

The Festival of the Youth Theatre of Piatra Neamt, Romania: A Festival for “Youth without Age” (notes on the occasion of the 34th edition)

by Kalina Stefanova

*“Once upon a time there was a festival, and when its
time came it went out into the world to seek its fortune”
Liviu Timuș*

With all its natural givens, Piatra Neamt—a city of 80,000, ensconced in a beautiful valley surrounded by the lusciously green mountains of North-Eastern Romania, with a river running through it and a lake where flocks of swans nest all year round—could well be a thriving resort town and home of rich theatre institutions and events, like the Shaw Festival at the Niagara-on-the-Lake or the Shakespeare Festival of Canada at Stratford-on-Avon.

Instead and, most surprisingly at first glance, Piatra Neamt is a home of a festival of an entirely opposite type: focused on poignant social and political issues of both national and international scale. It is the oldest international festival in Romania—an institution of a very rich and awesome biography which stands out even against the background of the festival-rich contemporary Romanian theatre scene. Let me just mention two of the other international festivals in the country: the one in Sibiu, which ranks already third in size and clout in Europe, after those in Edinburgh and Avignon, and the one in Craiova, specializing in Shakespeare, which has established itself as *the* must-see showcase for productions of the Bard’s oeuvre from all over the world—the first having turned 30 this year and the second to celebrate the same age in 2024.



Romanians at the Gate of the World. Photo: Adrian Nita.

The Piatra Neamt Theatre Festival is run by and has its headquarters in the Youth Theatre—the only institutional theatre in the city. It belongs to the county of Neamts and is, thus, a theatre of a regional rank. At the same time, it is considered as “one of the most important Romanian cultural institutions,” as the leading Romanian critic Maria Zarnescu puts it.

The theatre’s building is very special, both in terms of its architecture and of its location. Although built about half a century later than the impressive old houses in the city—in the 1930s and 1940s—it has something of their combination of shy grandeur and modesty. It is beautiful and quite big, and, while one goes up the slightly steep street leading to it, it looks even awesome. Yet, since it stands literally in the outskirts of the hill, where the main square is located, and only its upper floors are on the level of the square, once you are already in front of the theatre you have a feeling as if it holds its hat off in reverence to the beautiful old buildings above it. This exuding of humbleness, of full awareness of its place in the city landscape’s hierarchy, and of paying due respect, is further enhanced by the special glitter of the dark brown-to-black tiles of the roof, typical of the city’s roofs,

as if after rain—a type of glitter celebrating nature and our modest place in it, so different from the lofty shine of the usual gilded facades of the old grand theatres. All this lack of ostentation makes the Piatra Neamt Youth Theatre’s building stand organically in sync with the general atmosphere of the city.

The theatre started functioning as such only in 1959 but got its name nearly a decade later, in 1967, and soon afterwards, in 1969, the Festival had its inaugural edition. During its first seven editions (then as a biennale) it was and it wasn’t international – all at once! That is, in terms of participating productions there were no foreign ones in the selection, yet there were many invited foreign guests and the special milieu created for discussions about theatre on such an international scale substantially contributed to opening up the horizon of the Romanian theatre. So it was in effect only in 1992, when, being revived after a long pause, the Festival became de facto international and substantially grew up in size, formats and programs.

The 2017 edition turned out to be a new turning point in the Festival’s development. And this was so not only because the edition was part of the celebrations of the Youth Theatre’s 50th anniversary but also because the Festival acquired a number of very important upgrades of its profile. After-show discussions between the casts and the audience, a new workshop entitled “The Spectator as a Critic,” a photo exhibition *Theatre of Youth Actors and Spectators*, a jury consisting of high school students from Piatra Neamt ... And soon afterwards another novelty was added to the list: an award for overall contribution to the theatre art given to a female Romanian theatre-maker.



Romanians at the Gate of the World. Photo: Adrian Nita.

Initiator of all these substantial quality changes was the new head of the Youth Theatre and the Festival, whose very appointment was in the first place a pioneering development. For, in their already considerably long history, the two institutions got for the first time a female theatre-maker at their helm! And a very special one at that: Gianina Carbuariu, the enfant terrible of contemporary Romanian theatre.



Gianina Carbuariu. Photo: Dorin Constanda.

Born in Piatra Neamt, but having left it to study theatre in the beginning of the millennium, Carbuariu actually came back there with an already large collection of firsts. She was the first female director to win the Romanian Association of Theatre Professionals UNITER Award for Best Show (*For Sale*, Odeon Theatre Bucharest, 2014). She was short-listed by the Romanian media as one of the 100 most influential women in Romanian society today. She was the first Romanian female artist whose works were included in the official selection of the Avignon Festival. Most importantly, all that was so, since she was so brave as to dare to challenge the status quo by raising up on stage issues and problems long overdue to be solved—issues and problems having to do with hypocrisy and double standards on a national and international scale. And she was doing it in a very artistic way, not just as an activist’s statement. In brief, in 2017, Carbuariu was already an established artist with an international reputation—as a director, as a playwright, and as an author of her shows alike—because of her ground-breaking work that was literally changing the face of the theatre both in Romania and abroad!

I myself saw a stunning show by Gianina Carbuariu (*20/20*) several years earlier, in the very beginning of that decade, in 2011, and immediately knew I had come across a unique talent and tried to follow her work from then on. “Her greatest achievement is the remarkable balance between ethics and aesthetics,” Maria Zarnescu has written ... “The audience ‘manipulation’ is done by artistic ways, not political, and the emotion keeps its own sense. So it seems that Gianina Cărbunariu found the alchemical secret through which she discovered the philosophical stone of the 21st-century theatre.”

The very acute social edge, markedly accompanied by openness for a dialogue and for finding ways to solve problems together, rather than with the imperative approach bordering on dictate, so typical for many a theatre activist today, is maybe the most important feature with which Gianina Carbuariu has endowed the Festival.

In the same vein, the urgent need for ceasing the enhancement of division lines between people and for finding ways to genuinely understand each other and genuinely be together is what permeates the motivation of the theme of this year’s edition of the Festival—*Safety Zone*—as beautifully expressed by Carbuariu, its curator. Here’s part of her introduction:

“The Safety Zone is a space of solidarity, not of polarization. The Safety Zone has room for the sort of real dialogue that TV discussions and online interactions often only mimic. In the Safety Zone, the authentic living of collective experience raises a question mark over the noise of ready-made ideas, of wrong turns that risk becoming the norm. In the Safety Zone, we celebrate together inspiration, generosity, irony, vulnerability, difference, courage, empathy, aesthetic risk-taking, and exchange of ideas. We celebrate life and trust that humanity will win in its confrontation with the absurd or with injustice.”

Indeed, diversity was one of the features of the program of the Festival’s 34th edition. It consisted of three sections—national, international, and local—in the framework of which altogether 35 productions were presented. They were works of state, regional and independently-run theatres. There were performances of huge casts and solo ones, inside –on the stage of the Piatra Neamt Theatre and on its second, so-called, “Mobile Stage,” at the other end of the town—and outside, on squares. There was drama, dance, performance art, puppets... There were shows closer to the traditional type of theatre, others having nothing to do with it, and third ones—a majority—which dwelled in the in-between area. Naturally, the most populous was the Romanian part of the program which displayed theatre from all over the country, as well as three shows of the host theatre. In keeping with the tradition of the Festival, the international program had a special Focus: European women artists (under the title *Something to Declare*), and the six shows comprising it

were created by female theatre-makers from Belgium, Bulgaria, The Czech Republic, Kosovo, Slovenia, and Ukraine.

Notably, the diversity of the program did not translate into many-ness—this so unfortunate feature of our time. Well distributed in the framework of two weeks—from September 8th to the 21st—all, that theatre did not, so to speak, spill over and infringe upon the tranquil air of the town. This, to me, is a real asset of the Festival, since, the biggest festivals aside, a city can have its spirit genuinely enriched by an event only when it is not overtaken and exhausted by it.

Of course, the very fine flair for keeping the right measure in the curatorial process on the part of Carunariu doesn't come as a surprise. After all, being in the first place a socially conscious artist, she very well knows that theatre could easily become a claustrophobic place, when theatre-makers snobbishly sniff at reality outside theatre's walls and forget that this art is here for the sake of that very reality. So Carunariu has managed very finely to steer and contain the Festival so as to make it feel like an organic part of everyday life and, thus, bring joy and be of potential help in the most unobtrusive way. And not only in Piatra Neamt at that! Some of the Festival's shows are presented in two other towns as well (Roman and Târgu Neamț) and in rural parts of the Neamț county too. As a matter of fact this comes as an extension of the Youth Theatre's profile actually, since it travels throughout the county catering to a population of 400,000.

And one more aspect of the Festival's program struck me: its truly egalitarian spirit. No genres or types of shows were there just as an addition "to fill in the picture," or just "for atmosphere," like confetti – a role in which, for instance, street theatre tends to be often cast at many festivals.

Actually, it is exactly with a street show that the Piatra Neamt Theatre Festival started for me (as I attended its last six days) and it remained as one of the most memorable theatre experiences there. The two parts of *Romanians at the Gate of the World* (of the Maska Theatre, Bucharest) took place on the main square (above the Youth Theatre), which was arranged as a meeting point between us, today's people, and eminent personalities from the time of the belle époque and the interwar period who have made great contributions in the science and arts fields.

Each of them was allotted a separate small podium (about eight altogether in each part) and, like in a museum, was arranged seemingly as a wax statue, clad in a gorgeous costume of the respective time, standing or sitting on a chair, with just a few objects connected with their life and achievements placed on a small table or next to it.

The invisible curtain of the show goes up when recordings of short texts about these personalities start sounding from loudspeakers next to each "small stage." Simultaneously with the recordings,

the statues gradually begin coming to life, with stiff movements at first—after all, so many years have passed since they have left our world—but with eyes full of curiosity, as if at once listening to how they are being presented to us and enjoying their visit to our world. At some point, some of them talk together with the loudspeakers, when there are quotes by them, or just sit and touch their objects. Then, as their presentation comes to an end, they “freeze” back in their initial postures. All this gets repeated many times nearly simultaneously, while the viewers move from one “exhibit” of the makers of Romanian culture and science to another and try to catch up with all their stories.

In the beginning, while one is concentrated on acquainting oneself with the details about all these people and their achievements, the experience feels like a guided tour in a museum. Then one comes to realize that it is exactly to concentrate that is challenging here, since the square is not at all large and all the stories from all the stages resound loudly and at once, thus nearly overlapping and overshadowing each other. It is exactly then when this mixture of street art and traditional type of theatre, in terms of acting, gets the shape of a powerful contemporary theatrical installation which transcends by far a mere exhibiting of a past spiritual glory. It appears to be more about a juxtaposition of our world and the world of these personalities on the territory of the spirit. And the power of this installation stems, I find, from the stark contrast between the minimalism accompanying these people of great deeds, on the one hand, and the chaos and cacophony of our everyday environment, with stepped-up decibels and fights for attention, which make maintaining normality even on a small scale feel like a big achievement. No matter how vain and eccentric all these celebrities might have been in their time, compared to the ubiquity of noise and many-ness today, and the resulting lack of clear focus in the figurative sense of the word, they radiate dignified modesty and simplicity, and make one feel humbled at least for a short while.

Interestingly, the topical issue of many-ness kept on reappearing in different ways in some of the next productions I saw. Not so much as an issue on focus, though, but rather as a temptation they had not fully managed to resist or vice versa—something which, either way, emerged as a factor for their overall impact.

Naturally, the large-scale, indoor productions were most prone to succumbing to this so common temptation today. For instance, in *The Dream* (Reactor de Creatie si Experiment, Cluj-Napoca) the effect of the impressively good music, the talent of the actors and the very important issues in focus were slightly undermined by the too frequent repetition of the main refrains—a repetition that inevitably led to diminishing of their meaning. Or, in the hilariously funny *Artists' Factory* (Teatrul Municipal Bacovia) the stereotypes of in-theatre relations and the scenes which look like quotes (e.g. at least close to the musical *Hamilton*, or the notorious case of David Merrick announcing the death of the director of *42nd Street*) at one point piled up to an extent of going slightly over the top and threatening to exhaust the comedy. Or, in *Operation "Firecracker"* (Teatrul Nottara, Bucharest),

while the mouse tails of the Securitate agents were an excellent phantasmagoric type of an extension of the characters, the adding of more puppet elements (mouse heads of these characters and a gigantic head of their female master) did not really contribute to enhancing the clout of the show. These ostentatious puppet theatre guest-elements as well as the projections on screens didn't feel as if they were growing organically out of the preceding action and only overburdened the otherwise very clearly cut and well-acted production. These shows made me feel they needed some small editing for the sake of keeping the right measure.



Operation Firecracker. Photo: Andrei-Gindac.

The most impressive of the large-scale shows to me was *Magyarosaurus Dacus* (of Teatrul Szigligeti, Ordea), the newest work of Gianina Carbuariu. It tells the defying-imagination life-story of a much larger-than-life and truly encyclopedic type of a person – a Hungarian baron whose discovery of dinosaur fossils was just one of the impossibly wide diapason of his ventures and adventures at the turn of the 20th century and onwards. Carbuariu's directorial choice of having

different actors and actresses play him in his different ages, endeavors, and, in effect, faces comes as an organic extension of this many-faceted personality and makes the show feel like an unassuming visit of our time to the universe of his life and, at once, as an invitation to him to peek at our world. The use of painted wings and of painted figures dropping from the ceiling while, at the same time, live music is played on proscenium further helps the mixing of times and makes references to poignant topics of the baron's world sound strikingly contemporary—like the Western stereotypes regarding the Balkans and especially Albania, the place of women, anti-Semitism, etc. This unexpected topicality of the story happening over a century ago, of course, brings in a sad overtone about the state of our world. But can we imagine Gianiana Carbuariu doing a show even about something having happened millennia ago without a reason other than exploring our world and pointing at its problems, of course with both laughter and sorrow?! After all, she didn't hesitate to invite even extra-terrestrials (in *Planet Mirror*, Piatra Neamt Youth Theatre, 2021) to make us think about ourselves and what we do to our world.



Magyarosaurus Dacus. Photo: Teatrul Szigligeti.

There is one detail even of her show, though, which is not entirely spared by the influence of the many-ness trend: some of the costumes, more concretely the contemporary clothes of the actors. Most probably they are chosen to be very tawdry and eclectic as sort of an extension of the main character's singular colorfulness and many-sidedness. Yet they tend to distract the attention from the very acting of the actors clad in them and, at times, even from the story itself. Their effect is similar to that of an excessive number of trailers and photos which intersperse a very well related story in a digital magazine literally getting into the way of the reader to fully enjoy the beauty of the narrative and see the depicted personality in its wholeness.



La Fracture. Photo: Pauline Vanden Neste.

The show that unequivocally grabbed my heart was the one that employed the most austere stage means of expression: *Fracture*, a 50-minute one-woman show of Yasmine Yahiatene (Little Big Horn, Belgium), where the concept, text (much less than ten full pages) and interpretation, as well

the live drawings (on the stage floor) and their simultaneous animation on a screen are all created by her.

The very powerful impact of this show is, of course, not a result solely of its frugality. It comes, in the first place, from the very brave associative and contrasting montage the narrative is based on. It starts with footage from a football match with Zinedine Zidane, back in 1998, which Yasmine watches with her dad, and the Marseillaise proudly resounds, yet, oddly, the bloodiness of its text coming to the fore. Footage of her father and herself growing up follow on the screen—nearly all the time they are from parties, where he's always with a cup in hand and invariably looks happy. And then, all of a sudden, in the projection her father cries and the story makes a rapid turn, as Yasmine says something as if out of the blue which does indeed have an effect of a bolt from the blue: when her father was eight, during the Algerian war, French soldiers entered their house in Algeria and told his mom to choose between her son and her brother--whom to save, the other one would be killed. The choice was to be done immediately. Yasmine relates this very calmly and it is in the same way that she very briefly describes the horror of the running away of a mother and a child through the desert and then up to Europe. The narrative then is back again to the area of the mundane, only now the father's drinking is placed under question, as is the connection between it and colonialism, and two songs cut through the "normal" life in Europe, saying everything that is at the bottom both of the laughter in those previous parties and the tears that followed: "We'll always be guilty of being Africa/ Mama, the moment has come, we've suffered too long."

I will not spell any more beans. Importantly, Yasmine doesn't comment, doesn't accuse or blame, she just lays out the outline of the story and doesn't even get overtly emotional, leaving the emotions to the altogether three songs she has us listen to--the Marseillaise and the two songs of the second half of the show. These songs serve as sort of emotional pillars that hold the very brave construction of this show which feels like a suspension bridge over the chasm of failed humanity.

There is something of the spirit of the ancient traveling storytellers in Yasmine's way of relating the narrative. Only instead of a rebeck in hand, she has a camera, recordings and electronic means to set the houses in her drawings on the floor to flames and to make tears pour from her father's face, drawn there and seen on the screen. Also she has the courage to mix cartoon-like drawing with tragedy--maybe in order to make it easier for us to understand, at long last. To understand both the past and the present of an, alas, still ongoing drama that so often turns out to be a tragedy.

The eye-opening and heart-rending quality of this show reminded me of the remarkable works of the South African director Brett Bailey, especially of his *Exhibit B* series, the most powerful glimpse at colonialism I have ever witnessed the art of theatre to offer. Likewise, when *Fracture* finishes, one has a feeling one has lived through not only a family's story but the plight of a whole continent.



The Return of Karl May. Photo: Atdhe Mulla.

For me, one of the most anticipated Festival shows was *The Return of Karl May*, a production of Qendra Multimedia, Kosovo, since I had never before seen theatre from there and also because of the implied by the title, always a sensitive topic of Western stereotypes of the Balkans, myself being from there. With all due respect to the creators of the show and their unquestionable talent, what struck me most were the striking similarities with the first shows of Oliver Frlić. I will never forget his *Damned Be the Traitor of His Homeland* (2010), his international break-through work, because of the powerful impact of its direct, in-face contact with the audience, the walking-on-the-edge mixture of facts and fiction, and the no-beating-about-the-bush when it came to problems that were in urgent need to be stated out loud, no matter if that would mean trespassing into the territory of illustration or getting into a literally declarative spirit. I still present it to my students as one of the shows that started a new wave of great overtly political theatre around the beginning of the second decade of the new millennium. And I have no doubt that the team of the Kosovo company has not been directly influenced by Frlić, since they said at the after-show talk that they

have actually only seen his theatre once. The thing is that now this type of theatre has for a while already been in competition with a foretold end with the placard-ness and fixation on statements of social media and the internet on the whole, and has, thus, rather exhausted its means of expression and, consequently, its power, precisely because it has become just a part of the incessant declarative talking on a global scale.

So, leaving Piatra Neamt, I came to wonder if the overt social and political theatre is not in need of reinventing, or rather re-imagining of itself. Especially, given the mighty impact of the other type of social and political theatre that does not simply name, spell out loud, and shock us with, the ills of our time and world but, by transforming them into (parts of) stories, manages to make them feel genuinely ours and, thus, make us genuinely care.

Dr. Kalina Stefanova is the author/editor of 13 books on theatre and criticism. Her three English-language books—*Who Calls the Shots on the New York Stages?* (1994), *Eastern European Theatre After the Iron Curtain* (2000), and *Who Keeps the Score on the London Stages?* (2000) – published by Harwood Academic Publishers (acquired later on by Routledge) and launched in New York and London, are reviewed in 15 countries and have been on the indicative reading lists of courses at universities in the UK, USA, Canada, Croatia, etc. Dr. Stefanova's last theatre book in Bulgarian, *Going to the Theatre around the World*, offers her personal experience of theatre from over 30 countries. *Theatre and Humanism in a World of Violence* is another theatre book in English Dr. Stefanova worked on, as a co-editor with Ian Herbert (published in 2009 and launched in Wroclaw, Poland). Two of the Bulgarian-language books by Dr. Stefanova (*Going to the Theatre around the World* and *More Glimpses of the Theatre, More Glimpses of the World*) are devoted to the Contemporary World Theatre and cover its main tendencies during two decades (1993 – 2013). She has publications in 25 languages in 28 countries. She's also an editor of the first volumes introducing Bulgarian theatre in English after 1989, *Contemporary Bulgarian Theatre*, published again by Harwood Academic Publishers (1998). Dr. Stefanova was a Fulbright Visiting Scholar at New York University for two years (1990/1992), a Visiting Scholar at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, (1998), at Meiji University, Tokyo, Japan, (2010), Shanghai Theatre Academy (2012 and 2015), Wuhan University (2016). In 1996 she was a recipient of a five-month British Council Fellowship at the City University, London. Dr. Stefanova has also delivered lectures and led seminars on theatre and criticism, and on Eastern European and Contemporary World Theatre in South Korea, China (Beijing and other universities in Wuhan), Chile, Canada, Portugal, Malta, Turkey, Croatia, Holland, Poland, Singapore, Russia, South Africa (four other universities), Slovenia.



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