

# HISTORICAL THEMES OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY IN THEATRE. A FORM OF EDUCATION

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## **Abstract**

This paper will explain the challenge of introducing history themes in theatre with the goal of educating the public's interest in the past in general and personal terms. There are three projects discussed in this matter. First and more briefly is the telematic educational project *Tele-city*, especially created for high schools, second is *Staipelochian*, a proper theatrical satire, and the third is *Str. Popa Rusu nr. 30*, a telematic one woman show. The paper will focus more on the last two projects, specifically into this sensitive responsibility of performers when dealing with historical facts that are still politically controversial, focusing on the theme of the Armenian Genocide and its refugees in Romania throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. History is about numbers, art is about people and the younger generation can be more receptive to theatre than to history lessons.

**Key words:** *history, political theatre, satire, genocide, education, telematic, adaptation*

I begin this article by admitting that my experience of working in education with children may not be vast. My research on the subject of history comes from a performer's perspective when trying to stage possible educational themes. My only experience with teenagers in an actual classroom happened in

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the telematic project Tele-City, under the umbrella of Marina Hanganu's company, Tele-Encounters. Along with Marina, I was coordinating the project in Buzău city. Tele-City implied four cities: Buzău, Braşov, Brăila and Iaşi and the performers and audience would swap between two pairs. This project was based entirely on history and I learnt along with the students.

This was a fulfilling task for me because I was witnessing phlegmatic adolescents became vividly interested in history, in the story of the town they live in, the streets they walk on, the buildings they would pass by every day, the terrain on which the shopping mall was built, whose personality belongs a certain bust statue from a certain plaza of the city and so forth. Those were facts who were lacking appeal to the new generation completely.

As a young actor and film director, I helped them construct their speeches in which they would mingle historical events with their personal ones regarding certain places they chose. The second step for them was to present ways of showing these stories to other youngsters from other cities by imagery through their smartphones. The exchange, as a whole, happened online via Google Hangouts, being streamed live on Youtube. I've guided the students through the process of research on the places they'd chosen, but the actual analyse of the feedback through questionnaires<sup>80</sup> was conducted only by Marina Hanganu as it can be read in a separate article.

In terms of approach, I used two different methodologies to work with the youngster. The first was understanding the basis of framing in film on the structure I have learned in my own film education. The most important book I had as guide through synthesizing information was *Grammar of the film language* by Daniel Arijon<sup>80</sup>. The second path of teaching was of preparation before performing, a more spiritual way of getting connected to

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<sup>80</sup> Daniel Arijon, *Gramatica filmului*, Oscar Print, Bucureşti, 2013

your body and to your voice<sup>81</sup>. These exercises are inspired by Tao practises; certain sounds are attributed to certain organs and the person can relax easily through inhaling and exhaling these particular sounds. I must admit that the latter was not much of a success because the students were more concerned on the text their performance was based upon rather than the performance itself or the connection with the audience. The speech was the most important part for them.

Regarding theatre in education and history in general, I believe that one of the issues in education, still, is the lack of interest regarding one's history. People *are running* for their future and, without noticing, they make the same mistakes their predecessors made because, as we can see throughout the events of our lives on this Planet, history tends to repeats itself.

“Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” stresses George Santayana<sup>82</sup>. Some may disagree. Although Holocaust has been an inexhaustible topic for awareness and a powerful source for artwork, people made the same mistake in the following decades as history reveals itself: the gulags of the Soviet Union, the Great Leap forward in China, massacres in Cambodia, in Indonesia, East Timor, Korea, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Chile, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Syria and still counting. Unfortunately, there may be some events we might not have records of.

The ideology, religion or race cannot be blamed because people change their motives for killing. First the National Socialist German Workers' Party opposed communists, then power shifted and Communists ruled half of Europe, but, on the other side of the

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<sup>81</sup> Mihaela Vosganian, *Triplu modul de practică și terapie vibrațională prin arta sunetelor*, Editura Muzicală, București, 2018

<sup>82</sup> George Santayana, *Life of Reason, Reason in Common Sense*, Scribner's, New York, 1905, p. 284

globe, in Indonesia, for instance, records show that around 1.5 million citizens were accused of being communist and were executed. It all depends on interest and interest never dies. As we speak, people all around the world protest against organ harvesting<sup>83</sup> in China, a massive action that occurs despite global awareness and existence of United Nations Security Council.

So, we may say that history repeats itself no matter how much awareness it's raised for one side or for the other. Charlotte Delbo, the French communist who survived Auschwitz, understood, when hearing about the Soviet gulags, that the Communist ideology can be deceiving, as well<sup>84</sup>, being used as an instrument of psychological and physical torment.

I am a product of the Armenian Genocide<sup>85</sup> because my father's great grandparents were refugees of Anatolia, the old Armenian Empire<sup>86</sup>. Some say the Armenian Genocide that had its climax in 1915 was the first of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that it wasn't the first. Fortunately, or unfortunately, I have learnt this not in school, but on the Internet. As the massacres in Anatolia were having a break in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other large-scale atrocities happened, such as the Namibian Genocide<sup>87</sup>. I may add that the Armenian Genocide is

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<sup>83</sup> Ewelina U. Ochad, "Organ Harvesting in China and The Many Questions to Be Answered", published 16.10.2018,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/ewelinaochab/2018/10/16/organ-harvesting-in-china-and-the-many-questions/>, accessed 20.11.2018

<sup>84</sup> Charlotte Delbo, *Days and Memory*, Marlboro Press, 2001, p. 32

<sup>85</sup> "United Nations Office on Genocide Prevention and The Responsibility to Protect, Genocide Background", <http://www.un.org/en/genocideprevention/genocide.html>, accessed 19.11.2018

<sup>86</sup> R.H. Hewsen. *Armenia: A Historical Atlas*, University of Chicago Press, 2001, p. 34

<sup>87</sup> Jason Burke, Africa correspondent, and Phillip Oltermann, in Berlin, "Germany moves to atone for 'forgotten genocide' in Namibia", published 25.12.2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/25/germany-moves-to-atone-for-forgotten-genocide-in-namibia>, accessed 19.11.2018

called so because the Armenian victims were more in numbers than the Assyrian and Greek victims. In reality, Assyrian population is on the verge of *extinction* because of the extermination of the ethnic minorities in Anatolia conducted by the Young Turks<sup>88</sup>.

We can say that the 20<sup>th</sup> century aged too soon, because of its early deaths, but it doesn't grow younger, as Benjamin Button does, this century lived in agony actually more like a zombie. And the 21<sup>st</sup> century is born dead.

Now in a more optimistic tone: What can we do? How can art contribute? History is about numbers, art is about people and I believe that theatre, especially, can become a more accessible realm of understanding history for the younger generation. In some cases, even more than film because they get in touch with real human energy.

I wasn't interested in the subject until I got older and I stood by father in the process of writing *The Book of Whispers*. My father is a politician and he is an activist for the Armenian Genocide; he is a different kind of activist, the one that seeks human dialogue between the two people, Armenians and Turks, not financial reparations like the Germans still pay today for the Holocaust. For Turkey, such financial reparations towards Armenian descendants as returning lands and properties could mean a disaster for the state economy. The novelist's perspective influenced not only my way of adapting and staging political theatre, but my way of seeing live.

There are three ways of dealing with trauma in *The Book of Whispers*<sup>89</sup>. The first one is oblivion. Oblivion is a monologue. It takes time to forget. One may not speak of what happened, but he or she has a monologue running in their head trying to find sense in what happened. In the end, it gets buried in a drawer, but

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<sup>88</sup> Sergiu Selian, *Istoria unui genocid îndelung ignorat*, Ararat, București, 2010

<sup>89</sup> Varujan Vosganian, *Cartea Șoaptelor*, Polirom, 2009

they haven't fully understood what happened and it can happen again.

The second one is vengeance. This is maybe the most common one. But one cannot compensate human life, one cannot even drop of blood. Human lives have the same value, no matter the side. Suffering may be too much to bear, but one's tears must not be an obstacle from seeing the tears of the other person.

The third and the hardest, forgiveness. But how can one forgive someone who does not want to be forgiven? Forgiveness is a dialogue.

The narration of these dozens of stories is told from a child's perspective who gathers all these events in a compassionate manner for all its characters, no pathos involved.

Art doesn't put conclusions. It's not a thesis. It has an open ending. The first part of the sentence belongs to the writer, the second one to the reader. The same went with the staging of *Staipelechian*.

*Staipelechian* is a strange name for a play, it seems meaningless. It makes no sense, even for Romanians. *Staipelechian* can be translated as *Stayputian*. The expression *Stay put* and the Armenian suffix for family names *yan*.

It is said that half of the population of Armenians in Anatolia were killed and the majority of the other half fled. In the next two decades, Armenians became somehow important worldwide through their personalities, so Stalin thought to bring all Armenians back together in the Soviet Armenia, a small piece of land Russia and Turkey settled upon.

The false repatriation plan worked out quite well as many Armenians went to what they imagined to be their Mother Land and ended up in a gulag in Siberia. One of my great grandfather's friend was fortunate enough to remain in Erevan and he used to write letters. These letters would not appear in the mail box, but

in the newspaper of the little town in Romania<sup>90</sup> saying how everything is superb there in the Soviet Union. My great grandfather, *Garabet*, was looking for codes, as he understood the charade of the propaganda. The newspaper was written in Armenian, but some words could mean something else in Romanian if read phonetically. Example of news in our play: “Here everything is fine. Mister *Meat* comes once a month to see us, Misses *Cheese* once a week. We miss you all. Please say hi for us to Mister *Stayputian*”, meaning ‘Stay put, don’t come to Armenia’.

The story of Mister Stayputian was first staged at the Armenian Street Festival. Among bazaar, food and music, the audience did not have the mindset for history lessons. Fortunately, our play was about survivors and their anecdotes and the Genocide was not even mentioned. As the Armenian Street Festival’s goal, we were showing mere moments in an Armenian community in a Romanian town.

The novel treats all tragical events with satire as we can see in Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*<sup>91</sup>, so, in a way, actors found it easier to understand the facts in a rational way. I believe that the staging of horrifying historical events can swiftly fall into patheticism, but a detached view on the subject along with a black comedy touch can save the message of the play and find its way to the audience poignantly.

The responsibility of performers when dealing with historical facts that are still politically controversial or even unknown is sensitive. We don’t know what’s wrong and right. We can just invite the audience to meditate and a lecture can push

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<sup>90</sup> Romania was one of the first countries to receive Armenian refugees during the Genocide because of its old Armenian diasporas. This was to be the third Armenian wave of migration.

<sup>91</sup> Yasco Horsman, *Theaters of Justice: Judging, Staging, and Working Through Arendt, Brecht and Delbo*, Stanford University Press, California, 2011, p. 232

the audience away. As a writer, I found it very difficult to leave personal feelings aside and talk the actors into this part of Romanian history in a way that we haven't learnt in school. I wasn't a teacher for them, we were all in this workshop of understanding history of one's family because, in the end, our play was about family.

Armenians may form one of the most important diasporas in Romania, but the young people know nothing about them. The performers found themselves in this difficult situation in which they had to learn to be rational and see the conflicts of the two World Wars from all perspectives, impersonate characters such as Stalin and Hitler and, also, recreate the Armenian spirit that even young Armenians lacks today. All my colleagues are Romanians and together we learnt so much from one another. Our process implied readings, watching fiction film and documentaries and improvisation. To arrive where we are today with the performance took us four years. We haven't learnt it all. At every rehearsal, we were to found still many questions unanswered regarding the characters and I am not speaking only about the characters of the Armenian community, but about the world leaders that are still enigmatic figures. Still, as a performer, you should, at least, seem to understand them.

I realised that the most powerful exercise for them was to read the Chapter *Cycle of blood* from *The Book of Whispers* out loud. The impact of their own imagination filling the gaps of the text was more profound than watching any film. It didn't matter that the characters were Armenians and the people reading Romanians. Pain knows no difference, no gender. This is the reason why our performers were all female despite of the majority of male characters in the play.

We presented the show in several school in Romania, at Armenian Festivals across the country and most important, at the



International Youth Arts Festival in Kingston. I've noticed that people over 30 years old engaged much more with the story than adolescents, so it seems that the balance between information, irony and emotion does not fill the gaps for the audience that lacks cultural background. Perhaps, these types of performances need a prior introduction, taking the risk of becoming a possible boring lecture.

They lacked the basic history information, such as the conflicts within the Two World Wars, where Armenians come from, how the Ottoman Empire fell, how the Communism arose and so forth. No matter how clear we thought our play is on information, it wasn't enough. Unfortunately, this is not the case just in Romania, but in the United Kingdom, as well.

Being a comedy, we have connected with youth easily and they enjoyed the performance and, hopefully, we triggered some interest for finding out more about the history of other peoples and their own.

The second project which implied both Armenian and Romanian history was *Popa Rusu no.30*, the address of a character born in a mix Armenian Romanian family who is now studying in New York. The entire performance was held on the phone with one person, in some cases, a couple. This was Marina Hanganu's dissertation project for graduating Central School of Speech and Drama.

The first item the audience was faced with was a mirror. In the end of the performance, they would leave with this sentence: "Dear Visitor, please take a look into the Mirror before we part". The small audience would find themselves in a labyrinth that the character on the phone constructed during her childhood. I would guide them through this labyrinth having 5 narrative points to discuss with the audience. The audience participated in this performance by changing the paths through these points, by

asking questions on objects that drew their attention in the labyrinth.

The narrative chapters were inspired by Marina's childhood and mine, stories about Armenian Genocide in Anatolia, communism in Romania, the revolution of 1989, coming up to the main conflict of the character: *coming back to Romania or making a live in America where there are too many people already?*

In a way, this experience was more fulfilling because I've witnessed the transformation in the audience, their revelations and their unanswered questions regarding their families' stories. Their participation continued after the performance, as well. They were asked to write to the character and send a picture with an import object, sending me pictures and stories about an important object in their lives. On the other hand, the number of people that could participate in this experiment was very small in comparison to the audience we gathered with *Staipeleochian*.

To sum up, these were examples of making an individual change through the act of theatre. No matter what is happening in the world, I believe our duty as artists is to inform ourselves as much as we can in order to make our own opinions on events and to be able to perform in a detached manner, no matter our feelings, and make the characters as complex as possible so that the audience can see an overall perspective about conflicts. In this way, we might leave little space for manipulation and maybe, as individuals, we will be able to understand, forgive and avoid future atrocities.

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