

## **Born to Run: Political Theatre Supporting the Struggles of the Refugees**

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by David Schwartz

The current article aims to describe the personal and political experience of myself being part of a collective of artists interested in the struggles of the refugees in Romania. The article focuses on two aspects: 1) the personal, local, historical-political, international context of the refugees' struggles; and 2) our artistic and human experience, including the interactions and collaborations between the artists and the refugees and the perspective of the latter on the artistic process.

The interest for the histories, perspectives and struggles of refugees started from the deeply personal experience of meeting (and befriending), a couple of Afghani refugees, during a trip in Central Asia, in 2011. Their complex life story and their traumatic experiences caused exclusively by the “guilt” of owning the “wrong” passport (the Afghani one) left a strong impression on myself and my colleague, Alice Monica Marinescu (actress and playwright). Starting from this concrete emotional experience, we decided, back in Romania, to research the situation of the refugees on the contemporary and historical Romanian territory. We were additionally touched by the topic, as both of us come from mixed, minority families (Jewish and Armenian), who went through several painful experiences of persecution, runaways and exile.

This research process was the beginning of the work experience for the text and performance “Born in the Wrong Place”<sup>1</sup>, a play that blends together the documented life stories of five refugees to and from the Romanian territory (a Palestinian man, a Jewish woman, a Serbian woman, an Iraqi woman and an Afghan man). The play premiered in Bucharest, part of a project financed by the Ministry of Culture which focused on emphasizing and debating the stories and struggles of refugees. The performance was built together with professional actors who were also included in the research process, and who met several migrants and former refugees. Furthermore, some of the actors themselves come from minority families, being connected emotionally and personally to the experiences of refuge and discrimination. The former refugees whose stories are performed in the play have received and read the text, and some have also been involved in the work process, contributing with feedback, suggestions and opinions, one of them practically becoming part of the team.

**From personal experience to research process – Meeting Ahmad and Paradise, Afghani refugees in Dushanbe, Tajikistan.**

During a research field trip in Central Asia, Monica and I met Ahmad and Paradise in Dushanbe, young Afghani refugees in Tajikistan. Following the worsening of the situation in Afghanistan, the visas for Western countries became more and more difficult to obtain. In this context, the number of Afghani refugees in the neighboring poor, but safer, country, increased. Ahmad and Paradise (both 24 years old at the time) were born in Iran, from parents of Afghani nationality, who had found refuge in Iran following the invasion of Afghanistan by the USSR in the 1980s. Iran gave very limited rights to the Afghani refugees and tries to

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<sup>1</sup> Premiere: September 2013, Platforma Contemporary Art Space, Bucharest. Written and Directed by Alice Monica Marinescu and David Schwartz; Music: Cătălin Rulea; Set and Costume Design: Adrian Cristea; Performers: Alex Fifea, Katia Pascariu, Mihaela Rădescu, Andrei Șerban, Silviana Vișan; with the Contribution of: Bashar Al-Kishawi, Margareta Eschenazy, Valentina Ivanov, Ahmad Marwi, Sana Rahimo.

limit the immigration process as much as possible. Ahmad's father, a former Imam of Turkmen ethnicity and Sunni religion in Afghanistan, was not able to find a permanent job in Iran, working instead as day-laborer in construction or recycling garbage. Ahmad and his brothers were not allowed to attend university because of their Afghani nationality. The whole family was constantly subjected to class and ethnic discrimination:

In Iran people would mock you, if you were Afghani. All kinds of stupid jokes: that Afghanis are stupid, that they are stuck in the past and live like they did 1000 years ago. And, the most stupid thing: when a child cries or doesn't behave, his mother tells him: if you keep crying, I will call the Afghanis to eat you! (Ahmad 2011)

In this context, Ahmad chose to go back to Afghanistan, in order to be able to attend university, with the purpose of helping his family out of poverty. In Afghanistan, he studied English and Computer Science. After 2006, when the situation in the country became even worse than in the first years of war, he managed, together with his girlfriend, Paradise, to get a Tajik visa and leave the country.

Legally, Ahmad was not allowed to travel anywhere. He did not have access to any visa. He couldn't even travel to Iran, even though he was born there and his parents were still there. Illegally, the black market has its own fares: a visa for Iran costs 1000 \$, a visa for Turkmenistan (where, being a Turkmen ethnic, he planned to apply for citizenship) costs 2000 \$ and the cheapest option, a Tajik visa – 500 \$. (Marinescu 2011, np, own translation)

In Tajikistan, a country that didn't sign the Geneva Treaty which establishes the rights of refugees, Ahmad and Paradise found jobs as English teachers. They were paid decently, even if worse than in Afghanistan, but were constantly subjected to harassment from the police: an absurd law forbids Afghani refugees from living and working inside the capital, where the majority of jobs can be found. Therefore, Ahmad and Paradise worked on the black market, without official

papers, and had to hide after dark, as they risked a consistent bribe or even expulsion in case of identification by the police.

The life story of these people, whom we eventually befriended, posed for us a range of questions and problems related to the artificiality of borders, the infringement of individuals' fundamental rights in the name of "nation-states", and to the concrete consequences of the global militarism and imperialism for the everyday men and women in "third world" countries.

[Ahmad] seems resigned and used to this situation, to the lack of alternatives, the lack of rights, the lack of a "welcoming" society, but nevertheless, he finds it "unfair" that the Afghans are treated like this by the rest of the world. Ahmad doesn't know what to do. He would like to get to the "real" world that he has seen in Germany. He doesn't know which way to go. And actually, he doesn't have many options. (Marinescu 2011, np, own translation)

Nevertheless, Ahmad was one of the few privileged Afghans who afforded the luxury of paying the 500 dollars in order to leave the country and who had a profession that allowed him to easily find a job abroad. The majority of Afghani citizens, as well as the big majority of people from extremely impoverished or war-torn areas from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe or Latin America cannot afford to move even to a different town.

In the current Romanian socio-economical context, the issue of emigration is much more visible than the problems of immigrants or refugees, because it directly affects the local context from an economic, political and personal perspective, but also because the number of emigrants is very big in comparison with the numbers of immigrants in general, and refugees in particular. The numbers of the latter is fairly small in comparison with other countries of the European Union.

### **Historical and social context – immigrants in post-Socialist Romania and the status of refugees**

The ethnic minorities in Romania are usually divided in two categories – the historical minorities (who have been living on Romanian territory before the Second World War) and the “recent” minorities, people who arrived during the Socialist period and, more often, after 1989.

Some of these immigrants came to Romania as foreign students during the Socialist period and chose to stay (usually following marriages with locals) or returned with their mixed families from their birth countries after the beginning of war conflicts (especially from Irak and Syria). Other migrants, mostly of Turkish, Arab and Chinese origin, came for business opportunities after 1989.

After the relative growth of the number of migrants, especially after Romania joined NATO and the EU, foreign citizens started to encounter difficulties in finding jobs. Immigrants, especially of Arab origin, face permanent discrimination, especially on the labor market:

Trying to show the nature of the problems, an Arab citizen invites me to talk to a potential employer from a commercial center, who, after I explained that the respective person doesn't need additional papers, told me: “you know how these foreigners are. They always make trouble. If I get an inspection and they find Iraki employees, what do I do? How do I explain it? They will fine me for sure, I won't be able to cover the fine with a month's salary! I don't want to complicate my situation. If you are so sure that they don't need extra-papers, find someone else to do charity for them (Guga 2011, 85, own translation).

Therefore, the problems on the labor market and discrimination make the immigrants more vulnerable in relation to the employers, having only two options: to diminish their wage demands, becoming a precarious workforce, or to find employers of similar ethnicity and/or religion.

A Romanian never hires an Arab unless the Arab is desperate and accepts working for nothing. And what can we do? That's why Arabs don't work

for Romanians – because they don't want to hire us (E, Iraqi citizen – Guga 2011, 87, own translation).

This situation, which apparently looks like a cultural problem, is actually functioning perfectly in the interest of capital (which benefits from a cheaper and more vulnerable workforce) and against the local workforce (disadvantaged by comparison with the immigrants who are forced to accept worse working conditions). This problem, which is currently rather small in Romania, is rampant in the Western countries, where precarious migrant workers are ubiquitous. As the Romanian artist Veda Popovici ironically noticed, a good part of this migrant workforce from some Western countries consists of Romanian workers, who face similar problems to those of the immigrants in Romania.

The Romanian citizens represent an awkward category of “foreigners” for the West. Never European enough, never civilized enough, never white enough. This representation is already applied, on a different level, to non-European persons in Western Europe. The Romanian public sphere borrowed this representation, forcing an apparent distance between the Romanian migrant abroad and the non-European migrant in Romania. But the two situations are not very much different (Popovici 2014, np, own translation).

The prejudices which affect the foreign citizens, especially the Arab and/or Muslim citizens, are also the direct consequence of the genuinely racist media assault coming from the Western media. The discriminatory propaganda, disseminated more aggressively after the 9/11 attacks in New York City, has been adopted without any critical reflection by a Romanian media which propagates the same stereotypes:

Also, they [the interviewed migrants] consider that the Arabs are constantly discriminated through the Romanian media channels, being often called “suspicious”, “terrorist” etc. This situation was perpetuated over time, influencing the negative Romanian public opinion towards the Arabs, and thus allowing their depiction as scape-goats, “judged without the presumption of innocence” (Guga 2011, 88, own translation).

In this context, when the immigrants face a relatively high degree of discrimination, the situation of the asylum seekers and stateless persons is even more difficult. According to the generally accepted definitions, a refugee is “A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to the respective country.” (Advocat.ro 2007, np, own translation) The persons who are in such situations enter Romania sometimes legally (usually with a tourist visa), but more often “illegally,” crossing the border. They usually deliver themselves to the authorities and ask for refugee status. While their application is being analyzed, they are placed in Centers for Hosting and Procedures for Asylum Seekers. They are allowed to leave these centers during daytime, but have to come back at night. They receive a minimum benefit, consisting of cosmetics, cloths and a symbolical amount for food (around 1 euro per day). During the asylum procedure, the refugees are not allowed to work. Beginning with 2007 (the year Romania joined the EU), the visa procedures, as well as the conditions for receiving a form of protection in Romania, became harsher following the directions of the European Union. Increased border security was one of the main requests for admission in the EU. Therefore, even though the Geneva Convention clearly states that no state should “expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened” (General <sup>1951</sup>, 137), the experience of social workers who deal with refugee rights shows that only around 10 percent of the asylum applications are accepted annually in Romania. There were several cases, both in Romania and abroad, of returned foreign citizens who were subsequently arrested, persecuted or even murdered in their countries of origin.

The number of refugees in Romania is relatively low in comparison to other states, around 2000 persons. The majority of them come from countries

affected by violent and sectarian conflicts, including Afghanistan, Iraq, Somalia, Syria, Libya and Palestine.

Although in theory they have almost the same rights as the other citizens (except for the political rights and the interdiction to return to their home-country), the situation of refugees is in reality much more complicated. The directions of the EU should protect them, but the law is usually interpretable and the bureaucracy ferocious. Even after earning the status of refugee, the refugees face the usual struggles of an immigrant: the language barriers, the prejudices of the natives, the difficulty to find work, the homesickness and the awareness of the fact that they might never see their home country again. This is especially true for the ones coming from areas of seemingly never-ending conflicts, such as Afghanistan or Somalia.

A Romanian state which, as a refugee told me with bitter humor, is not able to take care of or create jobs for, its own citizens, seems totally unprepared to face the refugee situation, considered a minor issue in the current economical-political situation.

The situation of the refugees is by definition a vulnerable one. They are never full citizens of a state, they carry with them the affliction of dislocation, their lives are permanently defined and directed by the bureaucratic apparatus of the nation states and by geo-political conflicts. Their mere belonging to an ethnic, religious or sexual category makes them targets in their own countries, but doesn't exempt them at all from discrimination and precarity in the adopted country.

The refugees are the scourge of nations, the persons who break up the foundation of nationalism, defined by the adherence to one people, one territory, one culture and set of traditions. The refugees are the ones who "don't belong" – and for them, special laws were issued, institutions and agencies were founded, shelters were built. (...) For them, such concepts as "human rights" are always interpretable, according to the interests of the ones who use them" (Guga 2014, 8, own translation).

Therefore, beyond the humanitarian problem of the refugee situation, the examination of these perspectives sets the frame for a broader historical-political reflection, about the dynamics of the global capitalist system, about the relation and inter-dependence between the Euro-Atlantic power core and the various peripheries and semi-peripheries of the world, about the effects of the imperial and expansionist policies disguised as “wars in the name of democracy”, about the West’s “new racism” (Balibar 1991, 20) that reframes the “foreigner”.

**“Euro-centrism” and “Orientalism” – Western racist discourse copycatted in the Romanian context**

In order to explain and frame more precisely the empirical situations encountered during the working process, as well as the historical-political origins of the racist discourses and behavior, I feel a short analysis of the West-East (or West-rest-of-the-world) dynamics in the capitalist (post-Renaissance) period is required. In this frame, I consider very useful the concepts of “Euro-centrism” and “Orientalism”, theorized by two Arab authors, the Egyptian political economist Samir Amin and the Palestinian-American literature theorist Edward Said.

Following the shift of the economical power core of the world from the Far East (China) and Middle East (Central Asia, the Arab Caliphate) towards Western Europe (the Italian cities, the Dutch cities, the British Empire) in the fifteenth century, Western Europe became quite suddenly the main economical, political and cultural force. But its development will inevitably depend on the promotion, by any means, of the “superiority” of the Western “civilization” and (white) race over all the others. The genocide of the indigenous populations, the colonizing of the other continents, the enslavement of Africans and indigenes could not find their theological-philosophical justification in the absence of this frame. Therefore, a rewriting of the whole history of history, science, culture and

the arts was undertaken in order to confirm the exceptionalism of the European “civilization”. This vision is called by Amin “Euro-centrism” (Amin 2009, np).

As Amin rightfully observes, once the West acquired superior military and economical capacities, it also arrogated to itself the right to represent others, to categorize and judge them. This action is called “Orientalism”, defined as “a political vision of reality that promotes the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, ‘we’) and the unknown (the Orient, the East, ‘them’)” (Said 1994, 43). According to Said, the Orient was perceived as a territory, a civilization, a culture which, if not inferior, at least one requiring correction from the West: “The Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgement, discipline, or governing” (Said 1994, 41).

Of course, this vision didn’t relate only to the (Far) East, but basically to all the non-Western territories, including, in literature for example, to the mythical Romanian-Hungarian Transylvania, projected in the mind of British writer Bram Stoker as the unknown, wild territory of the vampire Dracula. Furthermore, this vision established the basis for the racial theories of the 18<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, when some pseudo-scientific research proclaimed the absolute superiority of the Western European white (Arian) race.

If the classical racism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been, in theory, generally dismantled and condemned in the Western area, the new era of decolonization and post-Nazism managed to invent new forms of racism, what Etienne Balibar calls “Neo-racism”. This new racism is no longer based on “scientific” arguments, but on “geographic” or “cultural” ones:

It is a racism whose dominant theme is not biological heredity, but the insurmountability of cultural differences, a racism which, at first sight, does not postulate the superiority of certain groups of peoples in relation to others but “only” the harmfulness of abolishing frontiers, the

incompatibility of life-styles and traditions; in short, it is what P. A. Taguieff has rightly called a *differentialist* racism (Balibar 1991, 21).

This racism is characteristic of the post-colonial period, when the migration wave was reversed and Europe became, from the main emigration zone, the main “target” for immigrants. Therefore, the immigrants became the main victims of the Western racism. This “differentialist” racism which promotes the “impossibility” of cohabitation between cultures and the lack of will/capacity of a certain “culture” to “integrate” into the Western culture is by no means a new concept. It was also conceived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and on similar Orientalist bases in the form of Anti-Semitism: “A racism which does not have the pseudo-biological concept of race as its main driving force has always existed, and it has existed at exactly this level of secondary theoretical elaborations. Its prototype is Anti-Semitism” (Balibar 1991, 23).

This continuity is super-obvious in the case of Arabphobia and Islamophobia, which operate with arguments perfectly similar to the Anti-Semitic ones, and fall under the same “Orientalist” view that frames the (Oriental) foreigner as fundamentally different and unable to assimilate.

The Romanian context is a particular one. On one hand, the Romanian Principalities were placed geographically in Central Europe, but culturally, at least until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Moldova and Wallachia were under major Oriental influence. The Orthodox religion is an Oriental one *par excellence*, the alphabet used until the 18<sup>th</sup> century was the Cyrillic and the Western calendar was adopted only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, the rediscovery and valorization of the Latin basis of the Romanian language was part of the nation-state project, generated the idea of a Latin (therefore Occidental) island in a Slavic (Oriental) sea and thus enhanced the entry of the Romanian Principalities (and subsequently of Romania) under Western political and cultural influence. The pro-Western choice was definitely a strategic one, aimed to protect the Romanian countries

from the two main local expansionist Empires (the Czarist and the Ottoman). But the pro-Latin agenda that supported the re-Latinizing of the language and culture was mostly successful in the long term – most Romanians feel closer to Western Europe, which has become a sort of economic, cultural and political “role model”.

Nevertheless, for the West, Romania is still largely a mysterious Oriental state in all respects – from the permanent historical and geographical confusions of many Westerners (the idea that Romania was part of the USSR, the confusion between Bucharest and Budapest etc.) to the racist discourse and actions of most European states towards Romanian immigrants – the anti-worker campaigns and laws in the U.K., the expulsions of the Romanian Roma immigrants from France, the racist attacks in Italy etc.

In this framework, when it is more and more evident that the EU is a non-egalitarian structure that works for the benefits of the Central and Northern European states, in which the position of Romania is a marginal, submissive one, a big part of the Romanian intellectual and political elite still “identifies” itself with the West in a continuous process of self-colonization. This elite keeps praising “Western civilization”, always in anti-thesis with the “primitivism”, “barbarism”, more recently “Communism”, of the Romanian popular classes.

Historically, Romanian intellectuals have manifested a blatant anti-Semitism since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, occasionally influenced by “Oriental” religious (Orthodox) views, but more often founded on the same Western Orientalist principles of “non-assimilation” and “parasitism” of the Jews. The examples of Romanian Anti-Semite intellectuals and politicians are widespread.<sup>2</sup> Here is a relevant fragment of a Parliamentary discourse by the national poet and politician Vasile

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<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive description of the Antisemitism of the Romanian elite, see Carol Iancu, *Evreii din România 1866-1918: de la excludere la emancipare* [Jews in Romania 1866-1918: from Exclusion to Emancipation] (Iancu 1996) or Leon Volovici, *Ideologia naționalistă și problema evreiască. Eșeu despre formele antisemitismului intelectual în România anilor `30* [The Nationalist Ideology and the Jewish Problem. Essay on the various forms of intellectual Anti-Semitism in Romania in the `30s] (Volovici 1995).

Alecsandri, from 1879, which is relevant for the similarities with differentialist Western Anti-Semitism: “What is this new invasion? Who are these invaders? (...) they are the supporters of the blindest religious fanaticism, the most exclusivist of all the inhabitants of the earth, the most incapable of assimilation in other nations” (Iancu 1996, 240, own translation).

While in the Socialist period, the racist discourse was officially forbidden (though the ethnic discrimination of Jews and Hungarians became more and more common in the later years of the regime), in the post-1989 period racism became more and more widespread in the public sphere. The Anti-Semitic attacks, meanwhile, largely condemned in the Western world after the Holocaust, were rather scarce and instrumented mostly by the extreme right. But, in the general context of Anti-Roma racist discourse visible all over Western Europe, following the post-socialist emigration process, the racist attacks against the Roma communities became widespread among Romanian intellectuals and politicians.

The most shocking Anti-Roma declarations came from Adrian Cioroianu, otherwise a respected historian and Minister of Foreign Affairs at the time. He proposed no less than confining Roma offenders into concentration camps in North-Africa:

These people should not be placed in common cells with TV sets. They should be forced to the hardest labor and put in disciplinary battalions. (...) I was in the middle of the desert [in Egypt] and I was thinking if we could buy land in the Egyptian desert to relocate these people who are a disgrace to us (Blagu 2007, own translation).

The quote is relevant from the frightening perspective of the comparison with the Nazi camps, organized similarly on foreign land by the Romanian state (in occupied Pridnestrovie), but also from the Orientalist perspective. In Cioroianu’s imaginary, the territory that is most suitable for Roma “offenders” is the Arab-African Maghreb. One would have difficulties imagining Cioroianu placing his camps, for example, in the Finnish tundra.

Another interesting case is the one of another respected Romanian historian, Lucian Boia, who, aiming to analyze the “problem” of the relation between Romanians and the Roma minority, formulates similar “Orientalist” stereotypes: the Roma are presented as a homogenous mass of “uncivilized” people, who live by their own rules and resist assimilation: “To equal “Gypsy” with “criminal” is definitely abusive. But it is equally true that they live in a world of their own, where the constraints of the modern world do not apply” (Boia 2007, 240, own translation).

Boia is also the prototype for the intellectual “in love” with “Western” culture, obsessed with the danger of “the End of the West”. He even published a book with the same title, which is rife with Euro-centrist ideas, some of them simply hilarious: “The planetary civilization today is the Western civilization, absorbed and adapted, of course, in different ways. The others [non-Westerners] didn’t invent anything essential: from the electric bulb to democracy, everything came out of the Western laboratory. We can ask ourselves where would we have been without the West? Who knows? Perhaps America wouldn’t have been discovered” (Boia 2013, 28-29, own translation).

In the post-socialist period, this rudimentary neo-racism promoted by the intellectual, pro-European elites, together with the Western (North-American) and local media propaganda, joined the traditional popular fear of the “other”, of the “different”. The quasi-totality of our meetings with Arab, African and Muslim immigrants confirms the discriminatory and humiliating behaviors these people were subject to in relation with common men and women, but also with the authorities.

**The Research Process and the Elaboration of the Text “Born in the Wrong Place”. The Problem of “Representation” vs. the Vulnerability of the Refugees.**

The preliminary research period on the situation and problems of refugees had several components: a series of interviews, informal discussions and meetings with refugees and former refugees; meetings and discussions with sociologists and social workers involved in collaborations with migrants and refugees; and reading and checking several materials that refer to the situation of refugees, from national and European legislation, to various studies and testimonies regarding the violence and abuses suffered by these groups.

From the first meetings, we confronted a problem that was going to be at the core of our actions: most of the asylum seekers are afraid to talk publicly because of their volatile status. Even refugees – and refugees who became Romanian citizens – are reluctant to openly discuss their struggles and voicing their opinions, still feeling “foreign” and vulnerable, and afraid of the Romanian authorities and the public opinion. In most cases, refugees prefer to find individual solutions or to ask for help from specialized NGOs.

Several problems similar with the ones of the Afghani refugees in Tajikistan have been confirmed by the research process: the opacity and racism of the authorities, the exasperating bureaucracy, the lack of help and cooperation from many locals, and the difficult economic situation, in the context of an impoverished semi-peripheral state. Beyond these social problems, that will emerge also in the text, we encountered several humane, psychological and communitarian problems, that enabled us to reflect on a series of fundamental questions often ignored by non-refugees: what is the significance of “Fatherland”? Where is the place where one feels “at home”? How does it feel to leave separated from your parents, brothers, relatives and closest friends? What is the sensation when you know you will never see your birth-place again? What is the impact of

religion, ethnicity, nationality and geography over one's destiny? These are questions that also certainly rise in the minds of the millions of Romanians who left to work abroad, but which are even more striking for the refugees. In this context, we felt the need to also introduce in the text the story of a Romanian who personally suffered the experience of exile. After several discussions, we chose to interview a Jewish lady from Bucharest, who took refuge in Uzbekistan during the Fascist period.

During the research, we became more and more interested in the relation between the micro-histories of everyday struggles of these people and the global macro-history of the major geopolitical conflicts. The majority of refugees come from territories affected by armed conflicts. Generally, the local Romanian perspective towards these conflicts is neutral, uninvolved, or even a positive one (the thesis of "war for peace" according to which the wars held by NATO and the US, together with their allies, including Romania, are "just" wars, that will enable the "democratization" and "civilization" of third world countries). Therefore, it became very important to us to transmit the perspective of the victims of these wars.

Also, during the time of research, studying several laws, manuals and reports, we became more aware of a contrast which will structure the play: the fundamental opposition between the "letter of law" (the rights of individuals, as they are stipulated by various international and national laws) and the concrete, real situation of the persons affected by these laws.

From the beginning we aimed to write a text based on personal histories, eventually transmitted through the verbatim method. During the research process we faced the problems of "representation" and lack of "self-representation" of the refugees more strongly. From the discussions with them, and with several other activists for refugees' rights, the main problem they face is the ignorance and insufficient media exposure of their struggles. The cultural or civic events of

several groups of refugees are, most of the time, strictly communitarian events that do not reach the majority of the population. The activity of the organizations that work with refugee rights, even when it is well-intentioned, faces the lack of funding, and focuses mainly on resolving concurrent concrete problems of the refugees. As a direct consequence, the majority of the population is completely unfamiliar with the struggles, the situation and the life-stories of the refugees.

Therefore, the idea of a text (and a performance) which made these struggles and stories visible seemed to us an urgent matter. At the same time, the research process made it clear that at least for the time being, a project of self-representation (i.e., a play performed by the refugees themselves) would have been difficult to realize and ethically problematic. This is the case, on one hand, because the vast majority of these people do not want to expose themselves in public and, on the other hand, because we wanted to avoid by all means the feeling of a “zoo”, inevitable when publicly exposing a social and ethnic group perceived as “exotic” for a middle class audience. This idea was also emphasized by Bashar Al-Kishawi, one of the refugees who collaborated with us during the whole process: “When you talk to a person, he will tell you his story in an intimate environment, but if you put him in front of the public, I think he will run away and he will think that the people look at him like a monkey in the zoo” (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation).

We chose a variant of verbatim text written to be performed by actors, in which we aimed to transmit, as truthfully and completely as possible, the perspectives, stories and opinions of refugees from different countries, of different ages and sexes. The selection of the stories was based mainly on the willingness of the people to discuss details and experiences, and their approval to have their stories performed in a theatre play. We chose a structure of alternate monologues, based on five personal stories: a Palestinian born in Kuwait, who came to Romania in 1991 as a student and was compelled to stay because of an

interdiction to return to Kuwait; a Serbian woman who took refuge in Romania together with her husband and children, following the Kosovo war; an Iraqi Christian woman, who fled the war and religious persecutions which began after the occupation of Iraq by the US; the story of the old Jewish woman who took refuge in Soviet Uzbekistan, during the Fascist regime; and the story of Ahmad, the young Afghani we met in Tajikistan. The five stories have many things in common – the escape from war, the ethnic and religious persecution, the dismantling of families and impossibility to return “home”, the embracement of a new “Motherland”, perceived as their own country, but where the people are still perceived as “foreign”, the bureaucracy and lack of basic rights in the “adoptive” states. The stories are alternated in the text and even though the narration jumps from Kuwait to Serbia, from Uzbekistan to Romania, and from 1940 to 2010, the five story-tellers narrate somehow the same story: a sort of universal story of refuge, in which the lives of millions of persons could mirror, each with their own particular experience, but all united by the same struggles. The text mixes experiences and memories from the home country of each person with experiences from the Romanian context, including the local bureaucracy and the every-day interactions.

One last common element, that surprisingly emerged in the research process, and that we eventually included in the final version of the text was the relation of several refugees to the Romanian Roma minority. Though, in theory, it would seem that someone who personally experienced discrimination would be more open towards other ethnic groups, from the discussions with several migrants came out all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices towards Roma. Many were enforced by negative personal experiences (minor conflicts with aggressive Roma men, beggars or fellow workers), but several generalizations and prejudices were only borrowed without reflection from the mass-media discourse or from other non-Roma Romanians. Finally, we decided to introduce these fragments in the

play as a counterpoint, meant to reverse the context for a moment, in order to see that (some of the) discriminated persons can also become discriminators. It was important for us to state, on one hand, the fact that national racial stereotypes are so strong that they are easily assumed by non-Romanians too, and on the other hand, that no person, regardless of the discrimination he/she suffers, is free from behaving discriminatorily in other contexts. This fragment will prompt some of the most intense debates during the post-performance talks and create proper circumstances for pointing out that anybody, including us, the artists, can become oppressive in certain contexts and that permanent self-examination is always necessary.

The first draft of the text was ready at the end of 2011. We would have to wait more than a year until the national premiere in Bucharest.

**“Migration Stories” – Project for Making Visible the Stories and Struggles of Refugees. The Involvement and Collaboration Between Artists and Storytellers in the Creative Process**

The project “Migration Stories”, developed in 2013 and funded by the Ministry of Culture, consisted in the developing of the theatre performance “Born in the Wrong Place” and 9 representations of the respective piece, performed in Bucharest and in two other cities that hold Centers for Hosting and Procedures for Asylum Seekers.

All the performances were followed by debates with the public, conceived as part of the event, in which the artists, refugees and large audience discussed the main subject and problems reflected in the play. All the performances had free access for the public. In total, over 1000 people attended the events.

The main goals of the project were: the promotion in the public agenda and the debate of the struggles of refugees; and the critical analysis, in a public frame, of the geo-political power relations that structure the contemporary

capitalist world-system. I will further refer to the work process of developing the performance itself.

The process had several stages: choosing the casting; a second period of research, done together with the actors; the elaboration of the concept of the performance; the rehearsals; a series of public rehearsals and feed-back sessions, in which refugees and other migrants took part, including those whose stories are part of the text. The work of production, directing and dramaturgy was shared by Monica Marinescu and myself.

Together with the actors and actresses we started a second phase of the research process, part of which consisted of each of them meeting the person whose life story they were going to transmit in the performance. The actor that was going to tell the story of Ahmad met with him through online means. During the discussions with the story-tellers, the actors found further details from their biography, discussed the performance and how the refugees saw a performance about their life-stories, recorded interviews that laid the base for an updated enriched version of the text. Besides this, some of them really became friends and spent time together. Besides these meetings, the performers also researched the historical, geographical, political and economic context of the story-tellers' lives, trying to deepen the understanding of their personal experiences, but also the geopolitical background. Part of the research and learning process, we also held several theoretical discussions and practical exercises regarding the life-experiences of refugees. The research process has been, for the performers, as well as for us, one of permanent learning and self-education on topics which are rather invisible in the Romanian context.

From the beginning we aimed, as much as possible, to avoid the exterior elements that could bring the feeling of "strangeness" and "exoticism". Therefore, we aimed to find visual and sound solutions as neutral as possible, to move away from any ethnic-folkloric, exoticizing landmark. We decided that the only obvious

sign of “foreignness” should be the accent used in the Romanian language. We felt it was important that the performers tried to reproduce, as precise as possible, the accent, first as proof of respect for the persons who shared their stories, the accent being a distinction pertaining to the personal manner of narration and interpretation of the world and not a linguistic/theatrical gimmick. For us it was very important that when the respective persons come to see the performance they would be able to recognize their “voice”, like they would listen to an audio recording of their testimonies. At the same time, we needed the emotional distance, in the Brechtian sense, that would allow the spectator to remember from time to time that on the stage there are performers-story-tellers that transmit others’ personal stories, and not “real refugees” or “interpreters”. So, we chose to alternate moments when one performer tells a personal story of a refugee with interventions of a “choir” when all five performers tell fragments of one of the stories together, borrowing the respective accent. In this way, we tried to make clear the fact that the performers are collectively telling histories that are generally kept silent, and do not assume, or steal, the identity of the real persons.

A very important situation in the rehearsals relates to the part in which several refugees talk about the Roma in a stereotypical manner. In the text, that moment is followed by a fragment from the Romanian Constitution, quoted in the guide for obtaining Romanian citizenship, which states that “Romania is the home country of all its citizens, regardless of their race, nationality, ethnic background, language, religion, sex, opinion, political views, wealth or social origin.” (Constituția 1990, np, own translation) One of the actors, Andrei Șerban, a Roma performer, involved in Roma rights activism, insisted on being the one who would read the respective fragment in the show. And he read it in a virulent, vehement manner, straight towards the public, aiming to stop the discriminatory debate, and, ideally, to shake the prejudices of the spectators too, reminding them of the principles on which, theoretically, the Romanian state is based. This kind of

gesture is very meaningful from my point of view, as it states the difference between the “interpreter-actor” who “plays” the role, better or worse, and the activist-performer who believes 100% in the intentions and aims of the performance and who states his political views in every play.

### **The Involvement of the Refugees in the Working Process and their Opinions about the Performance**

As stated by Edward Said, the main characteristic of Orientalism is the wish (and power) of the West to “represent” the Orient, to be the one that names and defines what and how is the “Oriental”. Therefore, even though we, as Romanians and Eastern-Europeans, and furthermore, as a group of partly minority artists, are rather far from the Western privileges, the danger of assuming the right to “represent” others, especially a group as vulnerable and excluded as the refugees, is still there. Even though we aimed to avoid such an approach as much as possible, the decisive test, from our team’s point of view, was not only the confrontation of our work with groups of refugees, but firstly with the ones whose stories are part of the show. Our intention was to receive feedback and collaborate with them during the rehearsals. The most receptive to this approach was Bashar Al-Kishawi, who took part in the rehearsals, photo-documented the shows, translated the play into Arabic, promoted the show in the Palestinian community, and also for a broader audience: “The fact that I live here, in Romania, for 22 years and the fact that I lived separated from my parents, that I haven’t seen them for 16-17 years, this was the main reason to get involved so deep [in the project], because there are probably many people like me.” (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation)

Bashar also proposed that the person who would tell his story in the performance be called Selim, in the memory of his uncle who, when was fired from work in Kuwait because of his Palestinian origin, killed himself: “I

translated the text into Arabic, and regarding the name of my character, I wanted him to be called Selim. I wanted to pay an homage to a man that I very much respected and who, when facing a situation similar with my own, took his life. I learnt a lot from my uncle, he was an extraordinary person” (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation).

Of course, Bashar’s proposal was more than welcome, and thus the performance earned a new dimension, at the human and social level, of an homage to the silent victims of ethnic discrimination. Therefore, the theatre experience became much more than plain “representation”, an experience of artists and story-tellers sharing and expressing their perspectives. As Helen Nicholson (2014) also observes, our shared experience was one of gift-giving and exchange. Bashar’s participation, though not embodied, was active and meaningful, at the most personal level.

The level of involvement of each story-teller refugee was different, from the complete involvement of Bashar, who practically became a member of the team, to the lower level involvement of others. All story-tellers who have seen the show had similar reactions, guided first by the emotion of recognizing their own life stories, re-transmitted in a respectful and faithful manner. Bashar remembers in an interview: “I was hearing my story and closing my eyes, trying to live again those moments (...) I had a unique sentiment, like I was watching pictures from my childhood or a very old video. This experience is very real. There are parts of the play when you can see me crying” (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation).

Mrs. Eschenazy, the former Uzbekistan refugee, recalls similar impressions, telling me, during an informal discussion that “it is incredible the sentiment you have when seeing your whole life in front of your eyes”. For Sonia Ivanov, the Serbian refugee, the most important part is the political-educational goal, of telling real hard life stories: “People have to see the other side of life too, not only the nice parts. The nice parts cover the ugly ones, but in life there is more

ugliness. People who only want to see nice theatre are people who are afraid of life, afraid of the truth” (Marinescu 2013, 8-9, own translation).

Bashar, too, considers the educational component the most important, both for the broader audience and for the asylum seekers themselves:

I believe that, beyond the artistic part, any story, any movie, any play has to make you think and have an educational goal. (...) Among asylum seekers and refugees there are people who are afraid. (...) and it is good to see the play, in order to know that it is their right, as human beings, to live under safe conditions (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation).

Beyond the common educational goals, each storyteller has a personal aim for which they share their life experiences. Often enough, for the refugees the aim focuses on a traumatic experience they want to make public, because it is silenced, because they feel they have experienced injustice and/or because they want to prevent similar things from happening.

For Mrs. Eschenazy, the main goal of her personal story is not so much related to the persecution of her family and her refugee, and more to the present-day, struggles – she was forced to enter a Senior Home, after she was violently and abruptly evicted from her house in Bucharest. For her, this part of her story in the show was the main emotional trigger.

For Ms. Ivanov, the main aim relates to the trauma of war: “For me, it is very important to talk about the war, I lived my whole live in war. I don’t want to stay silent, I want to state that the war is a catastrophe which destroys not only individuals, but an entire people. I always say: May God see to it that no country goes through what my country went through!” (Marinescu 2013, 8-9, own translation).

For Bashar, the main problem at a personal level relates to his Palestinian identity, heavily oppressed internationally, and to the impossibility to visit Gaza, the land where his grandparents lived and died:

I liked it that you chose a lady of Jewish origin in the play alongside me, a Palestinian. I was very impressed by her story and wanted to meet her.

Because, beyond the Holocaust, her story as a human being is very meaningful. I liked it when she said that she didn't want to go neither to Palestine, nor to Israel (...) If all the Jewish population would have been like her, probably (...) we, my parents and others, wouldn't have been forced to leave their country (Fifea 2013, 6-7, own translation).

From the opinions of the people involved, one can extract the fact that the performance was successful in transmitting not just the exact words, superficially, but rather their points of view, the perspectives that they share and find important and which need to be voiced. From this point of view, in my opinion the text and the performance succeeded in their initial goal – building a frame in which the stories of refugees will be transmitted as authentic as possible, complete and in detail, though mediated and reassembled through the filter of the artistic team.

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