



**ULBS**

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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THEATRE OF CONSTRAINT**

*The itineraries of my directorial beginnings*

PhD:

EUGEN JEBELEANU

scientific guide:

Prof. univ. dr. habil. GEORGE BANU

Prof. univ. dr. habil. CONSTANTIN CHIRIAC

*A study dedicated to all of those who faced the idea of constraint in their daily lives or in their artistic path and who managed to acquire from this a form of creativity or resilience, a manifesto, a liberation.*

## SUMMARY

In 2014, the director of a theatre in Paris, Valérie Baran, came to Bucharest to see three shows that I had directed, to consider programming them in the upcoming season at the theatre she directed at that time, "Le Tarmac". The programming came a year later, but with a different show, *She's a Good Boy*. After watching the three initial shows, she made this remark that struck me: "You can see it in your shows, the way you work with the notion of constraint." This is due to the fact that in *dontcrybaby* I had amputated the use of the actors' feet, in *RETOX (Romania is an accidentally xeroxed country)* they were put to the wall, and in *Hotel* they did not use words as a means of expression. These limitations of the instruments of their bodies brought a new awareness of the freedom of their actions and a new valence to their acting game. Since then, a professional interest in researching what this term means in my work as a director has emerged. I thus realised that, indeed, it is one of the most important characteristics of my artistic approach, my theatre being one of constraint, given by several factors, external and internal, ethical or aesthetic.

Constraint is currently present everywhere, physical distance imposes a social constraint, the sanitary rules to be considered in public performances are unwavering, theatres are closing, festivals are cancelled, actors are at rest or are performers of new forms of online theatre or shows that are remade in order to be played outside, with a protective mask or eliminating direct interaction with the audience where the form of the show required it. In all these hybrid forms, how can the connection between the audience and the theatre actor be maintained, how can the peculiarity of the ephemeral in the theatre be captured and can the theatre carry on its mission of civic, social and political "first necessity"?

The theatre, through its conventional nature, conforms to a multitude of freely agreed constraints that make it function as a game. Theatre has often faced the notion of constraint in all ages: constraints given by the technical limits of the venues where the performances took place, the rules of dramatic theatre, such as the unity of space or time of action, material conditions, political systems in power, by the restrictive framework and context in which a show is created, by an imposed theme or by the criteria given by the troupe of a theatre to which a dramatic or directing writing order responded.

In its simplistic definition, constraint is that action (and its result) that forces, compels or summons someone to do something they would not do willingly and has a harsh, rigorous character;

in other words, constraint is a rule that reduces freedom of action. How can this rule produce a reduction of freedom and at the same time a release? Once the action is constrained and practically strangled, how does it manage to find free movements, struggles, pulsations? A constrained body is a body that is dictated what to do, beyond its will. In a sense, the actor's body faces this dictation of his actions on stage, through the instructions he receives from the director, so the constraint is already present in this type of actor-director relationship, one listening and executing the other's demands.

In other words, constraint in art can be confusing and at the same time can involve a fantastic effort of imagination and creativity in finding ideas, when a political system comes into question, one which forces the artist to do something that he wouldn't do voluntarily. This pressure on the artist can change his discourse, message or even the form of his work, can bring him down or sometimes sublimate his creation. Is there any form of freedom that can emerge from this summons, harshness, this rigour that is applied through practices associated with censorship and manipulation?

The constraints imposed by a social or ideological context, determined by a political system that restricts freedom of expression, inevitably influence the artistic act. However, he can find new valences, sometimes extremely surprising, that give value to the creation by moving or outlining the notion of censorship, as was the case with the Romanian theatre from the communist period. Implicitly, these restrictive aspects can condition the aesthetics of the performances and can change the essence of the form of the theatrical discourse, annulling it in unfortunate cases, or, on the contrary, strengthening its quality as a gesture of resistance.

Today, fortunately, political censorship is no longer relevant in Romania, but unfortunately today's artists face all kinds of constraints, the source of which is, most of the time, budget insufficiency. I am especially referring to the situation of independent theatre in Romania, which has suffered and still suffers because of this. The blockade given by the difficult economic situation, by a system that does not allocate enough funds for the independent cultural area, is a factor that influences the whole creation and weakens both the team and the production of the shows themselves.

Precariousness is a constraint and a reality of our contemporary culture that I have often faced, especially in the case of my performances in independent theatre. However, this situation brought with it (not similarly, but almost in the same way that constraint determined artists before

'89 to make use of it) working alternatives that would not block the imagination, giving value to projects by transgressing the problem, finding new, innovative and authentic forms of expression and theatrical practices, to fight the limits, thus strengthening the artistic motivation to win in the face of economic constraint.

Sometimes constraint is found at a thematic level, in shows that talk about social constraint, for example, as was the case with my shows that addressed the theme of homophobia, be it institutionalised, religious or stigmatised by ordinary ostracisation. Giving a space to stories that question the harmful effects of constraint is ultimately the acceptance that this oppressive action is not only the creative engine for discovering parallel freedoms, but also an extremely powerful factor of abuse, harassment and social discrimination and establishes a relationship of power, of hierarchy, between the executioner and the victim.

I will analyse in the pages of my thesis the ways in which this concept of constraint determines the artistic act, by referring to my performances where in one way or another this notion was felt. Whether it is thematic or deeply formal, I will seek to investigate how it affects the artistic gesture. In the construction of the shows I directed, constraint has become over time a challenge and a method, removing some freedoms, means or abilities (such as verbal language) of the actor, which makes them gain another experience in their work by being conditioned by this aspect that pushes them to find new solutions, playing with other codes.

Working in different fields such as theatre, opera and cinema, I came across as many means of expression that are subject to different codes and conventions. These conventions are integrated and assimilated by practitioners in each segment and, although they have a constructive purpose in drawing some rules, some may limit the creative imagination, they are rather rigid in relation to new forms and the intersection between disciplines.

But I will start this work by making the difference between constraint and convention. The latter is meant to help the theatrical machine to function, regardless of the pieces with which it is assembled, while constraint is an element on which the very establishment of the convention depends, so it can influence the codes of theatrical representation, which will be configured by structuring a concept encompassing a suite of conventions. They remain connected to the overall vision of the show, as if it is influenced by the notion of constraint, be it social, political or economic.

With these rules called conventions, theatre constitutes its spectacular form. Working principles are developed to be played with, shifted, modelled, so as to give birth to new forms in new visions. These areas of constraint are certainly extremely welcome for the enrichment of theatrical practices, as they are creative impulses for artists who research the way in which theatre shows are constructed.

Conventions are notions that apply to both spectators and actors. They are made to be respected, transgressed or hijacked and determine the rules of the game. The convention given by the concept and / or the stage device is essential. In the case of my shows, this aspect was often decisive in establishing the relationship between actors and spectators. For *doncrybaby*, I chose a bifrontal device, placing the audience on two sides. In *White (white dress code)*, the stage concept of the play integrates the spectators in the composition of the set, they are seated at the table where the events in the play take place. With the audience on three sides, *Hotel* places the spectator in the voyeur position, and the steps become walls in a hotel room, a place that carries pieces of the intimate past of so many people. In order for the message to be as percussive as possible, to reach the spectators directly, I chose to place the story from *November 20*, made at the National Theatre in Sibiu, in the setting of a classroom, with spectators in benches, captive in a space with closed doors. Together with scenographer Velica Panduru, I chose to place the action of Fassbinder's text, *Katzelmacher*, a show directed in Stuttgart, in a quadrifrontal stage device, a sports field that becomes a space for love, fighting, parties. *Alice* and *Digital Natives* propose an empty stage space, white spaces, neutral, aseptic boxes. *Familii* is another show based on minimal direction, with sparse movements of the actors in an empty space, with few decorative elements, in a white box of vertical blinds.

Conventions have been felt throughout history within the theatrical system and as constraints, for example, when we talk about the nature of the cast, exclusively male, in the case of plays after Shakespeare's plays in the Elizabethan theatre era, which meant a limitation of the diversity of bodies on stage and an implicit female discrimination, but which, sometimes circumvented, could precisely strengthen and denounce the injustices and inequalities in the respective society, between women and men.

A great constraint that I had to manage over time was precariousness. The independent theatre in Romania, the employed, proclamative, the one which takes a stance, is a theatre that often has a social, educational or political message and aims to get as close as possible to its audience, to

pull its sleeve, to pay attention to it and question it, discussing topics that are found in the concerns of contemporary society. It functions outside of the imposing buildings of state cultural institutions that often host theatre performances for a bourgeois, elitist, savvy audience. However, the Romanian independent theatre does not receive sufficient funding from the state to be able to fully fulfil its purpose.

My shows, regardless of the subject, explore vulnerability and identity, either gender (*She's a Good Boy*) or feminine (*Feminine*, by Elise Wilk, from the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamț, *Alice* from the Gong Theatre in Sibiu or *Itineraries. One day the world will change*, co-produced by Arcub and Cie des Ogres, both texts written by Yann Verburgh), or social (like that of the teenager who because of bullying in school will manifest his revolt by opening gunfire in the high school where he was persecuted in the past by his colleagues and teachers and then committed suicide, in *November 20* by Lars Noren, from The "Radu Stanca" National Theatre in Sibiu). The problem of identity encompasses a lot of constraints, given by society, family, self, through multiple forms of manifestation, as it happens in my shows: *November 20*, *Feminin* or *Ogres*.

Identity had at one point become a thematic centre of interest in my shows and around this theme a work practice was articulated, intersecting with the notion of constraint. I started with this preoccupation for the theme of identity to research a kind of theatre of reality, connected strongly to the pulse of current events, and through the use of documentary material I chose to tell the stories of vulnerable people in society on stage, those from its edges, far too absent on the contemporary Romanian stage.

Centred around the theme of homophobia, *Ogres* also established the direction of my French theatre company: the desire to talk about marginalised people, about non-heroes, about people that are different from the norm. The theme of minority appeared in my artistic approach as an organic necessity. In Yann Verburgh's text, the constraint is given by the social difficulty of living with a different sexual orientation, a difference that arouses homophobia, manifested not only by ordinary ostracisation, but also by institutionalised discrimination, given by either the political context or the religious cult in some territories. Concerning the text we also encountered situations in which it was forbidden to be released to the public, as it happened in Lebanon, where he should have had a reading with a team of actors from a private company in Beirut during Gay Pride in 2018, but a few minutes before the performance, four police brigades stormed the theatre where we were and

banned the reading, cancelling the entire activity. In this case, the constraint was felt at a level of religious, institutionalised, social and political censorship.

I chose to talk in the theatre about homophobia and the difficulties of an LGBT person's life in contemporary society, because I wanted to understand what drives the aggressors from *Ogres*, for example, to practice and perpetuate aggressions of a homophobic nature. These kinds of aggressions are traumatic, and translate into mental abuse, killing areas of human expression.

I chose to stage *November 20* because I was interested in finding out how people like Sebastien Bosse, the young man whose tragic story inspired Lars Noren's text, commit violent acts. Being myself a subject of ridicule during high school, living with aggressive verbal persecution from schoolmates on a daily basis because of my femininity and the inability to confess to my parents out of fear of abandonment and shame, I felt I have to discuss through this medium this extremely serious aspect of world education, bullying, which is the main cause for suicide among teenagers.

One of the reasons why I decided to go to France ten years ago was because in Romania I felt cornered, constrained by prejudices of the generalised mentality regarding the gay minority in Romania. The fact that I live in France today has helped me live this freedom of being with a different intensity. Sometimes I am considered an activist artist and that makes me happy because the idea of supporting the LGBTQI + community means that my work is not in vain, in the sense that it not only has a formal relevance in inventing artistic currents, but that it also provokes a reaction among people and the society in which we live.

I don't believe in the dissociation between man and artist. I talk about things that bother me because I run into them and I feel an almost visceral need to expose them in theatre or film. I can't ignore the fact that I'm gay when I make a film about the difficulty of living for LGBTQI + people in Romania. For me, the honesty of an artist is important and everything becomes personal with this characteristic.

In 1994, my father left Romania to go to work in Germany, in order to have a better life for himself and his family. Shortly afterwards, following a traumatic shock, he returned to the country with a completely different view of the world, forgetting his Western dream and his projections of European freedom. This moment triggered a new construction of identity for him and for the family members. Today, I live between France and Romania and build on the foundation of this past, my

family and my country, but with the conviction that there is still the possibility of creating a link between these two cultures, beyond prejudices, barriers and value systems. From these life stories *Itineraries. One day the world will change* was born, my show which interrogates the construction of identity in a rapidly changing territory and the mechanisms of struggle between individual and community, in a perpetual and playful game of theatrical *mise-en-abîme*<sup>1</sup> which explores both our most intimate borders as well as those drawn by 21st century Europe.

My social identity is strongly defined by my linguistic identity, expressing myself vocally at the intersection between my mother tongue, the Romanian language, and the one in which I exercise my activities for the most part, the French language. These languages are now as two frequencies of the same voice. So far, in my directing career I have often faced this difference given by the different linguistic identities within the group I was working with, especially when I did not speak the same language, as was the case with two projects I had made in Germany.

The actor can also be constrained by the language in which he plays, if it is other than his mother tongue. Personally, when I first played in French, everything seemed much fairer in my playing, because my vocabulary in French was lesser than that of my mother tongue, Romanian, and that forced me to an innocent reporting of language, like a child learning a new language, each word having a very exact meaning, maybe without much nuance, but extremely clear. Of course, a good knowledge of the language in which you play can bring a better understanding of the text, can give value to the subtext, ambiguity, but at the same time, constrained by a foreign language, the actor can gain stage attention in the present of playing that is fiercer than in their language, being more focused on the partner and the dramatic text, undisturbed by the parallel neural connections that our brain makes when we speak a language that we master very well, thus making apparent a more correct acting, with the role unfiltered by the actor's own perception and the experiences of their past. Thus, when playing a love story in a foreign language, that situation will acquire a pure, virgin meaning, not already experienced by the actor in real life, not using the words or gestures he would have used in the situation of his own love story.

The notions of foreigner, foreignness, the issue of immigration or political refugees are constant concerns for me because they imply a separation from the group, the community, society and represent largely vulnerable, marginalised, stigmatised voices.

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<sup>1</sup> Theatre in theatre (fr.)

Currently, the conditions or, in other words, the law is given by a sanitary constraint caused by the global pandemic, which determines a multitude of conventions to be applied, thus proving the power and the need to adapt the artistic ensemble globally in order to divert the health crisis that has anaesthetised the entire international cultural system and that has stopped its operation.

The borders have been or are closed between certain states, masks are used on stage, but also in the theatre hall. The number of spectators is obviously limited when the theatre halls are open. Many aspects which condition the present and, certainly, the future of contemporary theatre. These measures are applied in such a way that they themselves have become conventions, imposing and forcing artists to find innovative artistic solutions that go beyond the area of theatrical conventions known and used so far.

We live in an age of emotional and psychological imbalance and health danger that has upset the entire functional system. With the closing of theatres, I asked myself: why are theatre and art not essential? And I realised that we have to make it a necessity through different formulas by which we interact and in order to reach the public.

I wish and hope that today's theatre is about healing. We will need a theatre and art which heals, because there is a lot of suffering currently in our lives. Everything that happens is a big wound that will have to be healed at some point, and we are responsible for it healing. Perhaps not coincidentally, this aspect is found in the *Remission* project, the first show I made during the pandemic, which talks about healing.

The theatre, like the whole planet, is in crisis these days and it is preferable that this crisis also translates into a possibility to provoke reform. The invention of new means of reporting to the public is not in itself dangerous for the fate of the theatre, on the contrary, the reconfiguration of theatres as playgrounds also allows a movement of content inside the theatres, so a questionnaire of contemporary theatre itself and our cultural habits, whether they are of an ethical or aesthetic nature. Getting out of the theatre's operating tradition should not be a danger, but a launching pad for new forms, and although there are many artists who find it difficult to carry out their work, the reform must come from the idea of reinventing form. Of course, the solution is not to run towards new forms at any cost, but this approach can allow a continuation of the living show, in accordance with the times we live.

If we are to admit that theatre can be played on the screen by filming and broadcasting shows online (even when it comes to filming shows and live broadcasts), it should be noted that at the same time the theatre changes its DNA, because it changes its very essence: the presence of living bodies, the possibility of immediate interaction, its ephemeral dimension, becoming a moment in the past, framed in a fixed frame.

What will a theatre built on distance instead of closeness look like? What kind of approaches can we invent in this new context? How do you eliminate or manage the tactility of the theatre, the need to touch, the physicality of playing? What and how can the theatre of its spectators speak to them now?<sup>2</sup>

Isolation was, without a doubt, an extreme form of constraint. Theatre, behind a screen, although, in a way maintains a link to the audience, is not enough to be able to replace the meeting between spectators and actors produced by a live performance, but it can offer other valences.

This pandemic was and is without a doubt a difficult period, felt by everyone and by all sectors. These days it was the first time I felt strong and felt the frustration that settled in me as a person and as an artist. Because you can't complete projects, you can't complete ideas, everything is a projection into a better future, like in a play written by Chekhov, in which the characters dream of what will come, but without certainty that they will emerge from the crisis.

Milo Rau says in an interview during the pandemic that: "Making theatre means making decisions."<sup>3</sup> This statement makes me think that the director is an individual who has to opt for what he does without leaving things to chance, just as the actors have to decide when playing which direction to lead their characters in and I understand from this statement that making decisions means taking action. My way of taking action through this work was to put in writing some thoughts about my theatre in the first ten years of directing.

During this time, constraint has become a benchmark and I tried to either bypass it, or to overcome it, or to make use of it as an engine of creativity. Constraint is therefore found in everything I have done so far and I started looking for this type of creative constraint when it was

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<sup>2</sup> Popovici, Iulia, "Cînd o vinit holera-n satul teatrului", in *Observator cultural*: [observatorcultural.ro/articol/cind-o-vinit-holera-n-satul-teatrului](http://observatorcultural.ro/articol/cind-o-vinit-holera-n-satul-teatrului) [last visted: 25 octombrie 2020]

<sup>3</sup> Rau, Milo, *Segal Talks*, The Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, 2020: [youtube.com/watch?v=1TeBOKRdDQ4](https://youtube.com/watch?v=1TeBOKRdDQ4) [last visited: 6 mai 2021]

not there because it offered me a framework in which freedom to create was even richer and opened up the imagination. Thus, through conventions, I reduced the field of possibilities to discover a theatre of freedom of expression, of the cry against constraints that are external, social, political, economic, etc.

Between the versatility of role exchanges between the actors, as is the case in *dontcrybaby* and *RETOX (Romania is an accidentally xeroxed country)* and the proximity of the spectator from *White (white dress code)* or *Hotel*, I tried to get as close as possible to the spectator, to the person behind the character, behind the actor's mask, and thus a great theme was born in my theatre: identity. I wanted to give expression through text to my personal revolt which in *RETOX (Romania is an accidentally xeroxed country)* is transposed in some voices, while in *Hotel*, through a non-verbal language, I was talking about loneliness and about the difficulty of reconciling with ourselves, to be able to live with ourselves, to overcome prejudices and remove the insults we bring ourselves. With *She's a Good Boy*, I felt a need to talk about minority voices, about those that are different, the ones that are excluded, because I too, in many situations, also feel like a minority, a strange person, an excluded person. *Feminine*, *Ogres* and *November 20* take their vigour from the real, from the stories of people next to us, they are a documented theatre, without any of them having a journalistic approach represented on stage, but each one aims to raise questions about injustice in our society, drowned in constraints everywhere. Together with Yann Verburgh and Cie des Ogres, animated by the common desire to create a European artistic project, we sought to develop a dialogue between territories and concern ourselves with political issues circulating in our society, and thus we made and produced more shows, including: *Itineraries. One day the world will change*, *Remission*, *Digital Natives*, and other performative readings, all in this binomial configuration in which Yann Verburgh was the author of the texts and I the director. The experience in the world of cinema with the film *Poppy Field* certainly meant a unique adventure in my life, and brought with it other types of constraints, coming from inside or outside, but it also started a very fierce interest in cinema. Interested in the dialogue between the word and the body and in the desire to weave narrative threads between multiple stage planes and to give voice to the echoes between spoken and unspoken words, I wanted to make the opera *I Was Looking at the Ceiling and Then I Saw the Sky*, a show in which the word would not dominate, but which investigates the turbulence that occurs when we do not have words as a form of communication and to explore the underbelly of body language, which reveals meanings, lies, judgments, etc. Despite these pandemic times, I managed to direct a new show in France, *Remisie*, which will premiere with the public in autumn

2021, one year after its completion, and another in Romania, *Katzelmacher: if only it wasn't about love*, which I started rehearsals for at the beginning of 2021 at the German Theatre in Timișoara, but whose rehearsals were stopped and the production suspended for a few months because people in the team got sick with the SarsCovid 2 virus and the risk of continuing was far too great. Here there are constraints that can not be creative at all because they simply block the smooth running of things and involve a situation impossible to manage as an artist, being overwhelmed by the danger of infection. These days were quite different from those before the pandemic due to all the restrictions and they were and are complicated, but I decided to assimilate them and somehow integrate them in the directorial conception from now on because they are part of our daily life. For *Katzelmacher: if only it wasn't about love*, created in the midst of a health crisis, through the intersection the two environments, theatre and film, I wanted to annul the constraints found in one discipline by exploring and highlighting the freedoms of the other. *Itineraries. One day the world will change* is however perhaps the project that best articulated my theatrical discourse which represents me today as a theatre director because it shifted the constraint into a form of liberating revolt, and for me that meant the end of a cycle, but also the opening of a new area of interest in my research in art, now directed towards a theatricality of confrontation rather than empathy.

Concerning the continuity of the activity at the Cie des Ogres company, my artistic approach today is towards a popular theatre that heals intimate and political wounds, a theatre that cares about those in difficulty, minorities, a theatre that talks about humanity, rather than about society. From a formal standpoint, my theatre is now built on the linguistic multitude of actors on stage, the diversity of their bodies, and is located at the intersection of disciplines, addressing a dialogue between verbal and nonverbal language.

Constraint is certainly an engine of creativity, but although it allowed me to develop this study and a theatrical practice that revolves around it, I want my theatre from now on to be one that directs its attention more towards freedom of expression and favouring progressive fiction or discourse over those directed against constraint.

This work gave me the opportunity to understand the concept of constraint in art and its formal valences as an aesthetic challenge in theatre, through the experience of my projects so far. Obviously, constraint as censorship given by the political context in which the artistic gesture takes place is harmful as long as the theatrical manifesto is exercised in a restrictive and oppressive framework. Its contribution in the protocol and in the elaboration of the artistic codes in my practice

in theatre and the applicability of the constraint convention in the construction of my performances was without a doubt the central element of my creativity and determined my professional path.

Once I noticed the problem of the forcefulness that constraint implies, I think that the next step is, beyond its identification and questioning, healing. That is why I will seek to research in my practice a theatricality that cleanses individual and collective wounds and treats social fractures, a theatre of remission, and to make the stage a place where the closeness between peers, the vulnerabilities of people on stage is abused, thus changing the paradigm and the point of view, through emotion and carnality, proposing a constructive theatre, an urgent, indisciplinate and angry theatre, a theatre that questions our position as human beings in this world and the danger of negligence, indifference and our own actions.

I will conclude by saying that this essay about my theatrical journey in my first decade of directing, as a personal mosaic, is a thesis of research, of questioning verdicts, which aims to open a dialogue on the subject of "theatre of constraint" and which announces a new stage in my artistic approach, for the time being, one in which everything is allowed and where constraint leaves room for relaxation, confrontation, freedom.