

ESSAY

Narratives of emancipation

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A feminist is a man or a woman who says: yes, there is a problem with gender as it is today and we must fix it, we must turn it better.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie¹

One of the fundamental values of a feminist emancipator theatre that resorts to a political statement of empowering the status and voices of women, is intersectionality. The condition of women is and should be approached at the crossroad of several types of subjective identifications: gender, social condition, ethnic belonging. The intersectional perspective, asserting an inclusive, multi-layered reflection and an introspective capacity of building up identities and frames of representation that produce cracks in the hetero-normative hegemony, racist discourse, politics of discrimination, is essential for understanding and producing a feminist theatre focused on invisible stories, on clashes with an oppressive system, on repositioning against the reproduction of stereotypes and hierarchies.

The issue and the quality of representing women in theatre – one can notice a glaring disparity regarding the distribution of roles (male/female), doubled by the internalized conception of the „zero woman” - the woman producing zero confrontation, zero provocation, zero interrogation, zero contestation – is to be more and more debated. A woman valued for her obedience, for her submissiveness, for her domestic abilities and implicit resignation. A woman perceived through the male gaze and designed to confirm and to comply with a set of motionless, fixed attributes, prolonging a tradition of stifled revolt and control.

¹ “We should all be feminists”, TED Conversations, Dec. 2012,
https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_we_should_all_be_feminists



How unsettling, undermining, disruptive is the representation of women in a theatre dominated by the role models of omniscient and reflexive men, by the overwhelming dualities that tend to store up more and more gender imbalances?

Men are heroes, women are around.

Men are rational, women are sensitive.

Men are brave, women are fable.

Men are determined, women are unstable.

Men deserve to be in the highest position, women deserve to be loved.

Men produce changes, women accept to be changed.

Men create, women expect.

Men evolve, women stagnate.

Men are the product of their intelligence, men are the product of men.

Men invent, women enjoy the invention.

Romanian theatre is not very fond of an emancipator perspective regarding women. Their presence is mostly associated with an „accessory-like” image, being the wives of..., the daughters of..., the mistresses of... They are objectified, viewed from a sexist angle, characterised in direct relation to men, created and activated by them, mirrored through stereotypes that propose a binary understanding of their roles. Roles which are most of the times reduced to a repertoire of traditional dichotomies, emphasizing rigid dualities. There are not many contemporary shows which offer an alternative emancipator position of women, fighting for their rights, stretching out beyond clichés of representation, protesting against a system ensconced in male privileges. Themes and subjects as domestic violence, the choice to control one’s own body, maternity and teenage, gender equality, patriarchal order meant to be contested, the commodified body, exotism of women, are not very much researched and explored. Even when the plays are centred on women, the representations maintain the same traditional imagery, delving into a very conservative portrait and reproducing patterns that emphasize the categories of marginalization, sexism, racism. In order to cut the threads of these categories, feminist performances have to invest in reconsidering frames of thinking subtle revolutions of repositioning gender politics. Because feminism should belongs

to everyone! One of the possibilities for such a repositioning to take place is related to decolonization of bodies and minds: „If processes of sexism, heterosexism, and misogyny are central to the social fabric of the world we live in; if indeed these processes are interwoven with racial, national and capitalist domination and exploitation such that the lives of women and men, girls and boys, are profoundly affected, then decolonization at all the levels (as described by Fanon) becomes fundamental to a radical feminist transformative project”².

In the last few years, there have been some performances centred on representations of women dealing with economical oppression and harassment, sexual abuses, the body seen as a perverse projection of male fantasies, ignoring its intimate desires, deprivation of freedom and integrity.

Domestic Products, directed by Ioana Păun (the text is written by Xandra Popescu) explores the existence of Philippinas cleaning ladies, the harsh conditions of work they are confronted with, the humiliations and abuses, the compromises they are forced to make in order to survive in a domestic trap where they are harassed. The main part in the show was performed by a Philippina woman who has been forced to leave the country because she had no papers.

ROVEGAN, written and directed by Catinca Drăgănescu, reflects – following the narrative of a traditional Romanian fairy-tale – on the cumbrous disasters of economical migration, seen as a chain of endless abasements. The performance enforces the victims' positions regarding the way migrant women are portrayed, building up an exploitation context based on traumatic experiences. As long as women produce, they deserve to be taken into consideration. When they show the least sign of revolt, they are ejected and not taken into consideration.

CUNTHATE (URĂ) explores the phenomenon of pornography and sexual abuses in a perverted, aggressive order founded on the appropriation of women's bodies turned into commodities to be manipulated. The artists of Béznă Theatre dig into contexts of physical and emotional abuses that alter the dignity and integrity of the most vulnerable ones, confronting the audience with a necessary analysis of the status of women in a brutish and inhuman society centred on reproducing patriarchal models.

In 2012, Bogdan Georgescu created **Without support** (the team of the project: Cristina Eremia, Gabriela Dumitru, Cornelia Ioniță, Andreea Eșanu, Sânziana Nicola), a performance about

² Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*, Duke University Press, 2004.

the eviction of a space – La Bomba - that gathered around a whole community, vividly preserving its spirit. **Without support** is a testimonial performance which assembles the life experiences of three women, speaking out their loss and their marginalization, and confronting with continuous strives for a stable condition. A stability that cannot be erased as one erased dots of survival. A stability that is essential to any reconfiguration of a community. The show delves profoundly into a specific situation, opening up a theme of debate that covers fundamental fights and rights: the right of decent housing, the right of accessing services of public health and education, the right to live and work in non-humiliating conditions, the right to affirm as women becoming speaking trumpets in their communities, the right to voice up in their names, representing their own interest. Although it approaches a tensioned experience of loss and grief, the performance has an empowering effect through the voices of the three women who have been victims of the eviction process. It explores the possibility of re-imagining spaces of solidarity and continuity, spaces of embodying fundamental values for a micro-society of women. Symbolic spaces that oppose continuous discrimination. Three women - models of devotion and hard-working in their community – emphasize their active embodiment of several roles: mothers who want the best possible education for their kids in order to have a better future, agents of change who stimulate and activate others in similar conditions to engage in their communities, creators of cultural events, activists for housing rights.

Habemus Bebe, written by Elena Vlădăeanu and directed by Robert Bălan, explores the vulnerable and contradictory territories of motherhood, analyzing frames of pressure and freedom, ways of subverting a hegemonic discourse imposing the accepted and desired roles of the „omni-mother” – narrative creation of inherited fantasies. **Habemus Bebe** (with Dana Voicu, Carmen Florescu, Lala Mișosniky) documents personal stories, subjective experiences and intimate adventures in the land of motherhood, digging into fears, resignation, resilience, expectations, intriguing questions, failures, compromises, unsettling and uncomfortable introspections. Four mothers confront with a conglomerate of various social imperatives and intimate needs, continuously fighting back and forth for their space of engaging into self-affirmation and public negotiation with a colonized image of a woman existing only for the benefit of the others.

They assert a tremendously powerful gap between how a mother should be and how she really is, between how a mother is expected to act and how she feels determined to act, between what a mother performs publically and what she performs when the outer demonstration ceases to

be overwhelming. **Habemus Bebe** is a tender and harsh political poem, thematizing what we could call the „wall-condition” of maternity, a condition of projecting various desires and pressures. Can you raise a child without raising permanent frictions between inner needs and public needs?

A responsive critical theatre to the perspectives of internalized stereotypes that dominate the hegemonic discourse of maternity, functioning as a source of endless social labels and a normative behaviour: „The only thing I would not like to do is a performance with a thesis about maternity. Precisely because it is a sphere so much commercially, politically and intimately debated. Everyone has an opinion about maternity, about how a child should to be raised, about what a mother has to do, about what a father has to do. Some people do not confine to opinions, but they try to sell them, to impose them, to legislate them. I do not say that the performance will not have a feminist significance, it will have it, because there are some issues that we cannot ignore, such as the process of the medicalization of birth in a masculine medium, the status of the woman after she got birth to a child, a woman who seems not to know what to do with her own life while everyone around her seems to know, the assault of information and the blaming of the mother. It is a performance mainly about me and it is a text in which the achievement of the feminist movement finds its best place: the personal is political”³.

Habemus Bebe deconstructs unilateral constraints and consents, framing „mothers of confirmation” who need to face the established normative rules and behaviours imposed by a society who knows better than the mom what the mom should do. A society that is fond of pieces of advices which become instruments of pressure and activators of uniformity. A society that deepens into sets of principles, reducing a debated condition to homogenous wishes.

The show portrays mothers who endeavour both to make peace with and to undermine the vigilant public eye, who surveys their abilities and super-capacities, building up spheres of resonance of motherhood. The show assembles testimonies of mothers who are also artists, exploring their permanent negotiations. Mothers who endeavour to define themselves in accordance to a revolt against any given preconception that governs their lives, against norms and coercitive consensualities.

In 2014, a group of Roma feminist actresses and activists had the idea to create a Roma theatre company – Giuvlipen (feminism in Romanes), meant to develop a challenging local

³Elena Vlădăreanu in a dialogue with Alina Purcaru, bookaholic.ro, 2014, <http://www.bookaholic.ro/habemus-bebe.html>

dramaturgy engaged in deconstructing stereotypes of representing Roma women and racist attitudes, to foster solidarity and political involvement, to empower members of a community deprived of their own needs and voices, to protest against different types of oppression, to open up a field of discussing Roma feminism from an intersectional perspectives. There are very few visible contexts in which Roma women are not viewed as a bunch of clichés, confirming the stereotypes of non-Roma and emphasizing their prejudices. Giuvlipen produces a fundamental change in repositioning the Roma status in a theatre oriented towards annihilating the woman's realities. As stated in the manifesto of the company, „Giuvlipen is a feminist theatre group with, about and for Roma women, with the goal of contributing to the empowerment of Roma women in their living communities”. The group aims at proposing narratives that deepen profound identity questions and reconsider the role of women in traditional Roma communities, the double reality of stereotypes and norms they confront with: on the one hand, norms imposed by patriarchal, rigid, conservative communities, on the other hand stereotypes imposed by a patriarchal society, strongly devaluating the role of women in producing real changes.

In 2012, one of the members of the group – Mihaela Drăgan – created a one-woman show, **Del Duma**, in which she documented real stories of young Roma women deeply engaged in affirming their desires to go to school, no matter what the costs are. Desires that sometimes become a radical act of contesting the basic fundamentals of an entire community in which women have to marry very young – event that changes completely their lives. The brutal end of one of these stories becomes significant for the content of a show that Giuvlipen created in 2017 - **Who Has Killed Szomna Gransca?**. In **Del Duma**, education becomes primordial, seen as a transformative way of changing the young women who long for school, strive to continue their studies, do their best to generate personal and social transformations through education. The show focuses on individual, specific, intimate „journeys”, on a perpetual fight to have the right to education, and concentrates only briefly on the social and political contexts in which this battle for education is given. **Who Has Killed Szomna Gransca?** goes deeper into these contexts and gives a necessary background to the story of education.

Who Has Killed Szomna Gransca? fictionalizes a real story and delves into the circumstances of survival and oppression in a very stratified society. The performance proposes a multi-layered interpretation of a case that received some visibility in the media due to the tragic event that enveloped it. The media created the version that better serves its interests: a Roma young

woman has committed suicide because her family interdicts her to go to school. The performance deals with a subtle deconstruction of the causes of her death, debating the complexity of the roles in the community and the continuous mystifications of a marginalized condition. The death becomes a context of contesting the limitations of a blunted, backward community, exposing a shared responsibility. Who bears the responsibilities for such a devastating death: the parents, the community, the whole society who transformed the fundamental right to education into utopia for those living in poor conditions? The intimate yearn for keeping on going to school is strongly political and feminist because this very personal choice implies a chorus of linked social voices and frames of existence: the voices of the parents blamed for their incapacity to offer a better life to their daughters, the voices of the neighbours empathically portraying the girl (approached with a lot of understanding for their condition) and questioning their own status in the community, the voices of a society who aggressively promotes strategies of individualism, success, motivations, emphasizing „the darkness” of traditional communities. The show explores the multiple structures of proximity and distance regarding those who try to enlighten what happened and those who try to benefit from what has happened. A tragic personal destiny becomes highly relevant and subtly guiding for how general perception operates in terms of projecting external misrepresentations. The performance is situated at the intersection of shallow dominant discourses in a society who condemns those living in poverty to invisibility, castration of their most intimate dreams and favourable fictions of their condition. Education is a complex corpus of interlinked positions of power and oppression.

Who Has Killed Szomna Gransca? is a performance that never lacks any sort of emotional core, fully aware of the potential and necessity of reconsidering the invisible subjects.

Paralell, a Ground Floor Production (2014) directed by Leta Popescu and Ferenc Sinkó, with Lucia Mărneanu and kata bodoki-halmen, is both a cry of revolt and a whisper of tenderness, a manifesto for love, going beyond any restrictions and prescriptions imposed by accepted norms. **Parallel** is a queer show that affirms a political and poetical for statement, expressing subjectivities that transcend any fixity of gender, subjectivities that belong to a territory of womanhood freely fighting for the right to affirm its breakings with the narratives of domination and devaluation.

In **Parallel**, the identity of two women changes in front of our eyes, becoming extremely fluid as if it were inlaid on a block of ice that melts piece by piece. The show begins with a repetitive structure of condensed, tensioned moments. The actresses lift, more and more rapidly,

bar bells, do push-ups, jump rope, while the signs of the exhaustion are highly visible on their flesh. Signs of conforming and at the same time undermining the „fitness image” of a body-building that is meant to touch perfection, super-power, confirmation.

The bodies write a dramaturgy of physical resistance, exploding all norms, all boundaries, and all conventions.

The most empowering statement is the end of the performance: I live to love and to be loved.