

The Transylvanian Postdramatic Theatre of Radu Afrim

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Abstract: One of the leading figures of contemporary Romanian theatre, director Radu Afrim has been working with Hungarian companies for more than a decade, producing more than a dozen performances, which has its own significance under the circumstances that in his director's theatre, the text is never taken for granted, be it a pre-existing and pre-chosen dramatic text or the product of a collective effort. Nevertheless, due to his peculiar, non-hierarchical handling of all the theatrical devices, where equally intensive attention is accorded to each one of them, his productions always fall under the category of postdramatic theatre. We are dealing here with two aspects of contemporary Eastern European theatre: the blurring lines between director's theatre and collective production and the multiethnic character of it. As an aesthetic experience, his performances may be best described using Gilles Deleuze's terms of aspects and perceptions.

"I started directing because I wanted to combine painting, poetry, architecture, and literature. [...] [F]or me a work is good when it manages to break as many of the textbook rules of directing as possible. When it contains a sufficient dose of energy of uncertain provenance and a slice of ephemerality is delivered by heavy goods vehicles, [...] if the relationships between the characters are completely unpredictable, then it's almost perfect."¹

¹ Cristina RUSIECKI, *Radu Afrim: The Fabric of Fragility*, trans. Samuel W. F. ONN and Eugen WOHL (Bucharest: Entheos, 2016), 198.

Radu Afrim's directing career started in 2000. One of the most controversial productions of these early years was *Three Sisters. An (Un-)commonly Free Adaptation of Chekhov's Play*, staged with the Andrei Mureșanu Company at the Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe, in 2003.

"While at the start of his career the old-guard theatre critics were fiercely hostile towards his new approach to directing, in just a few years Afrim won the UNITER Award for Directing (the most prestigious distinction in Romanian theatre) twice: first in 2006 for his production of *Plasticine* at the Toma Caragiu Theatre in Ploiești, then in 2007 for *joi.megaJoy* at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest. [...] In 2008, he was awarded the Coup de Coeur de la Presse Prize at the Avignon Theatre Festival (Off) for the production of *Mansarde à Paris ou les detours Cioran* staged in Luxembourg. In 2009, the German foundation KulturForum Europa awarded him the *Prize for European Cultural Accomplishments*. [...] In 2009, his production of Fausto Paravidino's *The Sickness of the Family M.*, first staged at the Timișoara National Theatre, was invited to give a series of ten performances at the Théâtre de l'Odeon in Paris. In 2011, Afrim directed *When the Rain Stops Falling* by Andrew Bovell, at the Cuvilliés Theater in Munich, a production acclaimed by both the media and the public."²

In 2015, Afrim won the UNITER Award for Directing once again for his staging of *Tran-*

² *Ibid.*, 22.

quility with the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre Târgu-Mureş.

The Romanian theatre director had been working with Hungarian companies for more than a decade, producing a dozen performances. This has its own significance under the circumstances that in Afrim's director's theatre, the text is never taken for granted, be it a pre-existing and pre-chosen dramatic text or the product of a collective effort. Nevertheless, due to his peculiar, non-hierarchical handling of all theatrical devices, where equally intensive attention is accorded to each one of them, his productions always fall under the category of postdramatic theatre.

Also, we are dealing with two aspects of contemporary Eastern European theatre here: the blurring lines between director's theatre and collective production and its multiethnic character. Regarding the first aspect, Panna Adorjáni summarises this phenomenon as follows:

"The East-Central-European viewpoint reveals that when textbook definitions of devising and collective creations as performances that rely on the creativity of actors and are not based on texts and certain techniques of producing theatre are presented as such that necessarily lead to collective creations, it becomes possible to identify the spirit of collective creation in cases that in their own context have a completely different meaning."³

As for the other aspect, taking into consideration that postdramatic never meant that the text/speech is not important, on the con-

³ ADORJÁNI Panna, „Kollektív alkotás kontra rendezői színház: A kollektív alkotás és *devising* történetének és elméletének áttekintése a rendezői színházi paradigma perspektívájából”, *Theatron* 17, no. 1 (2023): 132–146, doi: [10.55502/the.2023.1.132](https://doi.org/10.55502/the.2023.1.132). All translations are mine, except otherwise stated.

trary,⁴ we presuppose it is not by chance that the director is working with companies that use a different language than his own, especially if we think of his long-term coproduction with the Hungarian company in Târgu-Mureş. We will examine these aspects by looking into Afrim's rehearsal process and analysing some of his most emblematic *mise-en-scènes*.

Afrim directed five performances with the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureş between 2014 and 2021, achieving significant critical and public acclaim. These are the following: *The Devil's Casting* (2014), devised performance; *Tranquillity* (2015), based on Attila Bartis' novel of the same title and the connected drama entitled *My Mother, Cleopatra; Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt* (2016), devised performance; *Drunks* (2018), based on Ivan Viripajev's drama, and *Grand Hotel Retrobird* (2021), devised performance. In September 2023, Afrim staged his sixth performance with the Tompa Miklós Company: *The Meaning of Emma's Life*, by Fausto Paravidino.

⁴ „What is emerging in the new theatre, as much as in the radical attempts of the modernist 'langage poétique', can therefore be understood as attempts towards a restitution of chora: of a space and speech/discourse without telos, hierarchy, and causality, without fixable meaning and unity. In this process, the word will resurge in its whole amplitude and volume as sonority and as address, as a beckoning and appeal (Heidegger's 'Zu-sprache'). In such a signifying process across all positings (Setzungen) of the logos, it is not the destruction of the latter that is happening but its poetic—and here theatrical—deconstruction.” Hans-Thies LEHMANN, *Postdramatic Theatre* (London–New York: Routledge, 2006), 145–146.

Rehearsal Process

Afrim creates audio-visual heterotopies where the aural dimension has an ambient-generating function. The chosen soundscape must have such an intense atmosphere that it instantly creates a space in which the rehearsal may start. This is the usual beginning of every rehearsal, regardless of whether there is a dramatic text on which the performance will be based. If there is a text, it will be introduced in the rehearsal process at a later point and will be subject to unforeseeable changes. There are no readthroughs or any kind of rehearsal, for that matter, except working ones.

The first encounter of the Hungarian company with the director is remarkable, judging by the individual interview with Katalin Berekméri, the leading actress and artistic director of the Tompa Miklós Company at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureș, who won a UNITER Award for Acting in *The Devil's Casting* in 2014, taken on July 22, 2023.

The company was faced with a theatre concept and a working method that are essentially different from anything they had met before. In 2014, the company was prepared enough to pick up the rhythm of work, the tempo, and to be able to meet those professional expectations which the director expected from the actors and the whole creative group. They fairly quickly understood Afrim's sense of taste and validity and prepare themselves to use a completely new method of acting. The actors have to be able to present radically different states of mind with abrupt changes. He or she must be very mobile, dynamic, and flexible, and he or she must possess good concentrating and improvising skills. The initial improvisations connected to the impromptu situations sketched by the director have to be accompanied by ultra-spectacular props and costumes. The complete creative team must be present from the beginning, ready to work, and willing to use their respective skills and instruments in abundance. The redundant

elements are cut out later on. A state of readiness and partnership is expected at all times from all collaborators to be able to follow the director's working method. The creative team has to rely on and trust its intuitions and instincts. Everybody has to be brave enough to plunge into the situation, since Afrim doesn't allow time for thinking, ponderation, and judging.

Afrim quickly diverts the actors' attention from themselves, from their fears, uncertainties and self-centeredness, because they must concentrate on the work, on the solving of the problem, and the task they receive, which requires his entire skill of concentration. The director allows a much shorter time for character-building and for finding and developing a valid acting solution than other directors. Therefore, the actors must channel their energies in a totally different way, but the solution is much more intensive and concentrated. Afrim doesn't discuss character-building, but the plot development might be the result of a collective effort, especially regarding the humorous elements. Instead of psychological dissection, he expects spontaneity, since the work happens on the stage, not in the mind. Working with him is overwhelming and exciting at the same time for those actors who intuitively understand his working method and are able to maintain the state of readiness he works in, and expect others to do as well.

Everything has to be exaggerated (movement, gesture, facial expression, volume of speech, etc.), but he relies on the actor's intelligence, taste, sense of humour, and internal sense of judgment of how and how much they show on the stage. The actor is supposed to go to the extreme, be that humorous, grotesque, or absurd, or to reach the borderline of melodramatic, but stop there. When an actor is ready, willing, and able to work with Afrim, he comes up with 4-5 solutions in order to help them and create situations where they can bring out the most of themselves. Besides the skills necessary for free improvisation and a strong sense of

humour, a zest for acting is required from the actor. The pleasure of acting has to be discernible in their performance. And, of course, the actor has to be ready for complete changes of everything during the rehearsal process, themselves, their solutions to the script, as well as scenery and sonority.

*Emblematic examples of
Afrimian mise-en-scènes in Târgu-Mureş*

While two of the performances with the Tompa Miklós Company between 2014 and 2021 started with the director's encounter with the texts (*Tranquility*, a novel of the same title, and the drama version of it, written by Attila Bartis, and *Drunks*, a play by Ivan Viripajev). The remaining three productions, at first glance, seem to have been dealing with childhood memories. The devised performances—*The Devil's Casting* (2014), *Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt* (2016) and *Grand Hotel Retrobird* (2021)—evolve around a child's experiences during socialism in the 1970s, in a multiethnic Transylvanian town, right after the changes in 1989 and thirty years later. But as Deleuze's befitting words describe:

„We write not with childhood memories but through blocks of childhood that are the becoming-child of the present.”⁵

“The artist is a seer, a becomer. [...] He has seen something in life that is too great, too unbearable also, and the mutual embrace of life with what threatens it, so that the corner of nature or districts of the town that he sees, along with their characters, accede to a vision that, through them, composes the perceptions of that life,

⁵ Gilles DELEUZE, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. Hugh TOMLINSON and Graham BURCHELL (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 168.

of that moment, shattering lived perceptions into a sort of cubism, a sort of simultaneism, of harsh or crepuscular light [...].”⁶

It seems that both production and reception of the performances rely on transformative principles, which can be best described using the Deleuzian terms of affects and perceptions. „By means of the material, the aim of art is to wrest the percept from perceptions of objects and the states of a perceiving subject, to wrest the affect from affections as the transition from one state to another: to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations.”⁷

In a retrospective interview about Afrim's oeuvre (more than 60 productions so far), published by the acclaimed Romanian cultural magazine *Dilema veche* in March 2023, the following question was asked: “In which one of your performances would you like to live for a while?” The director's prompt answer was: “In *Retrobird*. The block of flats of my childhood, with everything it comes.”⁸ So Afrim's most outstanding “block of sensations” is a block of flats (an apartment building) in *Retrobird Hits the Apartment Building and Falls on the Hot Asphalt*, to which we will refer as the first *Retrobird*.

The first *Retrobird's* scenery (designed by Irina Moscu) is dominated by a two-story building (or block) with small flats with windows and interior stairways. The performance unfolds in the flats, stairways, in front of the building, and on top of it. The storefront life, with no intimacy but a lot of Balcan vitality led by its inhabitants, is a well-spring of surrealistic and grotesques elements. The building sometimes shows its sad, two-dimensional side, not unlike an herbarium; other times it almost explodes from the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁸ Marius CHIVU and Ana Maria SANDU, „I am a Fan of Fragility: Interview with director Radu Afrim”, *Dilema Veche*, no. 985 (2023): 17–18.

clashes, meetings, and frictions of the heavy-laden lives. It took about two days to build it, and it stands there in its heavy physical presence during the three-and-a-half-hour performance. The spectatorial curiosity is duly satisfied in this multiplied peepshow. Each window serves as a small stage, and something is happening in all of them. We are witnesses of micro-stories, long gone fragments of life. Textures of memories congeal from shreds of noises and lights. The narrator (living in an unidentified time) swaps places with her child counterpart from the time of the performance. From the disappearance of Laura, one of the girls living in the building, to the preparation of the inhabitants for the visit of the Ceausescu couple, everything becomes weightless, as the collective memory of the community. Are we participating in a remembering or a forgetting process, or both at the same time? Somewhere between the desire and nostalgia for a home that perhaps never existed and an ironic (self)reflection in the fashion of the retro.

The scenery is packed with atmosphere generators: 1970s clothing fashion, magnetophone, herbarium, basket-ball, as well as the sonority: songs from ABBA, Boney M, and references to TV serials such as *Sandokan*, *Dallas*, *Valley of Memories*, etc. The sound- and light-design produces percepts such as the noise of the heels of the departing mother, the chirping of the birds at dawn, the shattering of the streetlights by the kids, kaleidoscope-like disco-lights, and others. The block also serves as a projection surface. The optical illusions generated by videomapping connect to the daydreaming and figments of the imaginations of the inhabitants. Moreover, they can endow the illusion of depth on two-dimensional elements as well as the illusion of movement on static objects. Thus, a poetic tension builds up between the illusion of movement and the fatal motionlessness of the herbarium. The block works like a vertical stage too, on which a virtual stage is projected, and the

play unfolds at the cross-section of the two stages as an extended reality. The projections simulate the changing lights of the passing days as well as of the seasons and of local storms. The ghostlike bouncing of the projected basketball gives place to the appearance of the light-bird. When darkness falls on everything, we see in a crack a light passing through the virtual stage with the contour of a bird.

At a decisive moment in the first *Retrobird* (2016), a little girl asks her older neighbour what retro means. According to the answer, if the girl writes about what is happening here and now, in thirty years it will be retro. And this is the idea that led Afrim to direct a second part of *Retrobird* five years later.

The starting situation of the *Grand Hotel Retrobird* is that the little girl, Mioara, from the first part, now a professor of literature in Belgium, revisits her hometown during a sabbatical. She books a room in her old block of flats, which has turned into a hotel; they have changed the wallpapers—a poignant theatrical representation of the changes in Romania after 1989.

The second *Retrobird* is also a devised performance; thus, the script is being born during the rehearsal process with the participation of the actors. Acting precedes speech; thus, body, language, and all of the sign processes are in constant shift and displacement relative to one another. We can never be sure what came up first—a gesture, a piece of costume, a prop, or a fragment of sound—and the text reacts to that (ironically, humorously, mockingly), or the other way around. On the other hand, Mioara is writing a book in her hotel room, and whatever she is writing happens more or less on the stage. The instant staging of the text is emphasised in as many ways as possible. For example, Amaryll, one of the constant guests, sometimes utters the written words together with the writer; the text sometimes notes that the man in white dress is bored of playing a woman, in which case acting precedes the text; or Vilmoska, the old child, lets the spec-

tator decide whether he will revive after the party or not. The script is contradictory, places us under pressure, changes the tone or smashes whatever we see, and never turns up the way we would expect. A high degree of unpredictability, idiosyncrasy, sudden semantic changes, and playfulness characterise it. The way it works influences each system of signs, and the other way around, depending on the situation and its participants.

The performance requires an intensive presence from each actor. The actors, using all of their tools (movement, speech, vocal expression, gestures, mimics, etc.) must be able to produce effects. Instead of representing something or somebody—"No role-playing!" is the most often heard instruction during the rehearsals—the actor should vibrate on stage and should convey enormous vitality and zest for playing. In other words, the intensity of their presence should prevent any coagulation of forms (characters). Zita (Csaba László, who received a UNITER Award for Acting for his performance) is the wife of the hotel manager. Most of the play happens in the reception area of the hotel because that is the place where everyone comes together. And this area is Zita's playground. Played by a man, she is a temptress who needs to entice everybody who shows up in the reception area. She is the motor of all the action that happens there, and the confabulator of the guests' micro-stories. But Csaba László's theatricalized body expands into the whole reception area; the tempo of his movement and speech and his ever-changing intonation guide the spectator's attention somewhere else. While the main action of all the figures is their appearance and disappearance in and from the hotel, since Zita's motional presence creates the space, the emptiness that remains after her disappearance is palpable. Vilmoska, the old child, played by László Zsolt Bartha is another example of how the attention of the spectator is directed behind representation, according to which Vilmoska is a retarded child, un-

tended by his parents. But the acting is not aimed at producing emotions (sympathy, regret), but at generating effects. His fast-paced speech in the party scene is juxtaposed by a similarly paced movement (kind of a weird dance), but with a different rhythm that produces a strange awareness that also draws attention to the fact that the retarded child perceives most of what is going on around him. The experiments of the subversion of the logic of representation weave through and haunt the entire performance with as many variations of duplications—spectral presences, and splitting into halves, for which only theatre is able to provide a joint space—as possible. Examples include the child and adult Mioara's presence in the same place; the thoroughly stylized figure of Vilmoska, the old child; the old and young body of auntie Teréz; the abject duplication of the Juhász brothers; the appearance of the doppelganger of the cleaning woman when she almost gets raped; the schizoid tension between Amaryll's body and mind, due to which we see a suffering simulacrum; and the constant struggle to create the female simulacrum.

In his work with the Tompa Miklós Company, Radu Afrim often turns to his own personal experiences, memories, sensations, and atmospheres, but he never handles them in a documentary manner. We encounter here the Afrimian version of the Transylvanian experience of facing one's own stranger, otherness, known unknown, and the openness that comes with the constant search for an identity in a director's theatre, which transforms all the perceivable elements of this experience into a discernibly stylized theatrical system of signs.

Afrim builds up blocs of sensations, which are compounds of perceptions and affects. The perceptions never have to resemble an "original" reference but should recreate the intensity of the experience. His interest lies in pinpointing the underlying forces that contribute to the birth or the becoming of perceptions. Likewise, affects aren't simply

affectations or emotional responses of the subject (be that the actor or the spectator). They are much more pre-subjective forces that pass through the subject of experience and change it. Afrim constantly pushes the limits of sensations, destabilises “normal” perception and affection, and avoids clichés. With the intensity of the sensible, new “blocks of sensations” may emerge.

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