Devised Theatre: A Change of Paradigm in Romanian Theatre

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Abstract
This paper proposes an overview of the contemporary trends in the creation of dramatic text and performance. Starting from ingrained, traditional practices, which are more often than not centred on the director, it then focuses on a more recent approach to drama and performance, "devised theatre", outlining its specificities, and commenting on its increasing occurrence in the Romanian contemporary theatre.

Keywords: devised theatre, collaborative creation, directing, dramatic text, performance

The working methods and practices engaged in creating the dramatic text always influence, at both aesthetic and structural levels, its final form. „*Definirea teatrului ascultă însă prioritar de contextul socio-politic, ca și de procesualitatea internă a creației*" [However, the definition of the theatre mainly abides by the socio-political context, as well as by the internal processuality of the creation] (Banu 2011: 15). In the domain of the theatre, the professionals' practices are particularly diverse. The twentieth century foregrounds the director's authority. „*Dacă pe parcursul secolului nu descoperim autoritatea unui mod, frapează însă aceea a unei funcții: Regia*" [If, along the century, one does not find a certain mode to be dominant, the authority of a function – directing - is nevertheless arresting] (17).

Deeply ingrained in the artistic culture, the classical model of constructing a theatrical performance implies a number of stages. More often than not, these may be encountered in repertoire theatres, whether institutionalised or private, giving their managers and artists safety in what concerns the working hours and the opening date – it is a safe and efficient organisational structure embedded in an unstable environment, that of artistic work. Conventional practices are almost exclusively based on a dramatic text previously written by an author. The text is then approached by the director, who extracts its essence, themes and concepts, and constructs his or her view on the play. (S)He establishes the setting and the general tone of the performance together with the art director, may operate changes at the textual level or may even rewrite it, with the help of a performance writer (as dir. Thomas Ostermeier (2015 online) usually does). Only afterwards is the text made available to the actors. Furthermore, the actors and the director collaborate during a few other stages to reach the final form of the upcoming performance. The first stage, known as "table read" or "read-through", aims at

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deciphering the text, at the understanding of its logic, of the characters and the relationships between them. Here, the basic psychological traits of each character are outlined, and this stage ends with the actors learning the text. After this phase, the creation team walks on stage, where, depending on the pre-established space, mise-en-scene is created. The last but one phase is that of the general rehearsals, in which final adjustments are operated, and after that, the theatrical show is ready for performance in front of an audience.

The book *Arta regiei teatrale [The Art of Theatre Directing]* by Horia Deleanu features two diagrams by Meyerhold which define the relationship of the director with the text, the author and the audience.
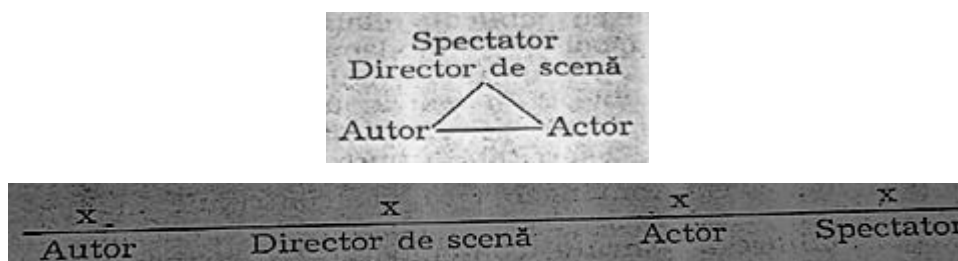

Fig. 1 (Deleanu 1987: 107)

In the 20th century, *„regia marchează desprinderea actului teatral european de sub autoritatea indiscutabilă a dramaturgului, el aspirând la regimul propriu oricăriu artist: acela al elaborării unui limbaj ce transmite informațiile piesei în funcție de o opțiune artistică"* [directing is what makes the European theatrical act escape from the indisputable authority of the playwright, aspiring to a regime inherent to any artist: that of creating a language that sends the information of the play according to a pre-established artistic choice] (Banu 2011: 17).

Thus, the preference for the second form of creation - that of the straight line (author-director-actor-spectator) - becomes fully justified.

> *Acceptând ca justă soluția teatrului „liniei drepte" considerăm însă că ambele soluții enunțate au darul de a atrage atenția insistent asupra relațiilor necesare, esențiale ale regizorului cu publicul.*
> [While acknowledging the solution of 'straight line' theatre as just, we, however, consider that both solutions are bound to assiduously draw attention to the necessary and compulsory relationship between the director and the audience] (Deleanu 1987: 108).

This approach to the creation and production process inherently triggers working relationships at the level of the host institution and its creative team.

> *„Diviziunea muncii" în teatru e de dată recentă (regizorul e o apariție europeană a celei de-a doua jumătăți a secolului al XIX-lea), iar înlocuirea, în poziția dominantă, a dramaturgului prin directorul de scenă – care-i plasează pe toți ceilalți participanți la munca de spectacol în postura de executanți – e, în România, rezultatul celor două valuri ale teatralizării și reteatralizării, aceasta din urmă datând din anii '60.*

> [The 'division of labour' in the theatre is a recent phenomenon (the director appears in the European theatre in the latter half of the nineteenth century), and replacing the author with the director in the dominant position – which turns all the other participants in the show into mere performers – is, in Romania, the result of the two waves of theatricalisation and re-theatricalisation, the latter dating since the 1960s] (Popovici 2015a: 1).

By turning the artists into "mere performers", this organisation creates, indeed, a solid hierarchy which ensures the efficiency of the working process and its final result, but can it really work within a vocational environment? What about the personality and interests of the actors who, bounded by the legal status they have as employees of an institution, must adopt a single person's views and rhythm? Can they be truly involved in an undertaking which has nothing to do with them as individuals but only as professionals? Does this practice have any kind of negative impact on the artistic act?

A public debate has been recently stirred in the Romanian theatre, discussing a phenomenon occurring as a consequence of this pattern of sovereignty of the Romanian director. The analysis centres on the production of more theatrical performances which, staged by the same director, display the same vision and are often faithful replicas of the first staging.

> *Copy/paste-ul, refacerile, reluările sunt rezultatul unei anume interpretări a relațiilor de muncă, codificate în concepția ideii de auctorialitate revendicată exclusiv de regizor. „Cine e autorul?" e, în plin secol al „morții autorului", întrebarea centrală în jurul căreia se distribuie tensiunile sistemului teatral – și nu doar în România. Începutul contestării acestei practici a autoreluărilor înseamnă, în realitate, contestarea modelului unui teatru al regizorului și de interpretare care pare că și-a atins propriile limite.*
> [Copy/paste shows, remakings and revivals are the result of a peculiar interpretation of working relations, encoded in the idea of 'authorship' applying exclusively to the director. 'Who is the author?' is, in the century of 'the death of the author', the focal question which concentrates the tensions of the theatre system – and not only in Romania. To start challenging this practice of the remaking actually means to challenge the pattern of a theatre centred on a director and his/her interpretation which seems to have reached its limits] (Popovici 2015a: 1).

Leaving all these aside, this unique pattern of linear production, primarily represented by the director, has its shortcomings and negative consequences, visible at the contextual level but also within a wider framework. With regard to the director's position, George Banu's remark may function as a wake-up call, unmasking the hidden face of this theatrical archetype: *„Consecință va fi exorbitantul apetit de putere care vizează constituirea unui regim dictatorial ce contrazice flagrant caracterul colectiv al teatrului"* [A consequence will be the immense appetite for power which aims at imposing a dictatorial regime that flagrantly goes against the theatre's collective character] (2011: 25).

At the international level, the deleterious consequences on the artistic art of the director's status determine some of the greatest creators of the twentieth century to challenge this formula or, at any rate, its interpretation and application in the working process. „*Când teatrul e sănătos, el nu e niciodată expresia unui singur punct de vedere... Unitatea distruge teatrul*" [A sound theatre is never the expression of a unique point of view. Unity destroys theatre] (Brook 1970 qtd. in Banu 2011: 27).

The good news is that, even in Romania and even though almost half a century later, there is public debate on challenging this practice. It is also worth mentioning that, at the boundaries of 'mainstream theatre', young artists work in the spirit of the contemporary practices, trying to adjust to the requirements of the new social and cultural realities, which can no longer allow, in the postmodern age, a romantic model of the director's theatre.

> *Or, aici intervine una dintre cele mai importante tensiuni de pe scena teatrală românească – cea între modelul teatrului de artă şi de regie şi modelele contemporane ale creaţiei colective, de grup, ale „autorului de spectacol" (care încetează să reproducă schemele de putere clasice, cu regizorul la manşă), ale creaţiei interdisciplinare sau ale renăscutului teatru de actor.*
> [Notwithstanding, here is one of the greatest tensions on the Romanian theatrical stage – the one between the patterns of art-theatre and director's performance and the contemporary models of collaborative creation, group show, "performance writer" (which cease to reproduce the classical power schemes, with the director in control), of interdisciplinary creation or of the reborn actor's theatre.] (Popovici 2015a: 1)

One of the practices of textual and performance creation which rejects unity is devised theatre. In the following section, the rules and methods specific to this creation type will be analysed and its emergence at both international and national level will be contextualised. Devised theatre becomes a more than necessary tool in a cultural space like the Romanian one, which seems to have been at a dead end for a while.

It should also be clearly understood that the denial or the departure of the contemporary artists, as well their attempt to break free from the totalizing auctorial tutelage of the director is as natural as the way in which "the drama crisis" generated this now contested model back in the nineteenth century. Hans-Thies Lehmann brings out this aspect, stating that:

> The autonomization of theatre is not the result of the self-importance of (post)modern directors craving recognition, as which it is often dismissed. The emergence of a director's theatre was, rather, potentially established in the aesthetic dialectics of dramatic theatre itself, which in its development as a 'form of presentation' increasingly discovered the means and devices that are inherent to it even without regard to the text (Lehmann 2006: 50).

At the same time, using the techniques of collaborative creation, the director gives up some of his or her tasks while taking over some of the playwright's tasks, which s/he further shares with the team, and thus emerges the idea of the "performance creator" (Popovici 2015c, online). When they do not stage their own text, performance creators need to use 'devised' techniques to create.

Devised theatre

This phenomenon emerged in the UK in the latter half of the 20th century but critics have noticed the presence of similar practices in France and the United States. The first terms used to denote this type of theatrical practice were "creation collective" or "collaborative creation" (Radosavievlic in Popovici 2015b: 17).

Devised theatre is defined in relation to the new theatrical forms emerging in the UK, which are based on the rule of 'text-less' artistic creation. This is why it is important to mention Duska Radosavievlic's statement that places the term 'devised' in connection with "a sector of performance arts in the United Kingdom that was not based on playwright and text" (in Popovici 2015b: 21). It is also why the same author suggests the departure from this term in European contexts, in which director's practices often include the team in the creation process. He considers that the overuse of this term has led to the merging of the terms of devising and troupe. He further makes his position clear by stating that 'devised' should be construed as "a ubiquitous creative method and not as a type of performance which is not based on text" (Ibid.).

> It is neither a matter of aesthetics, nor a revival of experimental avant-garde practices: it is a change in the production mode which provokes/subverts the traditional power hierarchy in theatre (Popovici 2015b: 7).

The emergence of this new form of creation and production at the European level invites to analysis and debate, in order to understand to what extent this new hierarchy is representative, and also if it should be preferred to the classical approach. What are the possibilities of this new means provided by devised theatre or collaborative creation, and how can they redefine Romanian theatre in the following years, considering that more and more artists choose to experiment using the 'devised' principles?

For a full grasp of the possible effects of this new formula, we need to understand how it manifests and is defined:

> Devised theatre can start from anything. It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes or specific stimuli that include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement. A devised theatrical performance originates with the group while making the performance, rather than starting from a play text that someone has written to be interpreted (Oddey 1994: 17).

The idea of devised theatre is inherently connected with that of an original production. If, in the classical performance model, originality used to be the imprint of the director who, through his/her views on a classical or contemporary dramatic text, would prove his/her ability to innovate, in the case of devised theatre, innovation is the fundamental factor. If the classical theatrical performance is representative for the artistic personality of its director, devised theatre is representative for a group of artists who succeed in self-defining in relation to their cultural and social interests and in conformity with the psychology, ideology and mentality of their culture. This new formula is inherently related to the ideas of knowledge and self-knowledge.

The artists who create collectively, based on their humours, culture, cultural and values, become representative for a community which is used as a tool, helping the spectator better understand the context. Theatre as "a mirror of society", the old cliché, acquires, in the case of devised theatre, a much more profound and revealing form than that which used to present society through the eye of a sole representative, the director.

Another trait which suggests the essence of collaborative creation is freedom. Both as a practice and as a feeling, collaborative creation is at all times faced with a wide range of possibilities of research and expression, exponentially greater than those of the theatrical performance based on the straight line or the triangle (see Deleanu above). At the same time, it infers a necessary condition: the artistic team or community, the group of artists united in diversity must have the same aims and goals but must also make their contribution to the development and definition of the final production.

In what hierarchy and authorship are concerned, they are more ambiguous and harder to define in the case of devised theatre. The roles of the playwright, the director, the actors and, in many cases, the audience, are not clear-cut when the 'paternity' of the text or performance is in focus. This concept reveals new traits of each of these professions, which seem to merge with all the others. The boundaries between the 'job descriptions' of the actors, directors and playwrights get more and more blurred, whilst multidisciplinarity comes first. This is what Duska Radosavievlic terms "deprofessionalisation", which should not be construed as the absence of creative skills but as involving "the integrative approach to more roles" (Radosavievlic in Popovici 2015b: 25).

The actors' role becomes more than that of simple performers: they may become "equal team-members" (26). At the same time, the playwright profession tends to depart from the literary area, whereas the theatrical performance "becomes more and more an instable entity, a deliberately open structure, tangent to the audience's reaction, and not a sketch for the spectacle." (*Ibid.*)

> Any definition of devised theatre must include process (finding the ways and means to share an artistic journey together), collaboration (working with others), multivision (integrating various views, beliefs, life experiences, and attitude to changing world events), and the creation of artistic product (Oddey 1994: 17).

This artistic pattern may generate a wide range of theatrical forms. It may become an educational theatrical performance for and using students, it may be a 'site-specific' performance devised for a certain space, a dance-theatre performance, it may often include the audience as an active and integrative part of the show, which gets adapted in real time, and it may also be a 'mainstream' performance which is by no means different from the classical forms of expression. It depends on the choice made by the members of the creative team. Therefore, one of the most important aspects of this formula is the group, its dynamics, and the professional and personal relationships between the team members. Artists with various preoccupations must have the same convictions in order to be eventually able to create a complex and 'seamless' artistic product.

In what production is concerned, collaborative creation allows the actors' team or company to develop their own formulae, in relation to their proposed aims. They may take any road they want in the creation process: there may be workshops on various themes, documentation activities, such as interviews or questionnaires addressed to a target group. Improvisation is an almost permanent element of collaborative theatrical creation. The actors have the freedom to build their characters starting from a real context or situation, and to place them in relation to other characters, without having a text at hand. Thus, the actors assume a part of the writer's role, whilst the playwright may select the lines to be used. It is the case of Catinca Drăgănescu in the show *Don't Cry, Baby*, and of Mihaela Michailov in the show *Familia Offline [Offline Family]*.

A stage of research and creation is always the foundation of a devised performance. This stage sometimes requires working with didactic, educational aspects, constantly taking into consideration the creative resources which may be employed by the team members. Among the first steps proposed by Alison Oddey for the initial stages of a devised performance, there are the acting exercises specific to the first year of study in Acting.

> Group practical work and getting to each other exercises are vital to that exploration. Exercises in communication, concentration, trust, sensitivity, movement, voice, and improvisation are all required for group development (Oddey 1994: 41).

It is not at random that theatre educators use these exercises for group development in the Actor's Art discipline. In the Romanian faculties of acting and performance, students are organised as a theatrical company. Spending three years together, their personal evolution is closely connected with the dynamics and development of the group. As acting is an art of communication at the highest level, it requires a high degree of safety within the artistic group. The artist's creative personality, in a metaphysical sense, cannot manifest in a sterile and aggressive environment, constantly restricted by pressure.

Ion Cojar, one of the greatest Romanian theatre educationalists, tributary to Stanislavski's method, proposes the syntagm „*Procesul, nu succesul*" [Process,

not success] (1996), referring to processuality in relation to the emergence of artistic expression. Expression may be ordered, controlled or 'acted', in which case the actor becomes a puppet of his/her own reason, subordinated to the aesthetic requirements of the director. Consequently, the actors seem sometimes 'histrionic' – in many cases depleted of human meaning and obviously acting. But when the aim is „*adevărul concret al sentimentelor*" [the concrete truth of feelings] (Banu 2011: 25) as a form of expression, it can no longer be either ordered or controlled, and appears as a result of „*proces psihologic efectiv*" [an actual psychological process] (Cojar 1996) performed by the actor during a theatrical present, in which s/he has already assumed the situation, the psychological condition and the thinking patterns of the character. In this case, expressing emotions is no longer an end in itself, but a consequence of a process. The performance effect is acquired by going from one psycho-emotional condition to the next in real time, under the eyes of the audience.

At the level of theatre production, these stages of research and analysis, the discovery of the various nuances of every form of performance expression become one of the main components of devised theatre.

Thus, in what the length of the show production is concerned, it must be subordinate to the unpredictability of the emergence of revelations or crystallised expression forms of various theatrical languages. The process may last from a few days to a few months or even a year (or more), according to various factors, such as: the availability of the creative team, financial resources or new discoveries which may trigger the restructuring of the entire initial plan. It may be said that 'collectively creating' entails a risk. But the absence of hierarchy within the creative group does not also imply an absence of administrative hierarchy, a factor which may also influence the production to the same extent as resources, time, and rhythm. Most of the time, risk acts as a motivation factor for the team members, and the research, development and experiment stages provide substance and depth to the final product. One of the best known representatives of this type of theatre, Mark Long, member of *The People Show* Theatre Company, suggests to his fellow artists: "You have to trust yourselves as artists, trust your art. Allow a situation where the sub-conscious of the group is enabled to emerge" (Long 1990 qtd. in Oddey 1994: 41).

Devised theatre in Romania
The scarcity of artistic groups which adopt devised methods in Romania may be the outcome of both a historical and political context. In the UK, this practice has emerged as the result of "the strong desire to work in an artistically democratic way" (Oddey 1994: 24), and is closely related to the emergence of "theatre in education" in 1965, which required a different approach for producing new dramatic texts and scripts which were, in this particular case, based on the curriculum.

In an interview for *Aurora Magazine*, Ştefan Peca identified as early as 2008 a possible beginning of the devised techniques in Romania:

> Tanga *se deosebeşte de* dramAcum *pentru că nu e o platformă deschisă de dezvoltare de text neapărat ci un grup de artişti (nu numai dramaturgi sau regizori, dar şi actori, scenografi şi visual artists) care crează teatru puternic ancorat în realitate/comunitate – cred că e una din primele tendinţe de* devised theatre *din România.* [*Tanga* is different from *dramAcum* because it is not necessarily an open platform for text development but a group of artists (not only playwrights or directors but also actors, art directors and visual artists) who create a theatre in strong connection with reality/community – I think it is one of the first attempts at creating *devised theatre* in Romania] (2008 online).

Nevertheless, devised theatre has not evolved so much in Romania to the extent of giving up the playwright. Referring to independent theatre, Iulia Popovici asserts that "independent theatre is either text-theatre or group-theatre, the textual support being, in most cases, original Romanian text, a context in which also emerges the figure of theatre creator" (2015b: 57). She further clarifies the group-theatre term, adding: "Not 'devised'. The collective-collaborative aspect is in regard to the performance construction, the control over the text being preserved by those artists who are given the part of the playwright inside the group" (Ibid).

In an interview for *Dilema Veche*, Saviana Stănescu associates the term 'devised' with the creative process, even in the presence of the playwright:

> *Devised theatre este un tip de teatru centrat pe procesul de dezvoltare a textului şi a spectacolului cu toată echipa de actori, cu dramaturgul la repetiţii, cu regizorul care coordonează această muncă de ansamblu. De obicei, există o temă care este explorată din mai multe perspective. De multe ori textul/spectacolul se bazează pe interviuri cu membri ai unei comunităţi, pe un anumit subiect. Alteori se porneşte de la zero şi tema apare în repetiţii, din improvizaţiile actorilor, din discuţii facilitate de dramaturg sau regizor, care poate aduce nişte întrebări şi exerciţii creative ce stimulează răspunsurile actorilor. Se poate porni şi de la o imagine sau de la muzică şi peisaj sonor. Important este faptul că dramaturgul creează textul prin acest proces de colaborare, nu stă acasă, în mansarda sa de fildeş, scriind o piesă pe care o trimite teatrelor. Sigur că scrii acasă de cele mai multe ori, dar materialul iniţial brut îl dezvolţi în repetiţii cu actorii şi regizorul.*
> [Devised theatre is centred on the process of textual and performance development with the entire team of actors, with the playwright taking part in the rehearsals, with the director who coordinates this group work. There is usually a theme explored from several perspectives. In many cases, the text/performance is based on interviews on a given topic with members of a community. It also happens to start from scratch and the theme emerges during the rehearsals, from the actors' improvisation, from discussions stirred by the director or the playwright, which may trigger some stimulating questions or creative exercises. It is also possible to set out from an image or from music and sound. It is important, nonetheless, that the playwright creates the text within this collaborative process; s/he is not at home, in his/her ivory loft, writing a play to send it to theatres afterwards. Of course, one writes at home in most of the cases, but one develops

the raw material during rehearsals, together with the actors and the director] (2008 online).

Therefore, in this context, the present paper considers devised theatre in the Romanian cultural space in the sense advanced by Saviana Stănescu, making reference only to performances with a strong collective and collaborative character of the creation process which also involves a playwright's presence. According to this definition, one may find devised theatre in the productions of more Romanian artists, such as Bogdan Georgescu, Geanina Cărbunariu, Mihaela Michailov and Leta Popescu. In Geanina Cărbunariu's case, representative is the performance entitled *20/20*, while in Mihaela Michailov's case, one finds devised principles in the educational theatrical performance *Familia Offline*. *Parallel* is an important Romanian performance based on devised ideology in terms of both authorship and working process.

> **Concept/ Choreography**: Ferenc Sinkó
> **Directed by**: Ferenc Sinkó and Leta Popescu
> **Text:** the team
> **Scenography**: Valentin Oncu (Official website)

As the quotation above shows, the text is attributed to "the team", and thus the performance is perfectly framed under the devised theatre umbrella. The performance is based on „*experienţele protagonistelor Lucia Mărneanu şi Kata Bodoki-Halmen. Creat din propunerile celor două artiste şi din texte scrise de întreaga echipă*" [the experiences of the protagonists Lucia Mărneanu and Kata Bodoki-Halmen, created at the suggestion of the two artists and made up of texts written by the entire team] (official website).

This performance was awarded the Uniter Prize for director debut, and was also a nominee in other categories. It is a performance which explores the LGBT condition in Romania, a show which combines theatre, performance and dance-theatre, speaking about sexual orientation.

> *Într-o societate dominată de maxima ipocrizie în materie de sexualitate umană, e foarte la îndemână să nu vezi că în această poveste despre ce înseamnă să fii gay (în România) se înghesuie toate micile istorii ale lui „a fi altfel" (sărac, vorbitor de altă limbă, handicapat, mamă minoră, infectat cu virusul HIV, blondă…) – iar asta începe cu faptul că homosexualitatea din* Parallel *e una feminină.*
> [In a society dominated by maximum hypocrisy when it comes to human sexuality, it is convenient not to see that in this story of *what it means to be gay in Romania* are crowded all the little stories of *what it means to be different* (poor, a speaker of another language, an impaired person, an underage mother, an HIV-positive person, a blonde woman….), and this starts from the fact that homosexuality in *Parallel* is a *feminine* one] (Popovici 2014 online).

The performance becomes a model for Romanian artists not only through its aesthetic value and success but also through its attitude towards theatre and

theatre-making. In a theatrical context in which "acting schools only prepare you for entering the institutionalized system"[1], a system that is repetitive in terms of aesthetics, themes and approaches alike[2], *Parallel* significantly contributes to the change of cultural paradigm in Romania.

All performances created following the principles of collaborative creation in Romania, whether they are as successful as *Parallel* or not, have begun to alter the image of Romanian theatre, and the consequences will be seen in a future in which the ideological and legislative framework will finally adapt to the contemporary realities.

Acknowledgement

Notes

[1] Unpublished interview, September 2015
[2] Iulia Popovici (Sep. 2015): "Theatre in Bucharest" – unpublished official text for ArCub, a diagnostic for the situation of theatres in Bucharest: *„E vorba, însă, de un eclectism repertorial care nu presupune o maximă diversitate a ofertei în teatre diferite, ci reproducerea aceluiași tip de ofertă (texte de factură similară, dacă nu chiar ale aceluiași autor, preferințe tematice asemănătoare, o aplecare generală comună către comedia de situație, alternarea aceloraşi regizori)"* [We are talking about eclecticism in repertories which does not entail maximum diversity of the offer in various theatres but the reproduction of the same type of offer (similar texts, even belonging to the same author, similar thematic preference, a common inclination for situation comedy, the alternation of the same directors).]

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