



Andrei Șerban at Martin E. Segal Theatre Center, October 5, 2009

ANDREI ȘERBAN AND THE TRAVELING ACADEMY: ABOUT CREATIVITY AND THE INNER SELF

Corina Șuteu

In 1990, immediately after the fall of communism, Andrei Șerban arrived in Romania from the United States. He was invited at the time to become managing director of the National Theatre in Bucharest. Șerban eagerly accepted the offer and soon took over the difficult challenge, perfectly aware that there was much to be done and that the results had to be both immediately visible and quantifiable in the long term. He was ready to try to reshape the post-communist Romanian theatre and give it a new form and creative energy, capable of nourishing fresh beginnings. He stubbornly strove to turn this energy into the seeding ground for a decontaminated emotional life to be offered to the people of Romania, who had been so alienated and enfeebled by their totalitarian past.

But more than anything else, Șerban's determination to participate in starting the engine of a new society brought the free arts back to center stage. This was his hubristic challenge and splendidly idealistic ambition. Was theatre before the fall of communism in Romania of artistic value? Of course it was. It was perhaps one of the few spaces where human breathing had still been possible, thanks to directors like Gheorghe Harag, Cătălina Buzoianu, Valeriu Moiescu, Dinu Cernescu, Victor Ioan Frunză, Silviu Purcărete, Mihai Măniuțiu, Alexandru Dabija, Alexandru Darie, and Tompa Gábor. But we, all of us living in Romania, felt like prisoners. And being a prisoner is not being free. It is as simple as that. Andrei Șerban was free.

By 1990, Șerban had already enjoyed widespread international recognition and was an acclaimed figure in both theatre and opera. By agreeing to come back home at this time, Șerban offered a precious gift to the Romanian theatre community. The miracle happened. In less than three years, he succeeded in reviving a moribund and lumbering institution like the Bucharest National Theatre. He reshaped the theatre to train Romanian actors for his Greek Trilogy (*Medea*, *Trojan Women*, and *Elektra*) and to stir, shake, and infuse with new rampant inspiration the formerly propaganda-laden theatrical arena. Romanian theatre was once again on the world map, reborn by his magical touch, and ready to vibrate internationally. "It was an unforgettable summer,"



The Greek Trilogy at the Romanian National Theatre in Bucharest, 1990,
directed by Andrei Șerban

he confessed in his 2006 book *O Biografie (A Biography)*, remembering the first season of this rebirth. “Everyone was so passionate and so committed to work!” But miracles last for three days only, according to a Romanian proverb. In 1993 he was off again. Post-communist repercussions were difficult to stop, and an unparalleled moment of freedom and redemption for the Romanian performing arts was drawing to an end. Şerban’s critical role in having made the artistic revolution more true and more effective than the political one had taken its toll. He felt his project blocked again by post-revolutionary inertia and growing nostalgia for the comfort of an already known and clichéd kind of theatre.

Andrei Şerban resumed his exile in the USA—by choice this time. After that, the burning question was how to bring renewed energy to Romanian theatre artists. It took many years. But in early 2004, by pure coincidence (although we know “coincidence is God’s alibi,” as Cocteau says), due to a workshop with actors and theatre directors from Balkan countries organized in Romania, Şerban was invited to return to the country to work, and a new phase of his creative relationship with his fatherland started.

The central reason for his return was, surely, nostalgia, and a yearning to work again in his mother tongue. But an additional reason was a need to move on and exist in the present, both in his American and Romanian present—a lesson that New York City teaches all of us who live here! The artist needed to return to his roots and, because between 1993 and 2004 a new generation of actors had emerged in Romania, he needed to see where they stood, and what were the wellsprings of their creative stamina. Here they were: hungry for everything that was inaccessible now that almost everything seemed accessible; ignorant about the range of human emotional capabilities and the need for discipline and research within the emotionally intricate landscape, unaware of their own inner potential—on the one hand, overwhelmed with information and, on the other, cut off from essential sources.

This is how the idea of an Andrei Şerban Traveling Academy was born. The director no longer nourished idealistic ambitions about working in Romania, and he was himself at a different artistic stage in life. He became engaged even more deeply in what Basarab Nicolescu calls “a theatre of spirituality,” of inner values, of self-introspection, all of which he translated in a unique performative extravaganza. Working with his own Master’s degree students at Columbia University and concentrating much of his energy on the

transmission of his ideas, Șerban preserved his extraordinary capacity to stage artistic universes that are at the same time funny and mysterious, light and complex, bold and fragile. The actors and students he worked with felt this profundity of the search he proposed, this double-faced persona of the artist, capable of arousing in each of them the most deeply buried creative skills that could be revealed in epiphanies.

All actors need the touch of a maestro, but Romanian actors need it perhaps more than others today, as there is a critical missing link in all formerly traumatized societies—the link between reality and the inner, emotional self. Violent, aggressive social changes (like the post-communist transition in Romania) do not allow time for emotional intelligence to develop. These changes focus all attention on practicality, ownership, territoriality, property recuperation and pragmatism. The arts are left behind. This is the moment when a sensitive artistic figure and his Traveling Academy are most needed!

Theatre can regain at such a juncture its crucial role as a critical mirror of truth in the face of politics, market dominated impulses, and society. Șerban's choices about how to develop the Academy were, therefore, not chosen at random.

In its first year, the artist decided he wanted to do a play based on the controversial novel published in 2006, *Spovedanie la Tanacu (Deadly Confession)*. The production became a docudrama describing the case of a young orphan girl—stranded in a small Moldavian monastery, mentally sick and in love with her former roommate at the orphanage—who dies under mysterious circumstances, apparently having been subjected to an exorcism by the monastery's head priest (a stubbornly orthodox young man, a great believer in his own vocation, but also trapped by his faulty views regarding power struggles and the limits of Christian dedication). The incident was sensational, real, and disturbing and had been covered by the international media as one of the hottest topics. Andrei Șerban organized a retreat, selected a number of young artists, and went for two weeks to work with the author, Tatiana Niculescu Bran (with whom he turned the novel into a theatrical scenario, using a great variety of workshop techniques and pushing the actors to develop strong and productive interior discipline). Some of the actors left; the subject was too strange, too sensitive, too troubling. But this was what the Academy sought to explore: questions such as what is theatre and why do we work in theatre if not to convey another reality, transcending the prosaic one. For the



Ellen Stewart and Andrei Șerban at La MaMa, 2007,
following the presentation of Andrei Șerban Traveling Academy's *Deadly Confession*



Andrei Șerban Traveling Academy presents *Deadly Confession* at La MaMa, 2007

actors that stayed, the message came through. Șerban found ways to enable the performers to acquire perspective, gain distance, and achieve discipline and rigor. The retreat ended with the promise to pursue the work in NYC.

The work continued, and a performance was mounted and premiered at La MaMa. The Romanian actors were touched by the unexpected appearance at the premiere of Ellen Stewart. All the energies and emotions generated during the weeks of intense work came alive in the performance, and the spectators could not stop their questions after the show. *Deadly Confessions* was soon recreated in Romania and produced by a major company there, the Odeon. This Romanian production toured Europe and gave its last performance in Paris, at the very special theatre space of *d'hôtel des Bague*, with Peter Brook in attendance at one of the performances.

In Romania, the performance gave rise to heated debate: Is this the image we want to give of our country? Is the priest guilty or is he innocent? The performance seemed to reduce his responsibility and suggest that we are all socially responsible for what is right or wrong in our society. Spectators found the performance overpowering, but necessary. Intellectuals wrote in awe about how the production probed critically different facets of reality, while actors and directors argued admiringly about the mixture of documentary and fictional levels in the text. As always, Șerban had touched the right cords, painful ones at times, and the powerful reactions on the part of audiences proved how well the Academy had succeeded in giving meaning and depth to theatre making in Romania. The participating actors were full of gratitude and faith; they were never the same again back in their home theatres, and still today they remain clear about what theatre should be ever since undergoing this experience.

A second cycle of the Academy was supposed to start in 2009: a workshop during summer and a journey to New York, concluding in a performance. At least this was the intention. This time, Șerban wanted to do a play about the sculptor Brancusi, but the texts that he was able to obtain were not inspiring. So, he decided to plunge headlong into contemporary Romanian literature, choose new texts, and start a two-week retreat in Horezu, close to Brancusi's birthplace. Was it the place, the rediscovered pleasure of working freely and with no predispositions, the excellent actors who came to the auditions, the ambiance of the nearby village, or the silent recollections induced by the landscape . . . no one will ever know, but the effect of this second Traveling Academy workshop was magical. Special energies echoed a

special state of mind, the new group of young actors discovered that theatre is about the self, the quest for self, and the rendering of this understanding to the others.

In 2010, after having achieved an *état de grace*, the group found that mounting a production seemed futile and inconsistent for the New York phase. Hence, New York was this time more of a follow-up for the sake of international perspective. The ten participating actors and visual artist Matei Branea joined Andrei Şerban for a special event of the Traveling Academy, presented on October 5, in collaboration with the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center at the CUNY Graduate Center. An interactive and splendidly alive evening with filmed images and discussions about the Academy closed this second cycle. The young actors who accompanied Şerban and demonstrated the Academy's training exercises were Ioana Barbu, Andreea Bibiri, Lia Bugnar, Boris Gaza, Radu Iacoban, Marius Manole, Maria Obretin, Liliana Pană, Ioana Pavelescu, and Matei Rotaru. Included as part of the evening at the Segal Center, Şerban launched a new, two volume retrospective album—*Andrei Şerban: My Journey in Theatre and Opera*, edited by the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and published by the Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House in Bucharest. As the album and the presentation by the Traveling Academy proved, Şerban's work is global in scope, intergenerational in influence, and unending in duration. The Traveling Academy, as a live process, can never predict what will happen to it. This time the experience was both integrated and disintegrated, as a spiraling cycle of evolution creating bridges between its phases and leaving the past to the past.

“But thy eternal summer shall not fade,” says a Shakespearian sonnet. The mystery of transmission and understanding through theatre can only remain intact if the unforgettable summer that Andrei Şerban brought to Romanian theatre in the 90s never fades. The Traveling Academy exists to make this desire feasible.

The Andrei Şerban Traveling Academy was launched at the initiative of Corina Şuteu, the director of the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York, and is a laboratory-like setting created for young actors in Romania, allowing them to “evade from what one already knows and reinvent oneself from the scratch,” as one of the participating actors referred to his work in the Academy's workshops. The Academy is organized in Romania and the U.S. by the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and Bucharest.



Andrei Șerban Traveling Academy 2009 demonstration at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

CORINA ȘUTEU is the director of the Romanian Cultural Institute New York. She started her career as a theatre critic in Romania, and has served as the director of the Theatre Union of Romania (UNITER) and Theatrum Mundi in Bucharest. In 1995 she founded the first regional training program in cultural management for Eastern European professionals, the ECUMEST program. She has worked extensively as independent trainer, consultant, and researcher in the fields of European cultural cooperation and cultural management. She is author of *Another Brick in the Wall: A Critical Review of Cultural Management Education in Europe* (2006) and of numerous articles and studies.

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Andrei Șerban Traveling Academy demonstration at the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center

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