

# The Anatomy of Space – András Both's Vision about Theatricality<sup>1</sup>

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## **BOTH András**

**Abstract:** *András Both shares insights and experiences from his theatrical journey. He reflects on creating his artistic identity in Romania, then on the challenges of rebuilding this, after emigrating and navigating cultural shifts. The renowned designer underlines the role of seizing the given chance and collaboration in his success, highlighting how opportunities are interconnected. He emphasizes the significance of working with talented colleagues, like directors, actors and costume designers, and the influence of other great artists in shaping his path. The importance of immersive preparation, akin to Stanislavski's approach, is highlighted, along with the value of rituals in the act of artistic creation. He also contemplates the mysterious alchemy of theater and its power to transform ideas into tangible, resonant productions. Amidst musings on artistic growth, he contemplates the essence of creativity, the vitality of unconventional thinking, and reveals his plans of presenting his works on an exhibition.*

**Key words:** *theatre, set design, artistic journey, creative process, theatricality.*

I'm going to talk about how and where inspiration is originating or coming from, and about my practical experience in making theatre. Also, about my professional life and experience, as the center line around which my life evolved was designing.

I had the good fortune and the chance to work with some really brilliant directors, which for any designer is the best thing that he/she can wish for. As you know, theatre is a delicate and very difficult medium, where everything has to work; otherwise, it just drowns into failure and wishful thinking. On the other hand, I have been teaching theatre all my life. Teaching came out of my hands-on experiences of designing, also very much informed by my actual work and endless conversations with directors that I happened to be working with.

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General know-how, information, knowledge, continuous learning obviously is very important, but it was always that additional step in making those ideas work on stage that ultimately mattered, how the alchemy of this miracle called theatre, happens.

As soon as I graduated in Bucharest, I ended up working at the TV studios. Back then, we were assigned a job and made to work there for three years. Being a student in Bucharest from 1970 to '76 obviously gave me the extraordinary opportunity to see exceptional theatre performances.

There were several influences that I can remember. First, it was the theatre that was happening in this city, (Targu Mures) where I was born, with productions directed by György Harag and others, shows that I could see as a young, hopeful teenager who wanted to get into the arts. Another major influence worth mentioning was Pál Nagy, an exceptional teacher and a good friend. Later, in the early 70's after moving to Bucharest, I had the chance to see theatre of the highest artistic caliber, productions like *Leonce și Leana* [Leonce and Lena], by Liviu Ciulei, *Nepotul lui Rameau* [Rameau's Nephew], by David Esrig and Lucian Pintilie's *D'ale carnavalului* [Only During a Carnival], just to mention a few.

By the mid-seventies, many of these productions were removed and marginalized by the communist censorship, some of the directors had left Romania, moved to France, Germany and the USA. In a way, that was the reason why I also ended up in the U.S, years later.

On the other hand, making theatre—since the subject is “theatricalization” and how to rethink theatre—or the act of making theatre is about rethinking theatre all the time. So, to me, “theatrical” is something that evolves constantly. I do not know of any kind of prescription or recipe of how the creative act should be. It's the creative energy of the moment that counts, at that time, with those actors, those designers, and with that specific director. Obviously, the director holds the key as he/she makes the final decisions.

So, I can say with absolute conviction that the conversations, the endless questionings, the give and take, the discovery process are/were the most interesting part of any collaboration or professional friendship that I happened to be involved with. Questions like, how do you start? what do you do next? You read the script, you may have countless conversations with the directors, and then what? What happens after that and how the actual work begins?

I would also like to mention that what influenced me greatly, as a constant source, was coming from visual arts, photography, design and architecture. Just to mention a few, such as Marcell Duchamp, Joseph Cornell, Frank Gary, Francis Bacon, Edward Kienholz, etc.

Designing or being creative in general, can be summed up as rediscovering the creative act in the act of making. Practicing design, exploring and learning, teaching and understanding, is the endless circle in which I've been living for forty-plus years.



Interminable questionings, productive exchanges, including conflicting views and arguments, all can generate positive results, and are very necessary.

As I mentioned, as a young designer, just out of the university, I had the chance to design the sets for a student show (*As You Like It*) at IATC. There I met Cătălina Buzoianu who saw my work and asked me to design the sets for an upcoming production of *Romeo and Juliet* she was directing for the International Theatre Festival in Edinburgh (the costumes were designed by Lia Mantoc). This was the start of an extraordinary adventure that continued with four more outstanding productions and the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest. Such memorable plays as *Să îmbrăcăm pe cei goi* [To Dress the Naked] by L. Pirandello, *The Master and Margarita* by M. Bulgakov and *Nu sânt Turnul Eiffel* [I Am Not the Eiffel Tower] by E. Oproiu, came one after the other. All this was happening during the most depressing and darkest times of dictatorship. Also, one of the best times of my professional life.

It would be a legitimate question to ask why some of the best theatre happened during some of the worst and hopeless of times?

Working with Cătălina was intoxicating (in the best sense of the word). She would throw at you impossible ideas that defied common sense and even gravitation, just to provoke a process of different reactions and thinking. We would meet and brainstorm. I would work and try to find practical, feasible solutions by often courting and inviting the impossible. She never spoke in concrete visual terms—which I actually liked—since she would leave it entirely up to me to invent my own response, my own solution for the space.

When we worked on *The Master and Margarita*, for example, the only thing she told me at a certain point was: “Well, imagine sliding mirrors that are reflecting into each other creating a multiplied endless world, and that was it. Then it was up to me to find the specifics and steer the conversation to precise, grounded, practical and usable three-dimensional ideas.

At the beginning, our discussions were somewhat intriguing, rambling, but nevertheless I loved them. She trusted me, which was very reassuring. I would constantly relate and return to the text just to also depart from it, looking for solutions in the most unlikely places. In the case of *The Master and Margarita*, Ivan’s hallucinations offered the key for my designs. Different spaces and location fading into each other at different times, from a street in Moscow to Pontius Pilate and Jesus, from hellish to banality and then back, to the leitmotif of the psychic asylum.

It was this unusual ability about Cătălina to use a given space in surprising ways, succeeding to startle even me about what potential lies in the set/space that I would have never thought of, even though I designed it.

She had an idiosyncratic capacity to make use of everything hidden, come up with interesting unpredictable *mise-en-scène* ideas. Our professional friendship was really symbiotic, a give and take in the best sense of the word. She would call you at three



o'clock in the morning, because she had an idea. It was this dose of creative urge and "insanity" that made working with her a unique addiction. We hardly had time for anything else.

I would start from found objects, paper models, and building model fragments early on. Sketches were only for my own use and they were way too abstract scribbles for anybody but myself to understand. She clearly didn't understand my sketches, I realized that immediately that it was a pointless exercise to show them to her, but very important to me. Models are, in general, a very good approximation of the real space, but with Cătălina models were only an approximation as the final understanding started with the actual set, the physical "on-stage" work.

An interesting example of collaboration was on Pirandello's *Să îmbrăcăm pe cei goi*. Her initial idea was a minimalist stage with reality fragments and suggestions in a Brechtian sense, ways in which Pirandello was staged safely before. My early impulses after reading the play were—in a visual sense—in a completely different direction. The model I built was closer to a Fellinian world. A rich, decadent, sexually charged, lush environment.

As a reference I could mention Fellini's *Rome* and *Amarcord*. Departing from the text and also the subtext of the play, what I proposed as set became a solid counterpoint that Cătălina had surprisingly embraced. It was a sign of her capacity to change direction and absorb unusual, contrasting ideas and really work together with us, and I include here the costume designer Lia Mantoc.

So, we ended up with completely different designs, a radical departure from what was intended at the beginning.

She asked to spend several days with the set model, would go away and re-think the *mis-en-scène* relative to the new special realities. A unique capacity that I have never experienced with any other director, not to this extensiveness, in any case.

So, the whole project started evolving. Of course, I would work with her, and re-size, re-think everything again. This was the most revealing, interesting and unpredictable process for me. An experience of a lifetime that shaped me in a major way.

The results were extraordinary because working with somebody who was as talented as she was also helped me to give my best and become who I am today as a designer.

Obviously, from my early years and till today, there have been other directors that I have worked with. A famous example at hand would be Lucian Pintilie, with whom I got to the US and worked with at The Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis. He called me from Paris, at that point I was working/designing in Israel after I had left Romania in 1983.

My work with him was not that different. He said two-three words over the phone about the play, (*The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter), nothing more, and then he gave me a hint: "Do you know this American artist, Edward Kienholz?" Kienholz just happened to be one of my favorite American artists.



References were made about his collage-montages and his large-scale environmental work. He was hinting to the inner fear, the oppressive psychological manipulation, about the visualization without being descriptive, and the anatomy of terror present throughout the text.

All this happened in the most blatant in-your-face kitschy environment, typical otherwise for lower British middle-class. It was one of my constant obsessions to observe, depict and collect images, as fragment of reality, constantly having a camera on me and taking pictures of everything I found interesting.

Many years later, working with Gábor Tompa at the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, we were staying together in a rented house, a true masterpiece of wallpapers extravaganza of the worst “bad taste” possible, with a unique genius, that reminded me of my *The Birthday Party* set, and of Lucian Pintilie’s comments “Think about the monstrous hiding behind apparent normalcy”.

As a designer I was never interested in “illustration” believing that good design is always running parallel with the text, confronting and enhancing it by visually commenting and never illustrating or imitating reality. This was true about everything I designed.

Once a concept is clarified, what comes next?

Creating/inventing the “set” the dramatic space?

What is the solution finding process?

How do you design and find your own voice?

What is the process?

The visuals should not be imitating what we already know from the text, but rather running in a parallel line with the requirements of the text.

The best analogy that I could think of would be from music. Just think about a quartet in which every instrument is playing a different tune, and what is important is the final result. Consequently, I like visual solutions that are dissonant. A dissonant dramatic space enhances the message of the text. I remember in my youth watching Italian neorealist movies such as, for example, *The Red Desert* by Michelangelo Antonioni’s in which Monica Vitti hardly talks. Some of the darkest, most depressing moments were juxtaposed with the most beautiful paradise-like locations. And because of that contrast, somehow the tension between the two had enhanced the dramatic result, which to me is always the most important.

Another aspect of the work with directors is allowing and being open to accidental random discoveries that happen during work. The actual work on stage always allows for unforeseen ideas or accidents. For me this is/was a territory where some of the best ideas were born.

Francis Bacon, the famous painter, one of my all-time favorite artists talks extensively about the “accidental”. Meaning, that when you work, paint, direct, etc, in



the act of making you discover always new ideas, new possibilities relative to the artistic medium. Obviously, the theater is “par-excellence” a perfect medium for constant brainstorming. Sometimes comments, interesting observations coming from any directions, from anyone, can open up new, endless venues for discovery and experimentation.

So, what is theatricalization? Or what is the solution finding process and its limits?

I could give you two more recent examples. The first one with Gábor Tompa, when we started thinking about our latest version of *Hamlet*, just two years ago. But how do you take on *Hamlet*? How do you open it up, and how do you approach it in a relevant way that speaks to us today?

I started playing with ideas in my head, looked at lots of photos I took of disaffected LA locations, etc. At a certain point he sent me pictures of isolated science centers in South Pole. Which was an all-white, snowy picture with a bright-colored constructions in the middle of a desolate endless space.

What he was suggesting was one of the scientific centers on a completely white surface, a red plastic house on legs, in isolation. That was where we started.

Hamlet is isolating himself. He had this view of loner, a recluse isolating himself behind books. That’s how he also directed it, which for me was a real challenge.

How do you depart from here? I used a huge plastic translucent screen, that ran all the way into the audience, over the orchestra pit, as wide and as big as it was possible. A hint, think about Japanese minimalism. This is where we started, then I spent a lot of time designing the several versions of the cabin/library structure. A bright red structure, a partially transparent structure loaded with books.

Talking about how I work and research, look for sources for my designs, and to understand where I am coming from, I should mention *Three Sisters*, also directed by Gábor Tompa. Having a well-defined aesthetic and method of approaching the subject by distancing myself from it, think about the dissonance I mentioned before, avoiding illustration by any means possible, is central to my work.

I had an interesting book by an American photographer, Robert Polidori, about Havana. You could see old Havana houses, which were in a romantic decay after sixty years of neglect. Talking about a Duchampian search and find, just like his ready-mades these also are found reality-fragments. This photo, by Polidori apparently has nothing to do with Chekhov, or with any kind of research about Russia, but it had everything to do with this staging, as inspiration and starting point, for me as well as for Gábor. This method of search for ideas was always the way to go for me, seeking an interesting adventures design, or designing as a way of life.

Good directors understand design as good designers understand directing.

This is just normal and the only way I can look at theatre making. There are some directors like Liviu Ciulei or Robert Wilson who direct and also design their own



shows. This is probably ideal, although the conversations and arguments with another person are/were extremely rewarding for my work.

Let me return to the Polidori photography. On the right side there was an opening, a doorway, and another door, and more doors along the same axis, and at the very end there was a bicycle. We both loved this image of this lonely bicycle we instinctively knew that we should find a reason to use it in the production. We just agonized over it. The idea/solution just came about during a rehearsal on the stage. At the final scene parts of the set opened up, and the end of the play, the Russian army arrives. This idea was the result of a casual random conversation. How about they arrived on bicycles then? When the set opened up, there are rows of bicycles on different levels in profile, visible at the back of the stage, soldiers with wings pedaling away on the bicycles. A static surreal image.

This type of “accident” like in *Hamlet* or like here with *Three Sisters*, should give an insight into the ways/methods I work with theatrical language. Till today, when I teach or design, I always like to have some casual crazy adventure as intellectual angle. Going in the opposite direction has become a good reason to return enriched. Allowing inquiry and inspection, accidents, these happy collisions with ideas, with new biases, with the script, with the director, this type of give and take, and productive conversation are the essence of my work.

It goes without saying that an essential element is trust in each other as artists.

For me, how to read theatrical lines and how to do theater generally, the act of making theater and this whole alchemy, the mystery of it, is my *raison d'être*.

Obviously, I had other kinds of experiences, luckily not too many, with directors with whom I got along perfectly at the beginning, and then, when the set was on the stage, they could not handle it for some unexplainable reason. You cannot have an abstract and visually strong set, and then panic and direct a realistic play in it.

There is no such thing as great design for a mediocre or bad production. Either everything works in it, and I mean everything, or nothing and then we have a failure.

The process is delicate and very difficult. Like any teamwork, when a large number of people are working together, like instruments in an orchestra, where every detail is important and part of a “body” which is the spectacle.

We all know that great theatre in history always was/is a climactic moment where incredible people of exceptional talent congregated. Such was The Schaubühne in Berlin, Teatrul Mic and Teatrul Bulandra in Bucharest, The Royal Shakespeare Company, Grotowski’s Laboratory Theatre in Opole and Wroclaw, and countless more.

During those years of intoxicating work, I designed four productions working with Cătălina Buzoianu and another three with Dragoș Galgoțiu at the same time. We lived immersed in intense non-stop work in a never-ending drunkenness. Five years of reading, of arguing, of listening to music, of constantly working, and of rarely sleeping



at night. All this during the most difficult and miserable times that marked the beginning of the end of the communist regime.

We were young, deeply frustrated, nevertheless, I must admit, that it was the best time of my life of living intensely with belief and purpose.

What is the magic of making theatre or “art” as a way of life? What is the alchemy of the theatre, to me, it is still a mystery. I know it when I see it happen.

I’ve taught all my life. It started in Bucharest early on. Even my teaching was informed by the conversations with the directors, conversation during the work. I can only teach what I do and what I have intimately experienced. It is a way of life to me.

When we were in Minneapolis with Lucian Pintilie, we would always go out to the restaurants, we had endless discussions, dissecting everything over glasses of wine. Meandering conversations where one idea or argument brings the other, and there are no short-cuts. You have to go from A to B to C to discover what F or G is, so it’s no easy way, and the adventure of re-thinking never ends. To reach high to level in your designs, you have to crawl or walk, do the work, go through each agonizing step, cannot take the elevator as there is no easy way up, no short-cuts.

So, if you have any questions, you can ask now.

*Question:* Do some of your models exist? Can they be seen?

*András Both:* Unfortunately, the models that I made back then do not exist anymore. When I left Romania, the only thing I left with were my clothes on, and I couldn’t even prove that I had done any design work since I had nothing to show. Later on, I recovered my portfolio. I do have a number of work models and lots of sketches that I have kept.