



SOLITARITATE

INTERVIEW WITH GIANINA CĂRBUNARIU

***Solitaritate* is built around five sequences, all inspired by actual events. How did you choose them, and what links them together?**

Gianina Cărbunariu: Usually, my creations are rooted in a long work of documentation and research, and especially in series of interviews. That's not exactly how I proceeded for *Solitaritate*, though. I found the material for the play in the news, in stories revolving around the urban middle class of Romania. Most of them take place in Bucharest, where I live, others in Baia Mare and Sibiu. Once I'd written the basic outline of the play, I showed it to the actors and other collaborators of the project to hear their reactions about its themes, to analyse its scenes together, and to create a shared artistic language. At the same time, I asked the actors of the Radu Stance National Theatre in Sibiu to interview the inhabitants of the city. They were to ask them about urban life, the impact of the crisis on their daily lives, about public space, but also about their dreams and anxieties. I think it is essential for artists to regularly leave the theatre to meet people and get a feel for situations and places.

What makes the middle class interesting?

The middle class, here, is the one that was most successful in navigating the transition from communism to capitalism. For the past four or five years, though, they have been subjected to a strong economic pressure. The comfort they had barely had time to get used to suddenly seemed threatened; they now feel vulnerable, from a social and economic point of view, and of course, just like everywhere else, they're starting to lend an ear to political discourses of exclusion. Most of them consider that the poor are responsible for their situation, that exclusion is the result of laziness or of a lack of ambition. I belong to this middle class myself, and they are the ones who, most often, frequent theatres, like the National Theatre in Sibiu, where the show was created. They're both the subject of the play, and its target audience. It can sometimes lead to ambiguous situations, such as when some members of the audience stand up when we play the national anthem. And I can guarantee it has nothing to do with a taste for participatory theatre, that it is nothing but a patriotic reflex.

Are you trying to hold up a mirror to your countrymen?

What I'm first and foremost trying to do is present different viewpoints and ask questions. Showing actual events taken from the news on stage is indeed a way to call out to the public. For instance, there's a scene in which the mayor of a city wants to build a wall between the Romanian and gypsy communities. Thanks to a similar project, the mayor of Maia Bare was elected with over 80% of the vote. There were a few dissenting voices, but almost everyone ended up supporting him, including the Roma community itself. Roma dignitaries are now part of the ruling class. This wall, or "line of demarcation" as the mayor calls it in the play, structures and privatises the city without there being any real discussion about it, without it really upsetting anyone. The situations I chose for the play all have something to do with the idea of separation, of disappearance, of commercial exploitation of the public space: it's the wall in Maia Bare, the Romanian People's Salvation Cathedral in Bucharest, or the traffic of invalidity cards in Sibiu and everywhere in Romania. I think the gradual disappearance of those public spaces reduces our capacities for resistance.

The elite you show in the play are relatively young. Are they a symbol for the modernity you're criticising?

I used to believe that our problems would one day be solved by the generational renewal of our political class. This renewal did happen, but the situation is actually almost worse today. A new generation of politicians, trained in Western Europe, are importing its models and doctrines, even though they might not fit the reality of Romania. They are highly cynical and spend a lot of time mimicking Westerners just to show that they are educated, civilised. This syndrome is spreading to an ever-larger part of the population. The question of European financing is at the heart of many of their speeches. This money is of course a boon for Romania, but it is most often funneled into projects selected according to European standards. Or, even worse, into the pockets of a select few.

It is precisely within the framework of a European project, *Villes en Scène/Cities on Stage*, that you are denouncing certain forms of European integration and cooperation. Isn't that paradoxical?

The project *Villes en Scène/Cities on Stage* gave me the opportunity to lead a critical work on Romanian society and on a number of European realities. I've always considered that the public financing of culture meant financing self-criticism. In Romania, most State-sponsored theatres have a repertoire that's similar to that of private theatres. That shouldn't be the case. I believe the mission of theatre is to question the cracks in reality. For there to be an articulation between our national character and a European project, we need to be aware of the problems and flaws that exist, we need to keep a critical mind.



In one scene, you show the funeral of a Romanian actress, Eugenia Ionescu. Is that a homage to Eugène Ionesco, or a way to settle a score?

Let me first say that I like Eugène Ionesco's theatre a lot, but that I am indeed getting a little tired of all the honours that are constantly being bestowed upon him here. I look at this creature, Eugenia Ionescu, with both irony and romanticism. She does begin as a sort of alter ego of Eugène Ionesco, but she soon comes to stand for all the giants that Romania loves so much. Even though they probably exist everywhere (I'm thinking of Gérard Depardieu in France, for instance), Romania loves its great stars to the point that they can't be criticised anymore. Yet several of those giants have been linked to nationalism or to the overbearing power of religion, many actresses were informants under the Communist regime. It was very common in theatres at the time. I'm not trying to say that they collaborated and that we are pure, though. Isn't it the same as collaborating when, today, one enjoys one's comfort without protesting against the system?

Between the giants of the Ceaușescu era and the westernised young wolves, aren't you also telling the story of a generational conflict?

Maybe. Theatre, for instance, has people who still practice it like they did in the 19th century, others who, like me, lived for most of their lives in the 20th century, and others, like my students, who have only known the 21st century. It cannot but lead to differences and incomprehension. What I find most worrying is that we're faced with a growing ignorance of recent history. The generations born after 1989 have to endure the consequences of causes they don't know or understand. In such a context, it becomes really hard to put things into words, to create a coherent discourse. Everyone knows that Romania went through a very difficult transition period after Ceaușescu, many are glad that we're now part of Europe, but few take the time to think about our trajectory as a country. The context isn't exactly conducive to debate. Even when one tries to talk, I feel like all that comes out is just noise, that no one's listening anyway. It's like shouting at walls.

Interview conducted by Renan Benyamina.

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