

“We Do Not Export a Product with the Stamp ‘Romania’”

An interview with Mihai MĂNIUȚIU by Andreea LUPU¹

Mihai Măniuțiu is a Romanian theatre director, academic and writer. He is Professor of Drama at „Babes-Bolyai” University of Cluj, Romania, and Distinguished Professor of Drama at University of California, Irvine, USA. Currently, he is Artistic & Executive Director of the Cluj National Theatre, Romania.

Since 1978, he has staged over one hundred theatre, dance, and opera productions in Romania and abroad. His productions toured in the UK, Belgium, France, Italy, Croatia, Turkey, Canada, Egypt, Austria, Hungary, Finland, Serbia, Brazil, and South Korea. His directorial accolades include: Best Director Award and Best Dramaturgy Award (Ancient Theatre Festival of Merida, Spain, 2008); Best Theatre Production of the Year (UNITER Gala Awards, 1993, 2005, 2018); Best Director of the Year (UNITER Gala Awards, 1998, 2002, 2003); Best Director of the Year (International Association of Theatre Critics, Romanian Branch, 1991, 2005).

He has published several volumes of fiction and poems, two volumes of theatre theory and a collection of essays on Shakespeare, *The Golden Round*, in which he explores the theme of power in Shakespeare’s plays. To date, four monographic studies have been dedicated to his work as a director: *The Trilogy of the Double* (Bucharest: Unitext, 1997), *MĂNIUȚIU. Theatre Images* by Cipriana Petre-Mateescu (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2002), *Dancing on Ruins* by Dan C. Mihăilescu (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2006), and *Măniuțiu. The Ever Changing Space* by Cristina Modreanu (Cluj: bybliotek, 2010), and a volume of critical essays by Mircea Morariu: *Mihai Măniuțiu. Essential Visions* (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2008).



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Andreea Lupu: *Mr. Mihai Măniuțiu, as you have a wide directorial experience in and outside Romania, and as your theatre performances have been so often invited to international festivals, I would like to discuss with you about the ways in which Romanian theatre is perceived abroad. To begin with, I'd like to know your opinion about the extent to which theatre performances are influenced by the culture of origin.*

Mihai Măniuțiu: Obviously, they are totally influenced. They come from the Romanian theatrical culture and, of course, from a fusion of everything that happens in the world. The soil, however, is always the Romanian directing school which has very particular and very strong characteristics. This is what distinguishes us from the others, and it could keep doing so if our school continues to be as strong.

A.L.: *How are these particularities perceived over the borders?*

M.M.: It is very difficult to say because every performance can be perceived differently. Performances directed by Purcărete, or Măniuțiu, or Tompa Gabor, Dabija, Cărbunariu will never be perceived in similar ways. There is no common denominator. We do not export a product with the stamp "Romania". There is a certain spirit that maybe unifies the ways in which the Romanian directors think, but there is no recipe. It is impossible for me to answer this question. All of them are individual artists and when they are chosen to participate in different festivals or tours, they are chosen precisely because of their uniqueness. Not for what they have in common with one another.

A.L.: *In this case, we can agree that there is no such thing as a common, recognizable language in all Romanian performances...*

M.M.: You mean whether they are identifiable in the sense that someone could come and say "A! This is a performance from Romania!?" No, there are not identifiable as such. It's the same for other countries like USA or Great Britain. I wouldn't know where a performance is from unless I recognized the language or unless I checked beforehand. It's all about the uniqueness of the artist. If we could identify the stamp of the country on a theatrical representation, it would mean we're talking about "country mannerism", which, of course, doesn't exist. Maybe only in the case of folklore.

A.L.: *So the influences always circulate.*

M.M.: You mean that in the air there are thousands of things and you never know what air you're breathing? If this is what you mean, then yes, in the air there is a whole lot of things, you never know what air you are breathing and, obviously, one can be influenced by important artists who come from totally different areas. There are many Romanian artists who were rather influenced by Pina Bausch than by Liviu Ciulei, or rather by Pippo Delbono than by Pintilie, it can happen. But this depends on the artist's internal alchemy. We cannot analyze them based on something like “country mannerism” or “generational mannerism”. When I was talking about the Romanian directing school, what I meant was that it's a school focused on the prominence of the director, concentrated mainly on an original reinterpretation of the text, the remaking of the text inside of a performance. The director has the power to recreate the text for the stage, not to serve it, not to be in his shadow, but to be a co-creator of the stage text.

A.L.: *Did you notice major differences between the American or British theatre school compared to the Romanian one?*

M.M.: Of course. With few exceptions, the American directing school is focused on realism and naturalism, and on a post-Stanislawski system for the actor's training. Here, the actors are given a set of abilities which helps them survive professionally in television, advertising, series, film, and only afterwards in theatre.

A.L.: *Which is not the case with the Romanian acting school...*

M.M.: Exactly. One of the main differences is that the Romanian actor is not trained for musical or film.

A.L.: *At the beginning, you said that a “country mannerism” would be impossible. Is it the same case for the audience?*

M.M.: The audience is very different from one place to the other. A generalization would be extremely difficult. However, what is obvious is that the foreign audience can enjoy much more easily long and very long

performances, whereas the Romanian spectators prefer the shorter ones. Beyond this obvious remark, there is a wide territory of discussion.

A.L.: Did you have any particular experience abroad that made you feel like you really are in a different country?

M.M.: I didn't experience any kind of rejection because usually the people who selected the performances were aware of what they took and where they were supposed to present them, it's a job after all. As long as the people who select the performances know how to do their job well, you will always find the right performance in the right place. I've usually been selected to participate in festivals and a festival's audience is really international, open and prepared. I had only pleasant experiences. For example, *Electra*, which I directed, enjoyed real success everywhere, even if it came in different shapes and forms. At the Merida International Festival, it won the best performance prize, but the success we had at Bogota was delirious: for almost 25 minutes, the audience refused to leave the theatre hall, they were throwing their hats on the stage and asked for certain musical moments to be repeated. In Croatia the success came under the form of a deep respect – we enjoyed the applause of the audience and afterwards, the performance got invited to another festival. It was rather a normal reaction, than a delirious one. In South Korea, the audience attended the discussions after the show. We had to stop after 45 minutes because we were exhausted, otherwise I'm sure they would have stayed for a much longer time, maybe even until morning. As I've already mentioned, the positive experiences I had with *Electra* were due to the fact that the performance has been invited in the right place, and thus obtained the right reaction.

A.L.: What about your experiences abroad as a director? Did you face any challenges or obstacles?

M.M.: Well, I am a hired director, I have to do my job. Usually, the secret is to win the actors, to make them trust you. It's only after you won them, that you can bring your artistic vision to life. The rest depends on the gods... not on me or on the company.

A.L.: Thank you for your time, Mr. Măniuțiu. I hope Romanian theatre will keep on surprising the theatre lovers from abroad with unique artists and artworks.