

Practice based research studies

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EVERYDAY LIFE DRAMA: A RESEARCH PROJECT AS AN EDUCATIONAL PLATFORM FOR THEATRE AND MEDIA

Abstract. The research and creation program *Everyday Life Drama* was born in 2004, as an interdisciplinary project with two immediate and even urgent dimensions: the first one was to re-link the playwriting practices to the social and political context, after more than one decade of aesthetical escapism and symbolical dominance of the theatre directing in Romania; the second one was the need of renewal in educational methods, by joining together the students from different programs, in a common effort of re-building a coherent perspective about their lives and their discourses. The program combines the workshops for video-journalism, creative writing in media and theatre, and photo-journalism, but also direct

anthropological field research, in a research camp of ten days, each of the last seven years. The importance of the program is that it offers each year a new bunch of artistic products: video-productions and documentaries, plays and film scenarios, written reports and interviews, photo exhibitions. In 2007 and 2008, the program was awarded two consecutive grants for Cultural Intervention from the Ministry of Culture in Romania. From 2009, the program was awarded a three year research grant from the Romanian Ministry of Education.

Key words: theatre, education, young people, self-representations, playwriting, drama, experimental filmmaking, teamwork, education.

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Arguments for a change in attitude and in methods. The theatre education as re-linking research to creation. (M. R.)

The idea of the *Everyday Drama Research and Creation* program emerged from the personal discontent of a small group of theatre professors and students at Babeş Bolyai University regarding their... everyday work. On one hand, the students and the professors had the feeling the Romanian theatre in general, and also the Romanian theatre education, became, in the last two decades, a sort of a museum of aesthetical perfectionism, quoting and commenting on the great theatre directors from the 60th and 70th. The performance (and even the theatre artists) seemed to have no relationship at all with the real life. The new theatre writing was nearly absent from the official theatre repertoire, the directors were completely uninterested in Romanian plays, and young audiences avoided, more and more, to go to theatre.

Still, an alternative perspective made room, the last decade, opposing to the allegorical canon of mainstream theatre a strongly consistent effort of rewriting and reinterpreting on stage social and historical problems and issues, for fresh audiences interested in a more direct and (as Habermas would say) "*communication actions*". But such a shift of direction in alternative theatre forms and formulas, supposes not only intuitions and talent, but also a change of perspective regarding the relationship between history and everyday life, as much as between methods and techniques of social and inter-personal research. That's where

the theatre educational (and academic research) system has to assist and serve. If we start by realizing the fact that each spectator and each theatre person is, first of all, a citizen of the post-industrial media society, the fact that we share the same social, political and communicational benefits and aggressions, the necessity of re-linking social research to theatrical and media experimentations becomes instantly not only clear, but also urgent.

The new philosophy of educational and academic research practices emerged simultaneously in Bucharest and Cluj, at the beginning of 2003. A small group of actual and former students in stage directing – from the Theatre University of Bucharest – founded, with the support of their professor Nicu Manda, a program meant to encourage the new and young playwrights to scan and document actual social-psychological issues. Entitled "*dramAcum*" (a words game between "*Drama*" and "*Now*") the program is in the same time a process of selection for new talents, a continuous bunch of creative writing workshops and also a system of staging the plays in their final and improved forms.

In Cluj, at the Faculty of Theatre and Television, our group of students and professors, who also previously founded the alternative performing arts magazine *ManInFest*, started in 2004 an extra-curricular research-creation program, dedicated to young writers, journalists, stage directors and video artists: namely *The Everyday Life Drama*. Its goals: on one hand, to re-link and educate the students

from different programs (theatre studies, theatre directing, media) in working together, in small teams and with specific personal projects; on the other hand, to build a bridge between the social and anthropological field research and theatre and media creation: teach them how to document, collect personal stories and urban legends, how to report and process social phenomena, and how to transform this material in artistic – non fiction or fictional – products, aesthetically valid.

The first issue in our program was the need of renewal in educational methods, by joining together the students from different programs, in a common effort of re-building a coherent perspective about their lives and their discourses. The program combines the workshops for video-journalism, creative writing in media and theatre, and photo-journalism, but also direct anthropological field research, in a ten days research camp, each of the last six years. The importance of the program is that it offers each year a new bunch of artistic products: video-productions and documentaries, plays and film scenarios, written reports and interviews, photo exhibitions.

The second issue was to find a main theme for our field research, capable to integrate both our anthropological interests, and our creative and artistic goals. The first three research camps were dedicated to the *Working Migration* topic, and we tried to document the specific situation of families left home by one or two members relocated, for economic reasons, to west European countries. It

was then considered that more than two million Romanian people were – legally or illegally – working abroad. They are, most probably, more today. From 2007, we embraced a new and ambitious theme: *The X-Men & Women Generation*; the title, inspired by the cartoon – and eventually film – series *X-Men*, attempts to define the young people from urban milieu, between 15 to 25 years old. We try to scan and analyze the profound mutations produced by the technological developments in psychology, behavior and interpersonal communication of teenagers and young people, as much as their universe of representations.

Moreover, we had to build a methodology in progress, combining teambuilding sessions, workshops and trainings for anthropological field research, for creative writing in media and theatre, and for rewriting the scenarios in inter-personal relationship writer-director, in order to see them staged or filmed. Working together and developing individual potential is a hard process, but it is worth to be done, especially when one starts from a shared idea and focuses one's energies on a generous and creative experience.

Year after year, the resulting material, in media and drama, were visibly more consistent and artistically worthy. Our methodology was continued and improved step by step, in direct work with the students who participate, not only at the training processes, but also to the decisions concerning each camp's specific topics and subjects. In 2008, at Târgu Mures, for example, the students'

interest were focused on three main topics: the virtual self construction of young people in internet communication and the relationship between the different masks and avatars and the real personality; the tendency of some of the young male and female to rethink their spiritual participation and to join marginal religious groups; the absence of interest of young people in the social and political life of their community. We managed to have three video-reports and one documentary, collected a lot of personal stories and produced 16 short or medium plays based on the archived material. In 2009, the research teams were interested in young people groups formed on cultural consumption bases, on shopping and costume design interests and, for the first time, on the sexual definitions and relationship. The field research methods were more elaborate, combining interviews and focus groups, and we managed to produce 5 documentaries, 3 short fiction movies and 21 plays and scenarios inspired on the field findings.

This summer, we changed the place, choosing one of the most successful tourist towns in Transylvania, the old and beautiful city of Braşov. We had a total of 23 BA and MA students, organized in 7 teams for movies, and 4 teams for inquiries or collecting stories. Their interests were focused on many topics, like extreme sports, rituals of courtship, the relationship between the body perception and the construction of personal image (by tattooing and piercing), the social mask of young man and women by mans of hair

stylistic and make up, and – maybe the most ambitious subject – the relationship between earning and consuming personal money. At this moment, we have at least 6 documentaries in the editing stage, 3 short fiction films already done, more than 11 written reports, inquiries, story collections and an approximate number of 16 short and long plays and 4 film scenarios finished till the 10th of September.

Every year, the structure of the research and creation group changes, young students come in and some of the graduates go, or continue to work with us as MA students. Also, we managed to disseminate more and more visibly our results, publishing all the field research in a special issue of *ManInFest* magazine, editing and publishing collections of the best plays and scenarios, organizing media events with public debates in schools, colleges, libraries and cultural centres, public readings, and even contracting some of our plays for being staged by public or independent theatre companies. In 2009 we had two repertoire productions in Satu Mare and Târgu Mures on two of 2008's plays, and at the fall of 2010 we had also two new theatre productions at North Theatre Satu Mare and Puck Theatre Cluj.

The style, the structure, the ideology or the meaning of each play or film scenario are different and depend on the authors' imagination, talent and aesthetical preferences. What the program does, as a volunteer and extracurricular activity, is to provoke, to stimulate and to develop this skills, to encourage competition balanced by team spirit and to offer a direct feedback

from the young audiences, to whom the cultural products are dedicated to.

Theatre and Media – Playwriting methodology (R. S.-M.)

No one would dare to say that the works of the most prominent and famous stage directors and set designers or writers, from the beginning of 90' till now, were not beautiful, complex, challenging or valuable. But still, people between 16 and 30 years old go to underground theater. Further more, the need of the entire audience seems to go this way. How much are the dramatic structures modified in order to keep up with the audience's speed of understanding? What is the common point that a writer and his audience can find these days?

We will start from the author's belief that it would be healthy for playwriting to configure itself, therapeutically, around real life and to talk about events that set out our existence. But how can someone make students to write about these things, as long as they don't know how to write at all, and more, they are not always able to observe and explain immediate reality? The next method is an individual working one, meaning that the teacher will have to work with each student separately.

Our method starts with the construction of a character based on the observation of real people. The first exercise is to choose a person on the student's way to school, to follow him/her and try to put a story on the image, starting from the clothes, shoes, walk and way of looking at other people. When they arrive to school they

have to create a full biographic story of the observed person.

Another exercise focuses on the dialogue. In order to identify a dramatic conversation, or to write one, students have to go to public places – preferably choosing spaces they are not used to –, to listen and write down a conversation between at least two persons. Afterwards, in class, we try to understand the educational background of the persons they listed to, the specific language that was used, and they have to rewrite the conversation in order to make it understandable for everybody, meanwhile trying to identify the dramatic situation or mood the characters are in. This exercise is very important for the students in order to understand how street language can become theatre language.

For example the play called *Styx*, written by Brândușa Ban, originally derives from a conversation heard by the author between two young people who were talking about Second Life, and the ways to earn money in virtual reality. The result is a play in two characters, with scenes from Second Life and real life. In second life these two characters form a happy couple, in real life they are both men. The story talks about how, with the help of Second Life, one can enrich in real life, and become successful, and another can destroy himself. A poor doctor pretends to be a woman in second life and seduces a young man to the point he gives her all his money. On the other side of the story, the young man, in real life, does nothing else but plays the virtual game. The fear

of losing the internet connection becomes destructive.

A lot of the plays that we have as a result of this method are based on the next exercise: randomly choosing from a stack of one day old news, the students have to transform the news into a scene. Sometimes it's about a crime, sometimes it's about money. For example, in the play called *The Balcony*, by Georgiana Truță, the plot starts from news about a young man who kept his dead father on the balcony for eleven months in order to collect his pension. The author made a very complex research on news forums in order to understand people's reaction on this specific topic, and used their opinions in the play. The structure of the play is cross-fired, on one hand we have the simple story and on the other hand we have all these chatting people who express their approval or denial regarding the young man's behavior.

This specific exercise is very important for the ability of the student to transform five rows information into a real play. Usually, this primary information is only a starting point, or a climax around which the story will develop. On the other hand, the information collected during this exercise can be used as a reference during the play, to an event or to a story that is recognizable for the audience and creates humor or sets up a context.

To use one more example, I will talk about a play, written by Andreea Chindriș and Alexa Băcanu, called *Veronica cannot decide* – hopping that the readers will recognize the reference in the title. If not,

let me tell that it's a reference to a Coelho book called *Veronica Decides to Die*. The play starts from a world wide known scandal that took place in Romania about a monk and two nuns that exorcised a young schizophrenic orphan girl. Of course the play is a soap opera parody that presents the journey of a naïve girl from Bucharest to a small city from our country, during the trip she is mocked or molested by all kind of men that she meets, all called Noah: a train conductor, a doctor (a reference to another famous case about a young girl who jumped only in her panties, from the 4th floor apartment window, that belonged to a doctor who claimed that he called her there to treat her), and a priest. The end of the play is with Veronica not being allowed to die because she didn't suffer enough.

All these exercises are applied in the further development of the play which respects the classical six points writing structure:

1. The initial state of things – In what state the characters are when the curtain goes up.
2. Crescendo – where things start to get complicated.
3. Plot – the plot is revealed and from this point on the characters have no way of turning back to the initial point.
4. Climax – it's the highest crisis point.
5. Decrescendo, where the plot is finding some answers.
6. The final state of things where a new order is settled.

I would briefly like to talk about another play called *Papers, bears and girls*,

by Ana Cucu Popescu. These specific play talks about a very important issue that I think is spread world wide: the ignorant parenting: because of the work schedule the parents don't have time to listen or even observe their kids. The youngest one, 12 years old, decides that he will guide his every day life after a different rule: one day he decides that he can't see red color, so he can't eat tomatoes. Another day he decides he won't use words that start with the letter *d*. And because nothing works, he decides that he will do something nobody will be able to ignore: he sits on the flats stairs and doesn't move. Nobody can pass him because he is obese – another issue taken from real life: fast food feeding. After three day his parents decide to take him to a priest, because they think the devil possesses him.

As a method used during the summer camps, I applied all these exercises during a morning workshop two hours session, and the students had to solve them everyday until six o'clock in the evening, when we worked individually on each subject, character or event they found, in order to start developing the future play. After nine days of work, we had a reading session, in order for the author and the audience to hear parts of the future play. Most importantly, during these readings, was for the author to realize the stronger and weaker scenes, the characters that were not well developed and the way the others reacted to certain references.

In this year's summer camp, the work in progress was on two different levels: beginner and advanced. As usual, the

beginners were assigned to write a one man show, and the others twist-turning, long, complicated, plays. For the advanced team, things went a little bit further than this method: after field researching for characters, subjects and plots, we made another exercise, based on the previous play each of the students wrote. We analyzed every line of each play, deciding if it's possible for the audience to identify itself, or if it's a line written to define the style of the playwright, what the mistakes and what the strongest point of each writer were. After that, we focused on eliminating those mistakes and making the writer to concentrate on his/hers shortcomings.

As a result, the play *Nec plus ultra* by Cristina Iancu mocks the stupidity of commercial TV shows trying to convince the audience about different religions, yoga practice or mystical therapies that will save the world. In Romania, the case of a yoga guru that started the M.I.S.A. movement (Movement for Spiritual Integration in Absolute), which later on was discovered to be a cover for a porn industry, is well known. The debate on this topic is still on. The main character of the play resembles talks and acts as a guru, not necessarily as the famous Romanian one.

The *Mites's Jesus* by Ana Cucu Popescu is a play that has its starting point in a personal experience: a love deception. After hours of talking and introspection, the student was able to write down her experience in the form of a play in which two lawyers plead on the suicide of the

main character. They argue pros and cons while introducing “witnesses” to the characters’ life, who tell the story live, acting it in real time.

The result of ten days work is a package of thirteen new plays. For the first time, this year we had a section of short fiction script writing movies. Working with students on this project was similar to the playwriting method previously used and, as a result, we now have four short fiction scripts. *One way ticket* for example, is a script that has as a main theme the dramas that orphans and handicapped children had to live during the communist regime in our country: they were isolated from the rest of the world in special day and night care hospitals, mistreated and abused. This script is about a twenty years old boy, who lived such a drama, and hears on the TV that the orphanage he was kept in is closed. He decides to go on and kill the doctor designated to take care of him years ago.

After the summer camp, all the students went home and tried to finish their plays in 3 weeks time, according to the information learned and found. The purpose of all of these plays is, as well as the primary purpose of theater, identification; but of course, it’s all about other types of identification, above all overlapping each student’s style and talent. All the given examples are from my own experience of working with students on playwriting. All the plays mentioned are written by the students of Babeş-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Television, during the playwriting classes and workshops.

The “One Day Movie” project – an experiment in teamwork and visual anthropology (M. P.)

One of the main approaches of the “Everyday Life Drama” program’s research branch is the production of short anthropological and fiction films, exploring the students’ most pressing topics of interest. These topics are selected by a brainstorming session and teams are formed based on each student’s particular motivations and preferences. For the anthropological films, usually, a team consists of one, maximum two Theatre Studies students, who conduct the actual investigation, find subjects and take interviews, and one student from the Cinematography and Media department, who does the filming. Together, they draw a basic script draft which defines the future film’s storyline and, in the weeks following the camp, work closely together in order to go through the raw video material, create a final script, compose a storyboard and edit the finished product.

After the auctioning of topics and the formation of teams, the students are given complete freedom to shape their investigation according to their own will and to take their own creative decisions. They meet, however, each evening with a designated tutor from the teaching staff in order to discuss their ideas, their progress and try to solve any difficulties incurred during the day.

The basic goal for the anthropological films is to offer an information base for the playwriting branch of the program. In addition, by working closely together on a

project spanning at least one month, both Theatre students and Cinematography and Media students learn to cooperate in a teamworking framework, an extremely important aspect both for playwrights and cinematographers, used to working and creating alone.

In this respect, we proposed, as an experiment, in 2009, to take things to a new level and, based on the field research, create short fiction films, "one day movies", as we've called them. Fictionalizing the results of an anthropological research can serve two purposes: to enhance understanding of the analyzed phenomena and to ease dissemination of the research's results to a wide and mixed audience, who more often than not lacks the patience and interest required from the audience of a proper anthropological film.

In the making of the fiction films, the students had full artistic freedom, the only limitation being the length of maximum five minutes for each product and the fact that it had to be finished in one single day, from idea, to projection. The students willing to participate were divided in two groups, each with a scriptwriter, director, cameramen, actors, and coordinated by a senior member of the camp's staff. Both teams started working at 10 A.M. and, by 11 P.M. presented two finished, five minutes long, coherent films.

One of the teams, comprising Alexandra Băcanu (Theatre Studies, scriptwriter), Alexandra Sofonea (Stage Directing, director) and cameramen Alexandru Boariu and Alexandru Șerban

(Cinematography and Media) decided to start from a real incident, observed a few days prior in a public restroom. A few girls were ambushed by a guy with a camera phone, who, apparently, collected and shared with his friends pictures of women in embarrassing situations. The team chose to depict this scene as realistically as possible, producing a naturalist film, *X 09 FUN*¹, which takes place in a real public restroom and narrates the story by point of view shots in successive chronological order, emphasizing the perceived superficiality with which teenagers regard intimacy and relationships.

The other team, comprising Cristina Iancu (Theatre Studies, scriptwriter), Diana Dragoș (Stage Directing, director) and cameramen Alexandru Ponoran and Barbara Buh (Cinematography and Media) chose to take an introspective, auto-analytical approach, devising a script based on the conceptualization of their own experiences corroborated with the field research data. The film, *U.D.*², explores romantic relationships in a more metaphorical way, focusing on identity and personality transfers between alienated depersonalized partners.

The experiment proved to be a significant success among the participants, who decided, on their own, to create together a third film, *X Food & Women*, a visual essay exploring the thin line between

1 Available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-cG5WguSHI>

2 Available online at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5DYAomj_po

meat and flesh, between the physical and symbolical representations of women in the imaginary of young people.

The most important aspect of the experiment, in our opinion, beyond aesthetical and technical considerations, is the fact that the students managed to work together, setting competition aside and helping each other, by acting in the other team's production, sharing equipment and ideas and helping with problems encountered during the editing process.

In 2010, considering the previous year's experiment a success and given the widespread desire to work in such a project, we decided to include the "one day movies" into the list of the camp's mainstream activities. Because almost everybody wanted to participate, while we could only provide the logistical support for two, we had to subject all ideas to a public voting process. Eight teams (screenwriter/cinematographer) were formed and each team put forth one idea. The winners, decided by majority vote, were *Schimbarea la fațã* (*Transfiguration*), by Monica Bozdog and Marieta Manolache and *Trași pe sfoară. Nu-i o stradă!* (*Cheated. It's not a street!*)³, by Cristiana Keresztes and Adela Ștefan. The students whose proposals did not meet the needed votes were free to either join one of the teams, at will, or continue their field research. Everybody joined one of the teams.

Schimbarea la fațã shows, through split-screen montage, the parallel everyday

experiences of two young men, a priest and a clown, summoned one morning for the funeral of a dead girl. The priest is summoned by the girl's grandmother, representing the older, more conservative part of the Romanian society, for whom tradition is more important than an individual's desires, while the clown is called by the mother, representing a younger generation, more willing to compromise for the sake of her daughter's last wishes. The film explores this clash of generations, the seemingly irreconcilable gap between traditional orthodoxy and the tendency for modernization.

Trași pe sfoară. Nu-i o stradă! coincidentally approaches the same phenomenon of the generational gap, exploring the changing relationships between people and public spaces. It shows the continuous attempts of teenagers and adults alike to take possession of Brașov's Strada Sforii (Rope Street), one of the narrowest streets in Europe. The film takes a humorous stance in showing a policeman's futile efforts to maintain the order in front of an ever-increasing wave of tourists, graffiti artists, street performers, cyclists, playing children, beggars and housewives. The film ends with the policeman's "defeat" and his embittered statement that "it's no longer a street", it's evolving into something else, into a public space.

The silent war between the mentalities inherited from the authoritarian communist past and the young people's desires for change is evident in this film, as evident as the war between tradition and modernization was in *Schimbarea la*

3 Available online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kcXWkm17vH8>

Față. Compared to the films produced in 2009, one can observe a definite shift towards an ideological discourse, to the detriment of an aesthetical one. Knowing what it means to have only 12 hours of actual work seems to force students to investigate those aspects that truly ail them and to eliminate the superfluous stylistic embellishments. The 2010 films try to condense in 5 minutes some of the most troubling problems of contemporary Romanian society, both as seen and as experienced by the students.

The experiment has been a success, both from the researcher's standpoint and from that of the educator. By thoroughly

debating the subjects before starting work, by searching for information in the field and filtering it through their own life experiences, the students have managed to establish a personal relationship with their study topic in a way we find hardly possible in conventional research. From the educator's point of view, the teams' working dynamics surpassed all expectations. The students, coming from extremely competitive fields, managed to put aside their differences, to put aside competition and focus on working together, on helping each other to produce something together.