative interventions decisively inflected the tone, structural logic, and ethical orientation of the work. In consequence, the performances did not speak "about" the participants; they spoke "with" them, honouring the integrity of their voices and the complexity of their subjectivities.

Equally decisive is the transformed role assigned to the audience. Spectators were never positioned as passive recipients of pre-packaged historical knowledge; rather, they were constituted as active discoverers—discoverers not merely of factual information about the past but, more crucially, of the ethical and affective significance of that past. Through auctions that forced self-valuation according to Securitate criteria, through valuation games that rendered commodification viscerally immediate, and through testimonial exchanges that demanded ethical responsiveness, audiences encountered the dehumanising mechanisms of the regime as embodied ethical dilemmas. This approach resonates powerfully with Dominick LaCapra's concept of "empathic unsettlement" (LaCapra, 2001, p. 41), which cultivates a mode of critical engagement that neither collapses critical distance nor descends into emotional over-identification. In this way, spectators come to perceive how singular life stories illuminate systemic violence, and how ostensibly neutral historical data acquires palpable emotional and moral weight when refracted through the prism of lived experience.

Ultimately, documentary theatre emerges in this project as a profound enactment of symbolic justice. By placing upon the stage the voices of those whose very existence had once been reduced to political currency, performance restores a measure of agency long denied, contests the persistent forces of cultural amnesia, and reconceptualises the audience as co-witnesses and co-interpreters of history. In so doing, theatre transcends its conventional function as a mere transmitter of memory. It renders the previously incomprehensible comprehensible, the abstract viscerally human, and the historically silenced powerfully audible. In this profound sense, documentary theatre reveals itself not simply as a medium for the preservation of memory, but as a privileged site of ethical discovery—a space in which the past is not merely recalled but ethically re-animated, and in which collective responsibility toward that past is continually re-forged within the living present.



TEATRUL
ODEON
Sibiu 2012-2013

textul are la bază interviuri cu emigranți evrei ce au plecat din România în perioada 1965-1989

PREȚUL CORECT

Atelier deschis - Lectură

autor și regizor: Andreea Vălean

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The Correct Price/Sold Jews at Odeon Theatre in Bucharest, June 2013
Dramaturgy: Peca Ștefan, Directed by Andreea Vălean (image from personal archive).

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