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I. INTRODUCTION

When lockdown began, in March 2020, the stage designer Andu Dumitrescu, together with the director Radu Nica, was rehearsing *Pool (No Water)*, by Mark Ravenhill, at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj. Then everything changed. The theatre suddenly filled with padlocked doors. And yet opening night still had to go ahead. The rehearsals moved from the stage to Zoom and the actors' flats. Rehearsals were held with each actor in turn, at every possible hour of the day. Everyone juggled their schedules so as not to disturb family members or interrupt their children's online lessons. A solution was arrived at whereby the actors would film themselves at home on their phones. That is, with each of them in a different setting, with different lighting, a different sound, leaving the stage designer Andu Dumitrescu the task of finding a way to bring them all together. The set became exclusively virtual. Clearly, the concept and form were now wholly different from what was originally intended. It began to resemble an arthouse film in which the role of the stage designer was indispensable. It was he who chose the framing, he who chose the individual shots and angles, he who created the background for the recordings made exclusively on phones. And he who would edit the material employing an array of different video effects.

A typical scenario for 2020, the year Zoom exploded and theatre moved to the virtual stage. An emergency solution, like so many others. But for some Romanian stage designers, the solutions adopted during that year gave them an unexpected edge. In the enforced circumstances of the pandemic, those who were already working regularly with new media would enjoy more influence and significantly more freedom. The next step was for them to detach themselves from the directors they had been working with and to undertake their own projects, exploring new

frontiers. I will discuss here three Romanian stage designers with a considerable number of stage productions under their belts: Andu Dumitrescu, Mihai Păcurar and Adrian Damian. Each has a rich career behind them. They have collaborated with leading directors and worked on many different productions for the seven national theatres of Romania, to be found in the country's largest cities, theatres with the best technical equipment and the largest budgets for staging productions. Ever since the pandemic, the three stage designers have focused on visual and performative installations, real time projects, video game theatre, to give just a few examples. Of course, they continued to work in theatre together with their partner directors. In their own projects, when not producing classic or multimedia designs for a show they are working on together with a director, they retain elements from the language of theatre, the script, narrative structure, characters. But the new media they employ, being heavily technology-based, change the picture entirely. Free of the constraints of a conventional script, their ideas aim to intensify the immersive quality and level of fluidity. All of the projects discussed in this article are centred on interactivity, absorbing the spectator, the viewer or visitor with consummate ease. The relationship between immersion in space, whether physical or virtual, and real time becomes essential.

All of the projects discussed here, beyond their experimental nature, investigate a social or topical subject. *Algoritm/Algorithm*, by Andu Dumitrescu, and *Podul/The Bridge*, by Adrian Damian, discuss the condition of man in the technological age, the way technology influences interpersonal relationships. *În timp ce locuiesc/While We Reside*, the installation by Mihai Păcurar, ponders people's relationship towards the city in which they live, in this case Cluj-Napoca. *Dia-Pozitiv/Dia-Positive* speaks to the trauma suffered by children whose parents leave to work abroad for many years. Mihai

Păcurar's performative installation *Interior – lumină/Interior – Light* takes matters further by projecting man into the universal flux. *Network of Emotions*, the installation by Adrian Damian, looks at people's relationship with the environment. But whatever the subject matter, the central features are always immersion, interactivity and a focus on an issue facing society today.

1.1 How Much is Human and How Much is Non-Human?

Among the themes investigated by the stage designers is man's place in a post-human, hypertechnologized era. What changes in interpersonal relationships when technology takes centre stage? When whatever we do first requires plugging in a cable? What impact does this have on the environment? How does the way we perceive reality change as a result of our constantly switching between online and offline? How do people relate to the non-human? How does our interaction with robots affect the way we think? And what of our biodynamics? And our relationship with space?

It is no accident that the production I mentioned at the start of this article was modified in a unique, lockdown-specific way by Andu Dumitrescu, the very same scenographer who introduced new media to theatre and contemporary dance in Romania after 1989. Guided from the outset by the principal that "less is more", he prefers minimalist sets, with the aim always being to bring the actor to the fore. In the over 100 productions he has worked on, he has used live images, animation, real time video effects, video mapping, the Pepper's Ghost effect, to name but a few. Even just a few weeks before the pandemic, he was working on *Algoritm/Algorithm*, an open source visual-auditive-sensorial performance, together with the actor Vero Nica, the visual artist Marius Tănăsescu and the director Jennifer Corrales (a VAR Association production in partnership with the National University of Theatre and Film and the International Centre for Research and Education in Innovative and Creative Technologies). The use of "open" has to do with their idea of bringing people from

different professions to the stage with each performance.

To what extent are we affected by the information we send out into virtual space, the apparent freedom, the false sense of popularity, the illusion of communication, the fragmented reality we perceive, the atrophying of human relationships, the redirecting of human emotions towards machines? It was armed with these questions that the team set to work. On stage, the artist and curator Marius Tănăsescu, playing a researcher known as the Visionary, begins his performance with a presentation in the style of a TED talk, emphasising the fact that we are constantly connecting ourselves to something. Everything we use requires a cable. Alongside the Visionary were two other characters: a woman and a robot called Algorithm built by the researcher from online and offline waste. The costume of the actor playing the latter, Vero Nica, who made it look as if she was not breathing – for, as she explains, a robot is able to blink but not to breathe – was connected to a device via dozens of different cables. *Algoritm/Algorithm* sought to draw attention to the effects our actions have on the environment. We are all aware of the issue of global warming. We all know we need to take action to tackle pollution, the amount of plastic and waste in general. But only rarely do we think about how the online environment and all these devices are also a major source of the pollution we are trying to combat.

"It's about identity in a contemporary context, about consciousness, artificial intelligence, awareness, alienation, lack of time, the fragmented reality in which we live, manipulation, the balance between online and offline, true or false," says Andu Dumitrescu. "We created our own visual, auditive and sensorial *algorithm* in an attempt to find answers to a string of questions generated by the technological revolution we find ourselves in the middle of." He hoped that the project would help the public "become aware of how the moment we are inhabiting really looks and how we are *not* taking the time to try to understand it."

A theme such as this could not ignore the impact technology has on interpersonal relationships. “We are friends on Facebook, but when we meet we feel awkward or we keep to ourselves. We have the sensation that it’s enough to have sent some online messages or to give someone a call. Our relationship with technology becomes much stronger than our interpersonal relationships. We need to understand that our devices are not more important than our lives, that we have to find a balance in our relationship with technology,” explained the actor Vero Nica, who also penned the script.

The stage designer Adrian Damian, together with the director Alexandru Berceanu and choreographer Andrea Gavrilu, created an immersive multi-sensorial installation at the crossroads between theatre, dance and art installations: *Who Am I? A Human-Robot Performance* (a H3, Odeon Theatre and Arrogant Films production, co-financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund and the Ministry of Culture, 2020).

The main character was Kuka, a giant factory robot who interacted with humans, modifying their perception of space, dimensions and movement. This raises wide-ranging questions about identity, about the discomfort people feel when confronted with different ways of thinking, about biomechanics and the nature of movement. Why do we move in the way we move? What are the intrinsic characteristics of movement? In the dance between the people and the robot, the rhythm, the tempo, the direction served as different layers of research aimed at generating an understanding of biomechanics and our relationship to space and other bodies. When there was no performance, Kuka went back to work in the factory. In the opinion of Adrian Damian, *Who Am I? A Human-Robot Performance* posed “fundamental questions about identity, consciousness, isolation and human fragility in these confusing times we are all living through.”

The exploration of the relationship between the human and the non-human requires a sophisticated array of new media, which Adrian

Damian had already experimented with in other productions. It was he who, for the production staged to mark the opening of the theatre in the small town of Suceava, *Tigrul din oraşul nostrum/The Tiger of Our Town*, by Gianina Cărbunariu (2016), came up with the holograms the actors performed alongside. When they start a project in which Adrian Damian is involved, theatre directors are aghast at the amount of equipment they need to purchase, especially after he worked as assistant stage designer on Robert Wilson’s staging of *Rhinoceros* at the National Theatre in Craiova. His portfolio of spectacular virtual set designs also includes the scenography for *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night*, based on the novel by Mark Haddon, staged at the National Theatre in Bucharest. But, like his fellow stage designer Andu Dumitrescu, Adrian Damian explicitly states that, as far as the relationship with technology is concerned, his primary focus is on the human sphere.

The belief that no virtual encounter can replace a real-world, face-to-face meeting also informs the installation by Adrian Damian, *Podul/The Bridge*, produced by the Romanian Cultural Institute. It was performed as part of the fifteenth edition of the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space, which took place in June 2023. Like his previous installation, which we will discuss at the end of this article, *Podul/The Bridge* tests the limits of the word *together*. “We are more than what we see, we are connected at a deeper level than we think and we communicate beyond words. We are water molecules, we interact, we intersect, vibrate and resonate,” says Adrian Damian.

Two people are walking towards each other on a bridge. They look at each other, and the presence of the other person gives rise to a particular sensation in their bodies. The experience of the visitor, who is both observer and participant at one and the same time, is determined by the pace of their movements, the distance or proximity between the people passing each other on the bridge, their degree of calm or unease. What does the installation actually look like? A black prism seven metres long, three metres wide and three-and-a-half metres high, with two entrances

and hiding a surprise. This is how the author described it: “Entering from both directions, when they stepped inside the prism the public discovered a different world: a transparent bridge suspended over a pool containing five tonnes of water into which an LED screen was immersed. The ceiling was a mirror, all the walls were projection screens, while two curtains of rain flanked the sides of the bridge. So the public entered a magical world in which physical space combined with virtual space, and the proximity between the two people crossing the bridge from opposite directions, the patterns of their movement, the speed they moved at, certain gestures they made combined to generate the entire video and audio content. With the aid of sensors, we captured these patterns of movement and used them to generate a visual and audio world.”

Nothing is decided in advance. The video, the light, the sound, the motion of the water flowing under the bridge are all the result of the dynamic of the public in that instance. “Together we created an immersive and interactive installation which took the way the public reacted upon encountering an unknown person and turned it into visual and audio content. And the water under the bridge and in the two curtains of rain is like an extension of their bodies, a medium that resonates with the vibrations of the spectators,” explains Adrian Damian, who is only too happy to recalibrate everything, each time, together with the team, depending on the context. On the relatively narrow bridge, the people are placed in the situation of having to take a decision with consequences for the other person. “Should I stop, come closer, stand aside, look into their eyes, avoid contact or initiate it?” – these are the possible actions envisioned by the set designer, in whose view the installation represents “a tribute to the joy of an encounter between two people, facilitated and augmented by new technology.”

II. BACK TO PEOPLE AGAIN

A video game. Interactive, of course. You can only advance to the next level if you press the right button. Go look for it! You might find it on the door of the airplane. To start with we are guided

by a hardcore gamer. All the others are busy filming each other and speaking over the network. He is a Superman fan. Natural, spontaneous, likeable. He makes sure to ask you for a like, a subscribe and a share. He likes jokes and especially visibility. Just like all the kids. He can be cool, he can be funny, he can boast about his father. Who gives him everything he asks for. Well, that’s not quite true. In fact, this kid really misses his father, who left seven years ago to work abroad. Just like, for that matter, all the characters in *Dia-Pozitiv/Dia-Positive*.

Apart from our relationship with technology, the interaction between people and robots, the fragmentation of reality, the stage designers also tackle the more acute, more painful issues arising from everyday reality. The next project Andu Dumitrescu worked on after *Algorithm/Algorithm* was to create a theatre/film/video game performance based on the same techniques: *Dia-Pozitiv/Dia-Positive* (produced by the VAR Association and co-financed by the Administration of the National Cultural Fund). The creators of the video project described it as an “interactive visual and psychological labyrinth”. For two months, the actor Vero Nica and the psychologist Magda Cernea coordinated workshops for children whose parents had left many years ago to work abroad. Then Vero Nica wrote a script. It was directed by Jenniffer Corrales and Andu Dumitrescu. Compassionate and non-judgmental, *Dia-Pozitiv/Dia-Positive* speaks to the trauma of children from families where the father is absent. The characters subconsciously cling to a protective projection of their missing fathers. Whether girls or boys, the children employ the same mechanisms in order to protect themselves, in order to bury deep down their need of the absent parent. Especially, as many of the mothers find new partners. “I learned to live on my own. I love living on my own. Another year. Another city. Another father. A new family photo,” says the character played by Vero Nica. Superficially, the children cope with the situation well. Each finds their own outlet wherever they can – in imagined realities, in stories about dolls and robots meant to stand in for the real state of affairs. Each deploys their own

means of camouflaging reality. Underlying general themes begin to emerge – bullying, sexual abuse, consumerism and environmental issues.

The transitions between the scenes of the performative structure embedded in the web platform reflect the constant to-and-froing in the parent's lives, underscoring the lack of stability: shots filmed at the airport, both indoor and outdoor, travellers, airplanes, the passengers' legs... Each child expresses itself within its own space, with different details and colours, whether it's a doll's house, children's books, teddy bears, mountains of fish killed by water pollution. In the fragile world of the children, victims (among other things) of an upbringing founded on shame and inhibition, the trauma is consolidated. Although "I learned to be different in order not to suffer," as one young girl says, her decision is clear: "I won't be having any children. I won't have a husband. Unless I love him." We are able to discern such deep rooted convictions, liable to inflict long-lasting scars, in what otherwise appear to be conventional childhoods full of drawings, cartoons and made-up stories.

However well hidden, the trauma suffered by young and vulnerable children can only ever result in displays of anxiety and aggression. In a scene that breaks the rhythm, filmed in a warehouse full of different voices, the camera tracks the movements composed by the choreographer Arcadie Rusu that serve as expressions of anxiety. "I hate violence. I hate fear. I hate illness. I hate death." Every father promises he'll only be gone for a short while, but his absence lasts for years. Each child expresses their disappointment in their own way. Wearing red gloves, the girl played by Vero Nica learns to box from online tutorials. "It annoys me that I miss him. Before he left, he promised me we'd go hunting for rainbows." Each performative scene has its own story built around a character with an identity and individual traits. The public seemingly has the freedom to choose how the game continues. The viewer needs to find the right point or button to press if they want to advance to the next level.

But beyond the game, the social aspect is painstakingly documented in a country that prides itself on its dubious achievement of having almost six million people out of a population of twenty million working abroad. At least for the first few years, parents leave their children behind, usually in the countryside, in the care of grandparents or relatives. The team came up with an online, interactive project with the aim of creating a platform for communication between children in Romania and their parents overseas. Freely distributed, the programme was popular with children precisely because of its interactive, video game-like nature, the choice of images and the way it was edited. At least, that's what experts working on similar cases among the diaspora in Italy, Spain and the United States said during a discussion held via Zoom after the first performance. As one psychologist working at an NGO in Italy recalled, the most frequently heard sentence in online interactions with children is: "Mummy loves you."

III. HOW THE CITY RESPONDS

Another theme these stage designers explore is people's relationship to the big cities they live in. In 2016, together with the director Radu Nica, Andu Dumitrescu carried out the photo and video documentation for the theatre production *București. Instalație Umană/Bucharest. A Human Installation*, for which he created the visual concept. The project focused on important events in the history of the city of Bucharest. In 2020, Mihai Păcurar created the installation *În timp ce locuiesc/While We Reside*, which discussed the relationship of artists to their home city of Cluj, the second largest city in Romania, which experienced a period of rapid economic growth over the last decade. Cluj has attracted a lot of foreign investment and after Bucharest boasts the most developed IT sector in the country. A university city, Cluj has a large art-loving population. Against this backdrop, in 2014 a small team founded an independent theatre called Reactor de Creație și Experiment. Initially focused on documentary theatre, in time Reactor diversified its portfolio, producing dozens of performances.

În timp ce locuiesc/While We Reside was a live-streaming installation. The contemporary predilection for all things “live” and “real time” continues to spawn new artistic forms. The stage designers created exclusively virtual sets, rendering the borders between different artforms even more permeable. These were either a part of the performance or took centre stage. And in the case of the video and multisensory installations they even constituted the artistic concept in themselves. When we talk about “live” and “real time” in theatre, we know very well that this is just a convention. We know that the actors are only “pretending” to appear on the news or on Facebook during the performance, and that this is only meant for the public in the auditorium. We know very well that when, as spectators, we read on the computer screen the comments posted to Facebook, which allegedly roll in *live*, that these have in fact been selected and put together in advance. It’s all part of the same convention we happily accept in theatre. Someone sat down and thought about it, came up with a concept, made a selection from various proposals, then organised them according to their artistic vision for inclusion in the final production. What happens, however, when things really do take place in real time?

31 October 2020, 4 pm. Live streaming on Facebook with five cameras. Seemingly, the main character is Cluj. Or, at least, the only one that can be seen. In reality, the installation created by Mihai Păcurar, *În timp ce locuiesc/While We Reside*, as part of the Investigating the City. Laboratory of Documentary Theatre project, supported by Reactor de Creație și Experiment, shines a light on the relationship between performers and the place where they live. The main character, Cluj, turns out to have multiple identities. What the participants discover, in this case *live*, are the reflections of this character, the city, on its inhabitants, as well as the reflections it engenders in the individual consciousnesses of the artists.

The exterior views, snapshots of the everyday environment captured in different corners of the city, provide the pretext for the performers to reveal their interior perspectives. The small

patches of green space between blocks of flats and garages, where Zsófi Gábor walks her dog twice a day, always at the same time. The images of traffic captured by Raul Coldea and Lucian Teodor Rus. The park where people go jogging filmed by Ioana Hogman. Or the room in the house of Lucia Mărneanu, in fact a window, a radiator and the corner of a wooden staircase. The camera does not move over the course of the one hour and twenty minutes of total footage broadcast live. The framing doesn’t change. The images become a pretext for capturing the relationship between the performers and the city, personal observations or moderately critical reflections. As the installation proceeds, the adjacent texts give way to short personal recollections, memories of school, of travels, comparisons between Cluj and Târgu Mureș, the city where Ioana Hogman chose to study. The performers remain invisible figures in the great family of online communicators who post their observations on Facebook in real time. A real time in which the keys of Lucia Mărneanu’s keyboard clatter away and the reader waits with bated breath to see what she writes next. The spectators/visitors/readers create their own parallel edit, choosing where and at what moment in this snapshot depicted via the five subjective quasi-perspectives they wish to participate.

With these new forms of communication the public is no longer only witness to what happens to a body in space but also to a consciousness in space. Especially in the case of the fragments of identity to be found in the inner monologue of the actors Ioana Hogman and Lucia Mărneanu: the relationship with depression and the remedies meant to re-establish inner harmony, as found in nature, in the case of the former; and the adoption of a sexual identity different from the unanimously accepted norm, in the case of the latter. The relationship with space is defined by critical reflections, ranging from the mild to the extreme, when it comes to the hostility of the inhabitants with which Lucia Mărneanu shares the city: “One example is that, here, I’m not able to hold my girlfriend by the hand without people looking at us. When this happens, it makes me feel that I’m living in *their* city, not in *mine*.” Or “I live in the centre of Cluj – the city in which three

years ago the LGBT march was approved to take place on the banks of the Someș, over the space of a few hundred metres on either side of Garibaldi Bridge. While Noua Dreaptă [English: ‘The New Right’, an extreme right-wing party] march took place bang in the centre. In Unirii Square”. The context is one in which, although the LGBT community, attacked in public statements by the Romanian Orthodox Church but widely accepted among artists, often becomes a political football among the nationalist parties. In 2008, at the initiative of the ‘Coaliția pentru Familie’ [a coalition of organisations promoting the traditional family], the governing party staged a referendum to redefine the idea of the family. This would have involved changing the part of the constitution that deals with marriage, replacing the formula “between spouses” with the voluntary marriage “between a man and a woman”. The referendum, which generated much debate in civil society, was declared invalid due to a turnout of only 21.1%.

In the installation *În timp ce locuiesc/Where We Reside*, participants follow the project in real time. They see the words appear as the keys are pressed, while eagerly waiting to find out what the resulting sentence will be – and, in fact, what the artist wishes to say. And the artists have different things say. They are either objective – or, more to the point, indifferent – witnesses who observe a corner of the city as everyday life goes on there, or Cluj becomes a pretext for biographical recollections. At any rate, if the performers had not revealed it voluntarily, the experience of the viewers would have resembled that of a voyeur who invades the personal space of an unknown person. In real time, of course. Which almost entirely eliminates the appearance of an artistic construct, which conventionally is carefully created. Instead of organising the material, selecting and ordering it in terms of artistic potential to provide a high degree of relevance, *În timp ce locuiesc/While We Reside*, like every installation, relies on the impression of spontaneity and fluidity, on the sensation of here and now, suspending every other possible timeframe. The impression of immediacy, of being a live witness to what is happening to the

performers, of being a participant in a shared experience entirely replaces the traditional set of expectations.

IV. DIRECTION: INWARDS

The stage designer Mihai Păcurar also explores a form of connection with the “now” in the performative installation *Interior – Lumină (2021)/Interior – Light*, again by Reactor de Creație și Experiment from Cluj. Only that it is no longer a matter of an external “now”, the city itself or the relationship between inhabitants/artists and the urban space in which they reside, but an internal now. The installation was developed as a kind of devised theatre focused on the stage of the inner journey in which the performers find themselves. “We are here, we only have these means at our disposal, and we want to see where we are. To see what we can do with what we have,” was Mihai Păcurar’s initial idea. Conceived of as an exercise in honesty, the text was based less on objective fact and more on a strongly introspective element, on the attention paid to identity markers, to fantasy, to self-perception, to the relationship with the biographical event which defined the private sphere.

Four unconnected entities. Or perhaps a single entity broken down into multiple voices, personalities, guises or stages. Absorbed in their own world, each resides in their own ivory tower in a state of continuous introspection, alert to what is happening in their own body and in their own mind. They are less aware, however, of the world around them, which would appear more to inconvenience than to stimulate them. The entities appear to become submerged in parallel, incoherent and incongruous realities.

Two screens with projections, a laptop, some cables and some spotlights. Repetitive and occasionally grating sounds. Now and then we hear meta-theatrical thoughts: “Instead of this show there could have been a *performance*”. The atmosphere is fluid. Nothing that is said inclines towards a common narrative capable of unifying or connecting the four human entities. Fragments of the universal flux, simple, coexisting forms of life, they have no interaction or only a bare

minimum of social ties. In isolation, each accumulates experiences, turning us into witnesses to snapshots of their inner journey, occasionally acquiring a spiritual hue.

Amid an eerie atmosphere, surrounded by unsettling sounds, including occasionally digitised voices (all sound and light operations are carried out in plain sight), the four entities appear to be straight out of a cabinet of curiosities. More or less asocial beings, they have severed, or at least reduced to a minimum, their contact with external reality, a circumstance best captured by one of the characters: “I like staying at home. I don’t go out for a month. I don’t like change. I try not to leave a trace. I like to be as low-key as possible. I chose to be invisible. I’m not interested in the others. I don’t read the press. I don’t own a television.”

The performative discourse – born as devised theatre – of the experience and reflections of the performers is based on a handful of different themes. The first part is centred around the recollection of a journey, presumably a transition from one stage to another, from adolescence to adulthood. It is no coincidence that the final part is about flight. Each entity tells the story of one of their symbolic journeys, colouring it with sensations that lend it credibility. From commonplace realities, the performance evolves towards a series of visionary statements, such as that made by the character with an apparent mental disorder which predisposes him to metaphysical observations always accompanied by ironic remarks. Some scenes intentionally border on the absurd.

The statements made by the girl who says she is returning from a ten-day retreat where she cleared her mind, the reference to *Midsummer Fairies*, as well as other references typical of magical thinking provoke an ironic response in her interlocutor. However, despite the comic touches, statements that appear to be the result of direct, personal experience serve to heighten the performative discourse. One of the audio leitmotifs of the production is breathing. The visualisation of sound that bounces off the walls and the enunciations of the different characters – “Inside of me there are two parallels,

interior-exterior, darkness-light”, “Everything that happens in the sky passes through me”, “All things contain me. I leave one interior space and enter another, interior space” or “I have no memory. I perceive every moment” – express the certainty that, although none of the entities feels they belong to a shared existence, all exist as fragments in a universal flux.

The oscillation between different mental spaces and the articulation of the moment of epiphany by the aforementioned character straddle the extremely fragile border between vision/revelation and mental disorder. From the space to the atmosphere and type of discourse, everything is fluid, while the realities are in a state of continuous evolution. Nothing appears stable. It is through such snapshots of the interior lives of each entity that the installation proceeds. The theatrical means are kept to a minimum – two screens with projections, a sound track that significantly enhances the atmosphere of the entire performance, examples of body art, such as the yoga poses, the glitter one of the characters smears themselves with... Otherwise, everything is calibrated to the performance of the players, which eschews the spectacular, grounded in a plausible simplicity, retaining only subtle, fine touches with an ever-present sense of irony. Despite the note of ludic detachment, the performers provide the public with a pretext to participate in their experiences that originate from deep places. Life forms in a cosmic flux, their fragile inner lives appear to coalesce and to unravel from one minute to the next.

V. NATURE SPEAKS TO US. DO WE STILL HAVE EYES AND EARS FOR HER?

Another border-defying artistic form envisioned by a stage designer was the installation created by Adrian Damian, *Network of Emotions*, as part of Romanian Design Week 2021. Whether during the day or the evening, rain or shine, there was always a queue to get in. The main theme was *#together*. The visitors had the feeling they were in a theatre set. They entered via a plexiglas tunnel that let in the light from outside, only suddenly to find themselves in a dark forest. In order to make the space appear larger, the stage designer lined it

with mirrors. Convinced that the sense of smell is the fastest way to trigger emotional memory, Adrian Damian came up with a space full of 2.4-metre tall trees, turf, real flowers and all manner of plants, which together created the smell of a forest. As if wandering through nature, the visitors arrived at a small stream, the murmur of which was drowned out by the background music composed by Mihai Dobre of the band Șuie Păpărușe.

What was surprising about Adrian Damian's installation, however, was not the nature itself or the use of technology, but the combination of the two. A closer look revealed the osmosis between the elements of nature and the technology employed in the service of the artistic concept. On every tree there was a palm-shaped symbol. When someone pressed this symbol, the roots of the tree would light up. If they gave it a long press, thanks to dozens of invisible cables crossing the floor the roots spread out and connected with those of other trees. Hence the title of this multisensory installation, *Network of Emotions*, which was derived from the main theme of the event: together. The title was chosen by Adrian Damian during his research, when he discovered that trees can communicate remotely. Older trees send younger trees information about the environment, the level of humidity, the air and, implicitly, how to adapt and survive.

Need we add that the public felt as if they were inside an immersive stage set? On this occasion, instead of LEDs, mirrors and spectacular lighting, the artist opted for the synaesthesia achieved by the use of chiaroscuro, vegetal elements and natural smells. The idea for the installation was born of an interest in the environment and a return to nature, albeit without overlooking the contribution of technology. As an example of the impact of his installation, another artist, a fellow student of Adrian Damian's at drama school and in the meantime a well-known actor, director and choreographer, Ștefan Lupu, spoke right after leaving the pavilion of how he would go on trips, walks in nature and bike rides through the forests while growing up in Sfântu Gheorghe. How, since going to university in Cluj and then moving to Bucharest, he has only lived among concrete.

Adrian Damian's installation had the expected effect, just like a theatre set where the constituent elements are subliminally able to activate the emotional memory of the spectator. Information about what is happening on stage filters through and imperceptibly establishes the emotional tone. An immersive and – thanks to the use of technology – interactive stage set. In the most natural way possible, the public was able to walk through water or go around it, but also to activate sensors, while the sensation of being immersed in nature was created by the very use of technology itself. This no longer functioned as a superimposed layer, potentially violating and exposing nature, but rather as something, although illuminating its inner workings, the invisible, remote connections between trees, that respects and protects it.

VI. IN LIEU OF A CONCLUSION

Every new stage design, every installation turns into an opportunity for the scenographic artist to experiment with a different aspect of technology. It is for this reason that Adrian Damian dreams of a Centre for Scenographic Research, a living laboratory, open to all, with a focus on what can be achieved using the latest technologies, where specialists could carry out the experiments required to prepare for a new production. Its library would cover all the latest fields, providing information about the most recent discoveries. At this centre, every stage designer and stage technician would have access to the materials required for testing before taking any final decisions about a production: e.g. about the type of cyclorama, the type of stage covering, the equipment, etc. And it would all be crowned by a specialist journal that would present the latest information in the field, both from a conceptual and a technical point of view. For the time being, it remains just a dream.

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