



**WHAT TO REVEAL, WHAT TO CONCEAL.  
THE THEATRE OF THE REAL AND THE CONFESSION UNDER CONTROL**

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***Abstract:** In the following paper, I will try to analyze the specific strategies used in the case of Romanian socially engaged fact-based productions in order to install the convention of reality on which the spectatorial response is based in the case of such performances, how these strategies and the convention itself can be manipulated and what kind of consequences this manipulation entails, using the example of a theatre piece which aims at questioning the fetishization of truthfulness.*

***Key words:** documentary theatre; participatory theatre; realism; authenticity; true story device.*

The specific nature of all the practices and techniques generally known as documentary theatre (and for the purpose of this article, I will use this “fuzzy concept”, as Bill Nichols calls it (Nichols, 2001, 20), alternatively with Carol Martin’s “theatre of the real”, which addresses the spectatorial perception when dealing with the final product<sup>1</sup> – while the term documentary focuses on the artistic process per se) is that they are fundamentally predicated upon the idea of truth (one previously unavailable to the audience), to which the theatrical experience gives a direct access. Talking about what she calls “the promise of documentary”, Janelle Reinelt speaks about “a realist epistemology where knowledge is available through sense perception and cognition linked to objects/documents. (...) Spectators come to a theatrical event believing that certain aspects of the performance are directly linked to the reality they are trying to experience or understand. (...) The promise of documentary at this level is to establish a link between spectators’ quest and an absent but acknowledged reality” (Reinelt, 2011, 9-10). In other words, what lies at the core of these practices has less to do with the accuracy of facts in empirical terms and more with a predisposition of the spectators to trust the facts, as presented by a performance, as being real.

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<sup>1</sup> In Martin’s definition, the theatre of the real means that the audiences come with the expectation that “what is represented is real or has a relationship with what is real” (Martin, 2013, 5).



## How to Build a (Fake) Reality Device

*Our Daily Hunger* is a theatre project developed in 2015 by two stage directors, Ana Mărgineanu and Radu Apostol, and Mărgineanu's constant collaborator, playwright Peca Ștefan, at the Replika Theatre Education Center in Bucharest. Open the same year, Replika is an independent theatre linked exclusively to socially-engaged documentary practices, even if the performances they present cover a wide range of approaches to the idea of documentary (historical – such as in *What We Would Be If We Knew*, defined as an “extravaganza” on the topic of Romanian social movements – educational and community-based – such as Radu Apostol's work with children, formally experimental or such as Alexandru Berceanu's *Interf@ce*, which uses neuroscience technology in an approach of mental processes of discrimination etc.).

The public profile of Replika is relevant here because the spectatorial practices are directly influenced by the identity and politics of the space, and the audience adapts their expectations accordingly, overpassing, sometimes, the previous artistic image of those involved (*Interf@ce* is Berceanu's first documentary-based performance, after a decade of staging either canonical plays or contemporary drama). In short, the regular audience at Replika comes there in search of a specific type of performance: fact-based and socio-politically informed.

The press release for *Our Daily Hunger* stated that it was inspired by the life and ideals of a Romanian philanthropist, Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston, that it re-enacted, in the frame of a dinner-performance, one of his projects aimed at “curing our daily hunger” and that it was directly based on some of Bazilescu's uncompleted writings, found during the documentation. The public communication also stressed that the work explores both the nature of poverty in Romania, the relationship between real social change and the artistic process, the conflict between reality and fiction and how we consume it during a performance (the term ‘consume’ clearly hinting at the specific convention of the show as a dinner shared by the spectators).

This presentation follows a rather common structure for the pre-show contextualization of documentary performances in Romania, and the type of information offered (which already sets a decoding frame) is strictly related to the kind of subjects documentary practices deal with locally. With extremely few exceptions (David Schwartz and Mihaela Michailov's *Hot Minds*, on the topic of the Bucharest Mineriad<sup>1</sup> in 1990, is the only one that I can remember without efforts), and contrary to the international practice, the Romanian theatre of the real does not document well-known public events or moments, which a spectator could recognize, being so able to assess the truthfulness of

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<sup>1</sup> On June 13<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> 1990, the anti-governmental sit-ins in the University Square in Bucharest were suppressed by the intervention of coal miners from the Jiu Valley, brought in by the newly elected government, in one of the most violent episodes of post-1989 Eastern Europe. In the Romanian imaginary, the Mineriad opposed the 'democratic' intelligentsia to the violent working class, setting up the frame for a class symbolic confrontation that would mark the following decades.



the facts in a performance by personally relating them to the available public information. By default, the Romanian documentary productions deal with the marginal, the invisible, the socially precarious, they are aiming at giving a voice to the unheard and are traditionally structured on personal testimonies, only exceptionally on other kind of materials or documents<sup>1</sup>. (In the same time, it has to be noticed that all these practices are mostly focused on social issues, like the faith of formerly prosperous mining towns, evictions, sexual exploitation, public perception of homosexuality and trans gendering, racism and discrimination, interethnic conflicts, intergenerational relations, education, etc. – their documenting methods being often shared with sociology<sup>2</sup>, anthropology, or narrative journalism, but without the direct sociological interest that informs what Johnny Saldaña calls ‘ethnotheatre’ – not on documenting the personal, as it happens in biographical or autobiographical theatre<sup>3</sup>, which leaves the audience less space for crediting the subjective and experiential perspective of the artists.)

Because this theatre of the real has a tendency of working either with publicly unknown realities or with a ‘body of evidence’ (Carol Martin) consisting in interviews with private citizens on specific topics, relevant for the artists’ approach, various strategies are employed in order to offer the spectator a background into the documented (hi)stories and the very condition of the performances as fact-based – all of them extra-spectacular. Almost every Romanian fact-based performance avoids any performative strategy within the show for introducing its real-life references (those which come close to such strategies are Gianina Cărbunariu’s *Typographic Capital Letters*, which uses real documents from a surveillance file in video projections, and the final scene in the collective performance *Roșia Montană on a Physical Line and on a Political Line*, co-signed by Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol and Andreea Vălean, scene in which, at some point, the voice of the woman in the original interview overlaps and replaces that of the actress on stage), creating instead a discursive dispositive not within but around the show. In other words, the realist epistemology that Reinelt talks about ends up being entirely based on sense perception and cognition *without* linking them to objects/documents existing *within* the performative frame.

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<sup>1</sup> In two separate occasions, for *X mm of Y km* (2011) and *Typographic Capital Letters* (2014), Gianina Cărbunariu worked with surveillance files of the Romanian communist secret police (Securitate). Bogdan Georgescu’s works (those that aren’t identifiable as community theatre) have press reports as a starting point (that he later develops through personal interviews); his practice uses documented facts as basis for a fictional interpretation of real-life events in larger social and political schemes, something that he shares with Cărbunariu.

<sup>2</sup> In Romania, the method of the life-story interview, intensely promoted by sociologist Zoltán Rostás and his students.

<sup>3</sup> Such approaches are very marginal – see *I Declare on My Own Responsibility* (2011), where actress Alina Șerban collaborated with stage director David Schwartz in devising a piece on Șerban’s own upbringing and challenges as a Roma woman.



This specific situation turns the creative team and the producer into not the main but the only provider of information about the documentary nature of their own production, specifically shaping the expectations of the audience, through press releases, programs, etc., and through post-performance discussions. Unlike the typical artists' talks – which are occasional and focus on the artist's persona or the artistic process –, these post-performance discussions have the tendency of becoming a constant accompanying element, a sort of regulatory set of footnotes for the artistic approach, are embedded in the offered spectatorial experience and are aimed at debating not the artistic, but the social dimension of the performance (something that, depending on the production, places them in the field of the educational or group therapy). In certain situations, these discussions help filling the information gaps and clarifying the documenting process.

It is also worth mentioning that the various *dispositives* used within the theatre of the real in order to install the 'appearance of real' have not benefited a specific interest from the part of researchers<sup>1</sup> and we are here in mainly uncharted territory, maybe because most of the theatrical documentary practices studied follow either the pattern of well-known public events or the autobiographical approach predicated upon a subjective perspective on real facts.

In the case of *Our Daily Hunger*, the 'reality-check' device around the performance included, besides the press releases, a series of interviews made by the artistic team with public figures, from journalists to cultural managers and actors, about their meetings, in the 1990s, with Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston and his philanthropic projects. Posted on YouTube, the interviews made it on other websites, while the press releases were published by a large number of media outlets. Whoever had the curiosity to check Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston online could find traces of his story on video and written materials.

And yet, the whole project is built upon a highly concealed secret: the philanthropist whose life and good deeds are supposedly documented and reenacted in *Our Daily Hunger* never existed in the real world<sup>2</sup>. The interviews and presentation materials posted online had all been generated by the show's team, in order to fabricate a concrete virtual reality for a fictional character of their own making, just like in films, where the list of friends on the character's *Facebook* friends consists in the producer's and other actors' real life *Facebook* names. (It's worth mentioning that the strategy of publicly placing a fictional approach in the field of the documentary also included a pact of complicity with journalists interviewing the artists while the performance was running.) Up until the end – including the almost compulsory post-performance discussion, which begins with the

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<sup>1</sup> With the exception of Alecky Blythe's (Recorded Delivery company) use of earphones in performances, which are considered as introducing an 'alienating effect' that makes the audience conscious of actors reproducing the words of the interviewed real-life persons (see Cantrell, 2011, and Taylor, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For how a similar 'true story device' works for a fictional story in cinema (Brothers Coen's *Fargo*, 1996), see Rowell, 2007, 186 *et passim*.



actors quoting from their grant application for the National Cultural Fund and asking the spectators if they believe that the performance met the objectives set in the application –, the fictional nature of what was presented as a documentary piece is not fully and openly disclosed to the members of the audience, and most of them leave the theatre believing that what they saw was “true”. Taking into consideration that the spectatorship in documentary theatre relies on an unsigned pact of trust between the audience and the artists, such an approach represents a clear form of transgression. Which, in this particular case, doesn’t involve only the spectators but also the two public institutions (the National Cultural Fund and the City of Bucharest) acting as financing bodies that appeared to have become Guinea pigs in an experiment about the increased chances for a socially-engaged project to be financed and the general wooden language of such projects.

Artists might argue that they don’t fully deceive the audience, since in the last scene, that makes the shift towards the discussion, they acknowledge the fabrication (as they do in the booklet accompanying the project, which contain the script, the playwright and the directors’ word) This last scene starts with one of the actors saying: “Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston didn’t exist”, it continues with the other actors admitting at some point that they lied during the evening “in many aspects” and they might have also lied to the financing institutions, then with quotes from their winning application and the question to the audience: “True or false?”. Actually, in the context of the aesthetics of the performance and the structure of this last scene itself, introducing this ambiguity doesn’t count as a full confession. The “Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston didn’t exist” line is followed by another one, saying: “Hunger and poverty have not been eradicated in Romania”, which opens the possibility of reading the potential admission of the fabricated reality as a metaphor (despite all Bazilescu’s efforts, hunger has not been eradicated, which makes it as if he didn’t exist).

The argument for the project that the artistic team offered in their National Cultural Fund application (which was not public and was available only to the administrators of the Fund and the experts committee, but was extensively quoted in the last part of the show) somehow acknowledged, indirectly, their conceptual approach:

“Poverty is easily manipulated by politicians, ideology and dogma can set up very quickly and dependence upon Maecenas figures like Gigi Becali or «local barons» characterizes many subsistence communities. (...) The aim of this initiative is to support and strengthen the critical spirit of the audience so as to avoid future manipulations of petty politics.

Not infrequently, social art of social risks becoming a trend – and even to excuse the artistic accomplishments through the importance of the subject presented. There is an extremely vulnerable line between presenting a subject and exploiting it. Equally, especially for documentary theatre, there is always *the question of the ethics of the approach* (emphasis added). Presenting examples of suffering, one uses and manipulates the suffering. Also, by taking credit for the «text», signing as the «author» – in the case of verbatim theatre



– what is obliterated is the fact that the «authors» are the subjects of the interviews themselves. “<sup>1</sup>

But again, the application itself was part of the experiment.

Leaving aside the much-debated issue of authorship in documentary-based performances (issue of which, contrary to how it appears in the quoted text, has been tackled by the Romanian documentary artists – in community-based performances, the members of the community are credited as co-authors, and collective authorship is common in the theatre of the real), this presentation clearly has a point in positioning the project as a meta-discourse on the risks of overexploiting the ‘promise of documentary’ and turning social theatre productions into self-serving narratives. But it does so by putting on stage a form of overexploitation in its own right.

In fact, the whole performance was a constant challenge to the spectators’ willing to believe – willing which is already higher than in fictional performances (leaving aside my personal experience of a Romanian documentary production shown to foreign spectators unaware of its documentary nature and who accused its implausibility, the higher degree of tolerance for lack of verisimilitude in fact-based productions is proven through examples such as the acclaimed American play *The Exonerated*, which recounts the sometimes extraordinary and unbelievable stories of exonerated death-row inmates). *Our Daily Hunger* uses a participatory convention – a dinner table shared by the members of the audience for Bazilescu Ariston’s commemoration, and successive moments of involving the spectators in group games in order for them to experience the feeling of being a community – to offer the participants a specific emotional experience. Specific, because real. During the several scenes of actual interaction of the actors with the spectators and of spectators between themselves, the *real* substance of this interaction is superposed to the *delegated* reality of the story developing between the actors. A story intentionally designed as a rather cheap melodrama with implausible twists that pushes the limits of the audience’s disposition to believe in its reality – underlining the idea that what we experience directly represents reality, not what we are *said* to be reality (and this structure of melodrama might also be responsible for the metaphorical interpretation of the “Septimiu Bazilescu Ariston never existed” line – as another of many twists that only prepare the audience for something more and more cheesy).

In his text published in the booklet, Radu Apostol explains their experiment through a comparison with a Bulgarian project, in which a group of visual artists designed a project for the opening of a Museum of Contemporary Art in a soon to be closed railway station and announced an inauguration date, with the participation of a famous Paris-based artist. Despite the fact that the Bulgarian Ministry of Culture denied that such an inauguration was to have place, a large number of TV stations and other media outlets came, and the artists used the opportunity in order to present the Ministry with their

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<sup>1</sup> Description and argument for the production, as presented in the project grant application.



project of museum. Of course, Apostol is wrong trying to compare the two experiments. The Bulgarian one is an artistic marketing stunt that uses public promotion of invented facts in order to attract media attention on their own, different, intentions, while *Our Daily Hunger* actively uses what they consider the audience's gullibility in order to prove a point (that reality might be manipulated by artists as it might be by others – media, politicians, etc.) that has never been contested but neither has it been openly discussed, taking advantage of the silent pact of trust between the audience of documentary theatre and its artists, by perverting the very mechanisms on which this pact is based and without turning the spectators into responsible partners of negotiating realities.

The artists appear to be fully aware of these ethical challenges of their project – since they appealed to various sorts of admitting the fictionality of their approach – but they never really fulfilled the promise they initially gave. And what will be the consequences of breaking the pact of true confessions on which the theatre of the real is based by definition?

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