

## Researching the Romanian Theatre Archives: A Look at the Past from a Contemporary Standpoint

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**Abstract:** *The archival research has been historically delayed in Romania which means contemporary researchers have a greater responsibility compared to their peers in other countries to recuperate relevant facts from the past. A consistent body of literature regards archives as structures of power, but they are also meant to be looked at with a personal investment, as books by Jaimie Baron and Arlette Farge argue. Based on their arguments as well as on my personal research experience, I am laying the ground in this article for a proactive attitude meant to bring archival research in the frontline of theatre studies in Romania. I chose the “how to” format, with questions and answers for this article, in order to encourage readers to undertake their own research as this is the most appropriate way to draw theoretical conclusions about this process and compare them to the ones already acknowledged in this field.*

**Keywords:** *theatre; archives; interpretation; history; research.*

### 1. Stating the obvious

Let me start by stating the obvious: Romanian theatre history – like any theatre history – is a complex body of materials which needs to be looked at from different angles, including a minorities’ approach, an ideological analysis, as well as a historically contextualized Eastern European analysis. It pains me to write about the lack of care for the archives in Romania, to say how few attempts of serious archival research we can list, or to mention again the nonexistence of an Institute or Center for the Study of Theatre History in Romania, unlike in the Eastern European countries around us. While almost all the countries in the former Soviet bloc have founded such institutes or research centers, such as the Theatre Institute “Zbigniew Raszewski” and Cricoteka – The Center of Documentation of the Art of Tadeusz Kantor in Poland, the Theatre Institute in Slovenia, the Theatre Institute in the Slovakian Republic, the Meyerhold Centre in Moscow and the Hungarian Theatre Museum and Institute in Budapest, Romanian theatre has not yet arrived to the same wisdom.

There are researchers in Romania too who are conducting their own well-documented research using theatre archives – to mention only the ongoing research Professor Miruna Runcan is conducting about the critical discourse in the communist regime –, which has resulted in two volumes published until now with the third to come out soon. But there is a



huge need of in-depth research in Romanian theatre history, and institutionally speaking we are still in the phase of barely acknowledging the importance of discovering and preserving documents and artefacts which can help us reconstruct a relevant and nuanced image of the past of our theatre. The Museum of National Theatre hosted in the new building of the National Theatre in Bucharest is closed for more than five years and another rich collection dedicated to the history of Romanian theatre was included under the umbrella of the Literature Museum in Iasi, with not enough space and personnel to take care of it, not to mention conducting research and sharing it with the public.

The Romanian paradox – if we want to call it like this – is that we like living in the past, praising the past and being nostalgic about it but we do not visit it with scientific methods, we do not preserve its documents and materials so that later we could analyze them and we do not research the past properly, as if for fear not to lose our illusions about it. One notorious example: Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, a famous actress and theatre manager between the world wars and in the first decades of the communist regime is still given as an example today as an illustrious theatre manager without mentioning her collaboration with the communist regime. Bulandra has become a statue and only celebration seems to fit her, even if the ambiguity of her profile is the most interesting thing about her. This explains, in fact, her success especially in the first years of the communist regime.

The historical delay Romanian society has been dragging on from the 1990s, after decades of cultural isolation is a huge burden on the shoulders of contemporary theatre researchers. There is already a consistent body of literature regarding the risk of any interpretation, one of those risks being the so called “archive effect” (Baron 2014) – how we can manipulate the past so that it would fit to our preconceptions or personal agendas. But there are also means of keeping us as true as possible to the findings we make, without trying to force them into a particular demonstration. As we need all the support we can get from our fellow researchers with more experience than we have, I tried to find it in their writings in order to lay the ground for this article.

## **2. The power of the archives**

In the past 50 years, the very notion of “history” has undergone a transformation and our understanding of our relationship to the past has changed. To understand these transformations, it is helpful to go back to what has been said and written about the concept of the archive by some of the most important thinkers of our time, starting with Foucault.

Rather than viewing the archive as a repository of unmediated evidence about the past, Foucault saw it as a particular structure of power in which particular kinds of documents are kept in a particular order, thereby delimiting the possibilities of what may be said about the documents and, indeed, of knowledge itself.

Baron 2014, 2–3



In other words, whoever discovers an archive first and comes out of it with a narrative based on documents and materials in that archive is the one controlling the narrative about a particular theme.

Derrida extended this line of thinking in his own discussion about “archive fever: “He writes about the ways that archives are structured according to the logics of power that determine which objects are preserved, stored, and revered and which are excluded, thereby creating the past rather than simply preserving it” (Baron, 2014, 3).

Seen from this particular angle, the researcher can be an artist itself, as he/she has the possibility to recreate the past, to reinterpret and reimagine it according to his/her own vision and understanding. Derrida’s standpoint is reinforced by the principles of New Historicism, a literary theory working on the premise that history can be better understood through literature, as there is no single, universal history but rather many different histories. This is a theory I embrace, as I actually conceived and curated a project titled *Microhistory*,<sup>1</sup> which gives a platform to many different voices of Romanian citizens whose experiences in the tormented Romanian society in the past thirty years are more than relevant for *the history* of this country.

Moving on from Foucault and Derrida, Baron discusses the particularities of the archives connected to films, but many of his conclusions about film archives can be applied to any kind of archives as they regard the relationship of the researcher and the archival material in general. His book discusses a couple of challenges such as the excess and inexhaustibility of the archive – as there are always too many documents and too many possible ways of reading them – and the uncertainty of the archives, as “the ideas of the location, provenance, and authority of an archive have become increasingly uncertain as online digital archives are constituted and accessed not only by institutions but also by individuals and groups all over the globe” (Baron 2014, 7). This is a way to compare the advantages and disadvantages of the “official archive” and the “the informal archive”, such as a private archive, for example.

Speaking from experience, I often found an informal archive much more interesting than an official one, as it usually comes with a story, an explanation about why an object or a document has been preserved by a particular person. The value of these personal objects or documents is given by specific moments to which they are connected. A piece of paper or a note, a drawing, a clipping from the press – they all come with a story connected to them, which makes them more significant, not only for the owner of the archive, but also for the researcher and for the audience. This is what makes things personal.

This is also why it can be tempting to use archival material to produce a sense of the “presence” of history rather than its meaning. Baron gives the example of documentary

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<sup>1</sup> Available online with English surtitles at [www.microistoria.ro](http://www.microistoria.ro)



director Ken Burns’ using archival footage from a context to illustrate another, in order to create the feeling that you can *see history* reenacted.<sup>2</sup> But there is a danger in this: “I suggest that this may be either a »reactionary« nostalgia that seeks to restore an idealized past that never existed or a »reflective« nostalgia – a self-conscious awareness of the longing that points to the gaps in the archive and informs the relationship between past and present” (Baron 2014, 13).

On the other hand, a documentary production like *Tipographic Majuscul* (Uppercase Print, 2020) by Radu Jude made from raw footage selected from the archive of the Romanian Public Television bares no nostalgia, yet it can give you the feeling that you *see history* as it was. It is a matter of perception: “I am calling for a reconceptualization of the appropriation film as not merely the manner and matter of the text but also – and significantly – a matter of reception, dependent on the effects the film produces, namely, the archive effect” (Baron 2014, 9).

A writer who also believed in the power of personal histories is Arlette Farge, who is actually connected to Michel Foucault, as they authored a book together (*Disorderly Families: Infamous Letters from the Bastille Archives*, 1982) based on their common interest in what prison, years of isolation and punishment can do to people. One can observe that this a research still relevant both for those who analyze the effects of living under the communist regime in the countries of the former Soviet bloc and to those who will soon analyze the effects of the recent global lockdown on people.

In her book *The Allure of the Archives* (originally published as *Le Goût de l’archive* in 1989) Arlette Farge traces her own feelings while researching in the archives with a very personal approach. While describing these feelings in detail, with personal information, she also manages to pass on important ideas about the unique position in which a person accessing an archive finds herself: about the power and the fragility of his/her position, the responsibility and at the same time the enjoyment that one feels in discovering details from the past and making connections between them. “The physical pleasure of finding a trace of the past is succeeded by doubt mixed with the powerless feeling of not knowing what to do with it” (Farge 2013, 11).

Farge argues that the doubts the researcher is confronted with are very important parts of the research process: we need them to remain aware of the responsibility incumbent on them. “You feel both the power of the contents of the archive and the impossibility of deciphering them. You realize that it is an illusion to imagine that one could ever actually reconstruct the past” (Farge 2013, 14).

Both Baron and Farge reveal that there is a lot of frustration involved in the process of researching a particular archive, in the constant sense of having to discover another document or another file which can prove you are right or wrong, but there is also a lot more than that:

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<sup>2</sup> A relevant example is the seven-part, more than thirteen-hour-long documentary series *The Roosevelts: An Intimate History* (2014).



Although the archive and its contents are constantly changing, at any given instant the archive is static, waiting for someone to enter and appropriate particular documents and put them into motion, giving them a direction or an intentionality in order to articulate some idea about our relationship to the historical past. [...] The freedom to continually use and reuse archival documents means that we will never determine a stable, objective truth about the past, but it is that freedom that makes the archive a site not only of repression and limitation but also of possibility.

Baron 2013, 13

I find many of the conclusions of the above-mentioned two writers to be true based on my own experience in researching the archives of Romanian theatres, and that is why I will continue to discuss a selection of these archival research projects and list some of the questions generated during the process. Some of the answers are listed too, but I believe the questions are always much more important.

### **3. A “how to” guide in three steps based on my personal experience in working in the archives**

(a) *How to make a documentary about Romanian theatre history: From Comedia Remix<sup>3</sup> to Theatre as Resistance*

*Comedia Remix* (2015) was a project consisting of an exhibition in the lobbies of the Comedia Theatre in Bucharest, a bilingual album documenting the subject and a documentary film. In the film we used fragments from the video interviews we made during documenting the project, archival footage from the Romanian Public Television’s archive, photos and footage from a celebration Gala, gathering all the actors and directors connected to the history of the Comedia Theatre and still alive in 2015.

In selecting the material and telling a story with it, we were confronted with questions of an ethical nature, which I am going to discuss and give a possible answer.

How to fill in the information gaps after decades of distorted reports or public statements made for the sheer sake of propaganda? As “information gaps task” is actually a teaching method, the answer to this question is already given to us. We need as many sources as possible and we can reach them through interviews, followed by a thorough process of comparing official archival material with people’s memories.

How to find out something real in the interviews with people trying to cover up for their ambivalent past? We should interview at least two people about the same event and make sure they took part in it in some way, then confront the declarations with written documents (articles, official acts, calendars, etc.). We need to be careful as personal memories are sometimes inexact and there is a lot one can read between the lines of the official materials of the time.

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<sup>3</sup> See [https://vimeo.com/133788332\\_](https://vimeo.com/133788332_)



How to make sure you do not miss the most relevant literature on history developments, theatre movements, philosophy, sociology, anthropology and so on – just to make sure you really interpret what you discover in the archives from a contemporary standpoint. There is only one answer to this: read, read, read!

My second example is the archival research project I have been working on since 2018, *Theatre as Resistance*,<sup>4</sup> produced in the frame of Timisoara 2021 (now 2023). The plan is to wrap up the project in 2021 with a multimedia exhibition and another documentary about theatre history. Currently we have a series of edited videos, as a result of our documenting process that one can see on the YouTube channel of the project<sup>5</sup>. We have also created a series of fanzines, popular instruments for sharing the results of our research, which are also affiliated to a European project, Heritage Contact Zone.<sup>6</sup> All the materials we gathered, including the interviews, are compared to official documents so that we can establish the frame of historical events. But one of the most important parts is the texture of feelings and impressions people had while making theatre under the eye of the totalitarian regime and this is something we can only recover from their personal memories.

There are many conflicted areas we are stepping on with this new research and we still do not have a clear answer to the question, “Was theatre a form of resistance in communist Romania?”. But as I have already stated, the question is more important than the answer.

We are still in the process of choosing a format for the new documentary and finding the best way to share our findings with the world, making sure that the documentary is entertaining enough for people to watch and that it is a valuable contribution to the history of Romanian theatre at the same time.

*(b) How to write A history...*

While I was writing *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism. Children of a Restless Time* (Routledge, 2020), I had to answer myself some basic questions. Is this THE history of Romanian theatre in the past thirty years? Is my take on it the only possible one? And, of course, the answer was *no*. There are many ways to tell the same story, and many stories to be added to *the* history. That is why I called my book *A History...*, meaning “the history of Romanian theatre as I see it, as I have experienced it, as I have been able to understand it from within”, because these thirty years coincide partially with my own career as theatre critic and performing arts curator.

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<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.facebook.com/theaterasresistance/>.

<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCA0SsMwThVo97fykPEsiwqw>.

<sup>6</sup> You can read about the project and download the fanzines from <http://heritagecontactzone.com/timisoara/>.



I cannot claim and will not claim that I am an objective witness, as I have been involved in the most important developments of Romanian theatre in the past 25 years. As a journalist and theatre critic I have often taken sides and supported the new generations of Romanian theatre, so any pretense of objectivity would be dishonest on my part. So, I have decided to be totally open about it and not be afraid of writing this book from a personal point of view, giving it a feel of authenticity, which proved to be the most interesting part for my editor at Routledge. She would have liked me to insist even more on the personal take, to make history even more subjective. The personal is more and more valued today in all artistic endeavors, including the academic ones, which used to reject it. We shouldn't be afraid to be personal in our research, as Arlette Forge insisted in her book. And if Foucault was right, I can say that I took the power in my hands by writing this history – a history of Romanian theatre – and by controlling the narrative in accord to my own point of view based on the public archives and on my personal memory as a direct witness.

But, of course, “my history” should be completed with a history of Romanian theatre from the point of view of Hungarian and German and Jewish artists working on Romanian stages, as they all have been and still are essential parts of this theatre. There can also be a history of institutionalized Romanian theatre, as well as one of the independent Romanian theatre, or even a history of Romanian theatre as seen in the archives of the Securitate – I am mentioning it because this is my current research on Romanian theatre history. All of these approaches are legitimate, and each can result in a valid contribution and they would certainly make *the history* of Romanian theatre more complete and nuanced.

Today, it is not possible to invest in only one history, in a unique approach on such a vast and fragmented subject any more. Investigating theatre archives from a contemporary point of view means that we need to read all information from our contemporary point of view, taking into account all we know today, not only from a historical angle, but also from a socio-political angle and it also means that we need to include the private alongside the public viewpoint.

*(c) How to make a dictionary – or sharing the research online*

Arlette Farge said in an interview that a historian is not the one accessing the documents, but the one who finds a good way of sharing them with others, with the public.<sup>7</sup> There is more than one way to share the results of your research in theatre history. You can, of course, write a book, which is a rather solitary enterprise (even if it is a collective volume). You can also make a documentary, which involves a small team agreeing on what needs to be kept and left aside from everything that has been gathered/recorded in a specific research. And there is also the possibility of creating an archive from the

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Arlette Farge: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdz7Pscm0A4>.



archives, with a bigger team and a format meant to empower the user to make his/her own discoveries.

I have recently coordinated the first attempt of creating an online resource platform in Romania titled *The Multimedia Dictionary of Romanian Theatre*<sup>8</sup> and together with a team of more than 20 colleagues specialized in Romanian theatre and a good number of students<sup>9</sup> we have reflected upon these issues:

Q1. How to write today about artists working in such a tensioned socio-political context as the communist regime?

Q2. How to explain to contemporary audiences, starting with students of theatre departments – with which we were working for the Dictionary – what powers were exactly at work in a totalitarian regime? Not to mention that Romanian communism had changed faces over almost half a century, and it was not the same in the 1950’s and in the 1980’s.<sup>10</sup>

Q3. How to recover documents and artefacts useful to reconstruct the context in the current culture, which does not preserve things or ascribe value to old things?

It is worth mentioning here that Romanian culture has been focused in the last three decades on “the new”, crediting the new, shiny and expensive objects over the old ones. An example from my personal memories can illuminate how this trend affected theatre.

As a journalist I had the chance to interview many people over time, among them many Romanian theatre managers. These interviews mostly took place in their offices. I remember interviewing director Ștefan Iordănescu when he ran Bulandra, one of the most important historical theatres in Bucharest and then, after no more than a year I was interviewing the next manager, Alexandru Darie, in the same office. At my first visit I was impressed to see the place preserved as it was in the times of Lucia Sturdza Bulandra: the same furniture and objects, paintings and portraits of the famous actress on the walls, all a bit too dusty perhaps but really impressive. After only one year I did not recognize the place. As soon as Alexandru Darie became manager, he made sure he renovated Lucia Sturdza Bulandra’s office and he used the most cutting-edge furniture, only glass and steel, a very cold, minimalist design. The place resembled an expensive attorney’s office. When I asked him, what happened to all the things he removed, the new manager bluntly answered: “We throw them away, they were old!”

Coming back to the online Dictionary, in order to answer the above-mentioned questions we designed a frame for all the entries in the *Multimedia Dictionary of Romanian*

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<sup>8</sup> See [www.dmr.ro](http://www.dmr.ro), launched in June 2020.

<sup>9</sup> See <https://www.dmr.ro/echipa/>

<sup>10</sup> We decided to start with the period between 1960 and 1989, with the intention of covering the post-1990 period in the second phase of the project.





*Theatre* which gives a lot of information to the readers so that they can have their own interpretation based on the materials we included: documents, posters, photos, videos (if available), reviews, etc. Besides these, we also included in each entry an article written by a specialist, representing his/her view on the career and contribution of a specific artist to Romanian theatre history, or on a particular theatre production, all with a rich bibliography at the end.

For such a research project, I believe, a balance concerning the researchers' age is highly advisable, since some of us were still children in the times we are writing about and the students were, of course, not even born. We need to recontextualize the existent information, but it is better if we mix different points of view, at least some of them with a direct witness quality.

It does not have to be the only interpretation and we certainly hope that the *Multimedia Dictionary of Romanian Theatre* will give food for thought to many other researchers. We see it as just a starting point, but nevertheless a very alive one, sometimes controversial and for sure very engaged in contemporary discussions about theatre. With this project we are looking at the past of the Romanian theatre with a contemporary eye.

#### **4. György Harag in the Multimedia Dictionary of Romanian Theatre**

In our Dictionary director György Harag has his own place, along other Hungarian artists working in Romanian theatre who are appreciated for their contribution to the development of the local scene. And the local scene is a multicultural one, especially in the north of Romania, where history has brought together different ethnicities and their coexistence has added layers of new ideas and inspiration. Here, theatre is richer than elsewhere in the country, thanks to multicultural vibrations.

Because of my age, I did not see Harag's productions on stage, so I only know them from my readings and from the scarce video fragments I have found. Reconstructing a theatre production from documents, photos and short video fragments is like playing to be a detective – very interesting if you're passionate about it, sometimes frustrating because not everything makes sense or you cannot really imagine how a particular production really looked or felt – but all in all it is an amazing endeavor.

As far as the reception of Harag's work is concerned, I can bear witness how much he was and is still revered by Romanian theatre people and intellectuals. Harag was touched by the magic realism cultivated by the generation of the Retheatricalization movement in Romania and, even if he lived and worked mostly in Transylvania, he was a true cosmopolitan, a universal artist.

I remember reading in my twenties one of the most appreciated cultural magazines in Romania – *Secolul 20* (20<sup>st</sup> century) – which included a special dossier titled *Harag, a great director* and dedicated to *The Cherry Orchard*, the last production he staged at the National Theatre in Târgu-Mureş just before his death at the age of 60 (*Secolul 20*, 1985, 295–301). The articles were written by people I admired most at that time – Luci-



an Pintilie, Alexandru Paleologu, Doina Levița – and they were covering the opening of this production as a truly special event, not only for theatre, but for Romanian culture as a whole. There was also a selection of images of the set-design created by Romulus Feneș for this production and they seemed like a message from another world. Doina Levița remembered Harag's productions she worked in with detailed notes on the working process, Alexandru Paleologu confessed that *The Cherry Orchard* was the first and only Harag production he saw and named it "a treatise on melancholy" (Ibid, 298). Director Lucian Pintilie declared himself an admirer of György Harag, whose work he knew well for many years: "Harag – whom I did not know personally – was so close to me that he meant the triumph, without risk, of my own hypothesis, and even more, he was for me *the unique path*, my own crossing from speechlessness to speaking, from blindness to clarity. He was the first and one of the only masters I have ever had." (Ibid, 295).

Reading about Harag's *The Cherry Orchard* in the *Secolul 20* magazine was the first time that I realized (as a young journalist) Harag's impact on a Romanian theatrical movement, but later I found that the traces he left are still visible in both Hungarian and Romanian theatres in Romania. Besides his famous final production, there are many others that left consistent traces in Romanian theatre. In 1977, theatre critic Mira Iosif wrote an article in *Theatrul*, the only specialized magazine dedicated to theatre at that time, about Harag's production of András Sütő's play *The Palm Sunday of a Horse Dealer*, co-directed by András Hunyadi, praising "the perfect collective creation". Ludmila Patlanjoglu assisted in 1984 at the rehearsals of Suhovo-Kobelin's *The Process* at Comedy Theatre in Bucharest and interviewed Harag extensively about it (Patlanjoglu, 1985). In the collection of the *Teatrul* magazine<sup>11</sup> the researcher can discover that Harag's productions were often in the focus of Romanian critics as guaranteed theatre events.

For a more contemporary point of view regarding Harag's work in the theatre, I invite the reader to our *Multimedia Dictionary of Romanian Theatre* where he/she can find a portrait of the great director, written by Anikó Varga with many details about his productions.<sup>12</sup>

I am sure there will be more in-depth analysis about this director's work in the future as Hungarian artists form a very consistent part of the recent history of Romanian theatre and their contribution to the aesthetic development of the theatre in this part of the world has yet to be thoroughly analyzed.

One can always start with a visit at the archives!

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<sup>11</sup> The collection is digitized and available online at <http://www.cimec.ro/teatre/revista/default.htm>.

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.dmtr.ro/artist/harag-gyorgy/>.



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