

A (Self)Ironic Portrait of the Artist as a Present-Day Man: The Newest Trademark Show of Gianina Cărbunariu in Bucharest

"The role of the artist is to ask questions, not answer them." One of the most quoted of Chekhov's statements seems to contradict the habit of the organizers to include in cultural programs those familiar discussions between artists and spectators (including journalists or critics). The mission of the Q&A sessions is, in theory at least, to build a bridge between the creative team and the target public, providing sometimes "that missing link" in their relationship. In practice they may reveal the artists' intentions and thoughts (unknown otherwise) or, on the contrary, they may develop into an alternation of diluted truisms and neologisms: big talk vs. small talk. "Artistic approach," "collaborative projects," "artistic concept," "challenge," "artistic message," "transparency," "social / political art," "empathy," "performing arts," "syncretism," "eclecticism," "interesting," "captivating," "wonderful," "splendid"...Words, words, words... Big words vs. small words. All sort of words.

Artists Talk is the title of the latest show by the Romanian playwright-director Gianina Cărbunariu. It was co-produced at the beginning of 2017 by Bucharest Cultural Center ARCUB together with the Association "Pieșe refractare." "In the last two years we have witnessed interesting situations, where the social and political context has strongly impacted on the way the artistic discourse was delivered and received. Being an opinion former, an artist has a certain responsibility. Since we are living in a world that is less and less inclined towards dialogue, what are now the artistic tools to operate with?" This is the question Gianina Cărbunariu asks herself. She is one of the most important personalities in present-day Romanian theatre, an all-round creator, author, and director of the scripts that are the basis of her shows staged in the country and abroad. They approach contemporary topics or are inspired by recent history: the documentation process (through interviews and archival research) is followed by improvisations performed by actors (selected from her age group or younger). This results in fictional scripts, in which real elements (excerpts from interviews, pictures, objects) are integrated. Many of these were translated and staged by other directors, and the shows have won high recognition in the theatrical world. In 2014, *Solitaritate*, a production of the "Radu Stanca" Theatre Sibiu was included in the official selection of Festival d'Avignon, and last year Gianina Cărbunariu was again invited by the Festival, as the playwright of *Tigern*, produced by the Swedish Jupiter Josephson Theatre Company. This year, she has been the artist selected to represent Romania at the Festival de Liège, with *Artists Talk*.



Gianina Cîrbunariu, Artist's Talk. Photo: Adi Bulboacă

A critical spirit, her mind always troubled by questions, Gianina Cîrbunariu could have been a member of the "Angry Young Men" during the last century. Nowadays she embraces the mission of re-shaping the Romanian theatre by focusing on local contemporary creations, and rejecting any expression of formal or ideological conservatism. However, just like Chekhov, she affirms that the role of the artist is to ask questions. As far as the answer is concerned, this role might be taken over by the viewers involved in the performance and possibly, in solving the problems raised by text. This is exactly the case with Artists Talk which, inspired by discussions with spectators and documentation from interviews, asks questions. "As a part of this system, we were interested in understanding how the artist's responsibility (or the absence of it) shows through from the discourse about his approach and about the world he lives in," the author confesses.

In five scenes and a prologue that set the show's protocol, artists from all fields are (self) incited to discussions. The general action takes place "somewhere in Europe," and the stories take us to TV shows, theatre and film festivals, and public venues—some identifiable and some not. The set and costumes are designed by the German set designer Dorothee Curio, who is working for the second time with Gianina Cîrbunariu, after *Sold Out*, a production by the Münchner Kammerspiele in 2010. The small stage of the ARCUB hall is horizontally outlined by a shiny floor, where the actors walk wearing shoe covers (as in museums or hospitals), and

vertically by a background of glittering fringes (as at a cabaret or music-hall). The predominantly black costumes are adorned with colored or sparkling applications by means of which every self-respecting artist boosts their personalities. (Between the episodes, the actors change clothes almost within sight, in one of the stage wings). The whole set design has a "casual glamour" edge, including the videos conceived by the visual artist Mihai Păcurar. The atmosphere is supplemented with the audio contribution of the composer Bobo Burlăcianu, through his electro dance music—rhythmed, abrupt, and, due to its varied characteristics, ironically commenting on the different stories.

"Irony" and "self-irony" are, in fact, the words that best describe this show. Sometimes accused of obvious theses in her productions dedicated to social issues, Gianina Cărbunariu seems to get even this time, through the humor found both in the extremely hilarious text and in the performance of the Romanian actors—maybe because all of them are part of and all too familiar with, this “artistic system,” whether they like it or not. Ruxandra Maniu, Ilinca Manolache, Alexandru Potocean, and Gabriel Rău are older or more recent collaborators of the director; they are renowned actors who play both at state theatres and in independent productions. They are joined by Bogdan Zamfir in his first Romanian appearance. Formally trained in Belgium, he is presently working with the French playwright-director Joël Pommerat.



Gianina Cărbunariu, Artist's Talk. Photo: Adi Bulboacă

And the artists talk: in their own language, the artistic one, whether it is Romanian, English, French, or even a little Czech. The artists talk sometimes the language of sincerity, other times that of sacred ignorant naivety. and most of the times, that of hypocrisy. The rhetorically claimed honesty keeps hidden other interests and flaws such as vanity, indifference, and artistic self-conceit. They are revealed as answers to the endlessly repeated questions of the media: "What was the author ' s intended meaning? What was the creative drive? What are your future plans?" Sometimes the developing discussions are sterile, sometimes they are thrilling. Although their resemblance to real people is not coincidental, the identification of a certain artist having a specific rhetoric is not at stake in this fiction. The particular becomes universal even if this " particular " is represented by a Romanian mayor who built a wall (sorry: a fence!) between two ethnic city communities, inviting afterwards a group of Visual Arts students to paint and turn it into a work of street art; even if this " particular " could have had the name of the Latvian director Alvis Hermanis, who refused to work in a theatre because of it being a "Refugees-Welcome-Center " ; and even if, in the last scene of the show, this " particular " actually bears the name of Irène Némirovsky, a novelist of Ukrainian-Jewish origin. Born in the Russian Empire, she lived more than half her life in France, wrote in French, but was denied French citizenship. Arrested as a Jew under the racial laws, she died at Auschwitz at the age of thirty-nine and became famous posthumously by means of modern marketing.

Questions about anti-Semitism, about the individual destiny facing the collective one, about responsibility and artist's freedom, about the reception of a work of art...Questions about the world refugees or those who are refugees in their own country, about country borders, about walls between us and the rest of the world...Questions about "art for art's sake" vs. " art with a message " ...What does "mainstream" mean today? What does it mean to be "fashionable"? Is it better to remain " a fly on the wall " or must you commit yourself as an artist? These are all questions which Gianina C ȃrbunariu has not proposed to answer, nor does she intend to emit verdicts, she only presents the issues. Excellently balanced, delivered with much humor and (self) irony, the answers reach their target. Due to the range of problems tackled and the high quality acting, ARCUB ' s Artists Talk is a production that meets European standards – Europe redefining not only its borders but also its artistic tools – Europe that is seeking to find itself.

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