

Resistance through Culture. Satirical Student Groups of the Last Decade of Communism and the Silence of Theatre Critics

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Abstract: In the '80s, satirical student groups, the so-called artistic “brigades”, were one of the most dynamic subversive artistic phenomena against the communist system. This paper aims to shine a light on the dimension of this phenomenon, to find explanations for the apparently privileged status enjoyed by such groups, as well as to clarify the reasons why theatre critics of the time so stubbornly ignored them.

Keywords: theatre, cultural policies, camps humour, political humour, theatre criticism

Let us not mistake laughter for dissidence.²

The line in the motto was uttered by a former activist on the payroll of UASCR (Union of Romanian Communist Student Associations) and UTC (Union of Communist Youth): Corneliu Dumitriu³. It is an excerpt from a

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 2. A line of Corneliu Dumitriu in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorul studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.
 3. Corneliu Dumitriu was the vice-president of the Bucharest Municipality organization of UASCR (1972-1974), a UTC Central Committee activist in Nicu Ceaușescu's team, and coordinator, among many others, of the Costinești AMFITEATRU Galas in the 1980s. After 1990, he miraculously became a university professor at the Bucharest National University of Theatre and Film “I.L. Caragiale” (UNATC), the head of the Romanian Centre of ITI/UNESCO, and later “retired” as the head of the Theatre Department of “Dunărea de Jos” University in Galați.

documentary produced by the Romanian National Television (TVR) in 2014, dedicated to the Romanian comedy groups of 1975-1989, as we find it emblematic for the way in which an overwhelming majority of our intellectuals and almost all theatre critics of the time referred to the productions of one of the most interesting and courageous levels of the cultural life of the last 15 years of the Ceaușescu regime: comedy groups, most often defined – so as to fit into the standard circuit of public diffusion – as “artistic student brigades”.

Should we not mistake laughter for dissidence? To a certain extent, we couldn’t argue with the interviewee, although, in the documentary, his line comes as an answer to the question on how their respective groups were controlled and harassed by representatives of the *Securitate*, which Corneliu Dumitriu pertinaciously denies, unlike his colleague Mircea Ursache, the former head of the UASCR Committee for culture (1987-1989), who admitted to having practised censorship, and that the *Securitate* always kept an eye on the students’ representations, and even confidently stated that “*student brigades posed the strongest opposition to the system*” [s.n.].

Of course, not any form of humour equalled dissidence, as the aesthetic “fulfilment” of official theatre performances did not necessarily equal subversion. However, it cannot be denied that there was a phenomenon of *subversive* student humour which persisted for over a decade and a half, with huge audience numbers (live, in venues with a capacity of thousands of spectators, only rarely censored, and even reaching the small screen). At the same time, it is clear that this phenomenon, through its most talented representatives, from *Ars Amatoria* or *BUM* in Cluj, *Divertis*, *Siringa* in Iași, *TCM* in Timișoara, *ASE*, *GEOF*, *Tact*, *Fics*, *Vouă*, *Energeticii* in Bucharest, *Mecanica* in Galați, and many others, repositioned and reorganized themselves quickly after 1990, creating especially TV formats of their (serial) comedy performances and shows, which were hugely successful, regardless of the different audiences addressed. Naturally, the political-critical dimension of their discourse after the fall of communism rose exponentially, and they are still notorious to our days, even though most of these groups are no longer part of the schedules of our many TV networks.

Three systemic questions arise from this: first of all, *how did these groups develop and what did their performances offer from a scenography and theatrical point of view?* Secondly, how was it possible for them to achieve success and

notoriety, *what socio-political factors concurred to the survival and even the evolution of the subversive dimension of their artistic discourse*, considering that “professional” theatre was under constant surveillance and regularly shaken by censorship and interdictions? Not least, and perhaps the most important question for our research: *what is the explanation for the utter silence of the theatre world and, most especially, theatre critics, on this phenomenon?*

1. Student Comedy Groups

Since, to our knowledge, no critical or historical paper has so far tackled the topic of student humour in the late communist years, it is quite difficult to gather systematic data on the matter. Nevertheless, we worked with disparate information collected from TV or radio interviews with some of the members and founders of these groups (Ioan Groșan, George Țâra, Toni Grecu, Florin Constantin, Doru Antonesi, Cristian Grețcu, Ghighi Bejan, Fiți Arieșanu, Lia Trandafir, Andy Lupu, Viorel Gaiță, Paul Nancă, etc.), from the few documentaries created by TV networks, or even as student projects. Besides, considering the permanent connections between student publications and comedy groups, we used several longer interviews conducted in 2015 by Simona-Ioana Cucuian, a researcher from Brașov, as part of her doctoral research, which has not yet been published: *Reviste studențești în comunism: Universitas/Universitatea comunistă și Convingeri Comuniste (Student Magazines under Communism: Universitas/Universitatea comunistă and Convingeri Comuniste)* (Transilvania University of Brașov, coordinator: prof. Virgil Podoabă, PhD, 2015). Luckily for this paper, over the last years, Simona-Ioana Cucuian published the transcriptions of these interviews on the online platform *ecreator*.

Ars Amatoria was a group I set up in my first university year⁴ at the Cluj School of Philology, alongside my late friend Radu G. Țeposu, Lucian Perța – the best Romanian parodist of our times, George Țâra from Prundu Bârgăului, Ioan Buduca, who was two years older than us, and, in the theatre group, we did theatre first and foremost alongside Emil Hurezeanu, who, as everybody knows, became one of the most active

4. The speaker refers to the university year 1974-1975.

editors of *Europa Liberă*. An interesting fact is that Țeposu came up with the name of our group in the very first year of university, when we studied Latin – as should be mentioned.

Many people thought and still think that *Ars Amatoria* translates as “amateur art”, and back in those days, this was a good thing: amateur art, *Cântarea României*, and so on; but in fact, it’s one of the expressions for which Ovid was exiled to Tomis. It is the vulgar equivalent of *ars amandi*. The first one to understand this, as we also wrote columns in *Scânteia Tineretului* magazine, and who asked how we were able to publish under such a name, was Mr. Paleologu, who knew Latin and thus grasped the meaning of *ars amatoria*. In simple words, it means the art of fucking. So, we set up this group and wrote texts together – by brainstorming, as it would be called today. We were successful with some plays I wrote, but which we all performed together. We even won the grand prize of *Primăvara studențească Festival* for my play, *Școala ludică*, instead of the folk ensemble *Mărțișorul*, headed by Dumitru Fărcaș in Cluj, which had won this award for years on end.⁵

We started off with *Ars amatoria* not necessarily out of local patriotism, but because, in all the interviews and documents we have read through, it popped up as one of the first student comedy groups that broke the small troublemaker mould associated to the “artistic brigades”, in other words, the first one to leave left behind dorm jokes and the usual self/criticism of their immediate university world, playing on truants, quibbling professors, failed exams, and idle management. And also because, as per this interview, as well as others, during their student years in Cluj, the group’s activity was directly connected to theatre productions, as Groșan evokes both types of performances under the same umbrella.⁶ This will be of interest in the subsequent discussion regarding the relationship between comedy groups and theatre criticism (see below). Naturally, the members of *Ars amatoria* also signed written (comedy)

5. Ioan Groșan, *Interviu cu Ioan GROȘAN*, interview by Simona-Ioana Cucuian, Web, June 29, 2020, https://ecreator.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4821:interviu-cu-ioan-grosan&catid=23&Itemid=131.

6. Based on my personal experience with the Bucharest School of Philology in the very same period, it was frequent for some of the students who took part in theatre activities to also get involved in “brigade”-type satirical performances.

works – as Ioan Groșan continued to do later on his own, under the very name *Ars amatoria*, in student publications (*Amfiteatru*, *Convîngeri comuniste*, and even, as Groșan points out, *Scânteia tineretului*). The interview suggests that the group merged with or was integrated into by the theatre group led by professor Ion Vartic, who back then was a university assistant, and with whom the group members had a tight, faithful friendship that stood the test of time.

It's rather difficult to retrace how sharp-subversive these texts created collectively – *devised*, as we would now call them – were, since our only sources are disparate memories gathered after a long period of time. According to the writer, as well as to the interview with George Țără, who after graduation became an artistic trainer at the Bucharest student club in the Tei complex, most of the times, their jokes relied on word play or on a mix of argots generated by the specific environment of humanities schools, especially the school of letters. The few examples that remained in the authors' memory reveal political connotations. For instance, the one attributed to Lucian Perța, entitled *Vremea recoltei*: “*Se recoltează orezu-n mai / Un om, un pai / Un om, un pai.*” (At the May rice harvest: a man, a straw, a man, a straw.) Or a more daring one, as it alludes to both the fixation of Ceaușescu's national epic, as well as the obsession of emigration, the patriotic poem *Ștefan cel Mare întrebându-și fiii* (Stephen the Great To His Sons), attributed to George Țără: “*Fiind mari, ce vreți să fiți, copiii? / Spahii, Măria Ta, spahii! / Dar fiii voștri peste ani? / Americani, americani...*” (“What do you want to be when you grow up, my dearest children? / Soldiers, Your Grace, soldiers! / How about your children, years from now? Americans, Americans...”)

With or without political allusions (for example, as a guest of TVR's *Amfiteatrul artelor* show in 1975, the group had to let go of any attempts of the kind⁷), *Ars amatoria* coagulated many talents and brought a breath of smartly playful fresh air to audiences at the end of the '70s, which in itself could have been a form of (masked) opposition to the gloomy frown which preceded and followed the establishment of the mammoth that was the *Cântarea României National Festival*.

7. George Țără, *Interviu cu George ȚĂRA*, interview by Simona-Ioana Cucuian, Web, June 9, 2021, https://ecreator.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4950:interviu-cu-george-tara&catid=23&Itemid=131.

However, it was this very colossal machinery elaborated by the party apparatus with a view to preventing professional arts from staying afloat to the benefit of amateur creation – which implied a huge not only organizational, but also economic effort, in times of self-induced economic crisis – that seems to have indirectly favoured the emergence and the inner dynamics of subversive student humour. In other words, the perverted effect of *Cântarea României* was an unprecedented meeting between “brigade”-type events, some of them having subversive dimension. This happened as student groups competed not only in student-dedicated stages of *Cântarea României*, but the best, most-awarded ones also went to the plethora of comedy festivals that had taken over the entire country, or were constantly invited to entertainment events organized in the big resorts that included student camps: Costinești, Pârâul Rece, Izvorul Mureșului, Slănic Moldova and others (most of the times, students’ transport expenses were reimbursed and accommodation and meals were included, so they enjoyed a tad of paid holidays)⁸.

Sometimes, competitiveness was stimulated by the management of certain academic institutions itself: while an overwhelming majority of the students involved in the creation and distribution of performances were volunteers, some trainers were paid by the school, the university, or the institute (for instance, the comedy group of the Academy of Economics, *Brigada ASE*, winner of many prizes, even had an accompanist for musical training, their own choreographer, dedicated costumes, and the group leaders, such as Fiți Arieșan or Andy Lupu, stayed in the brigade long after they graduated), or were on the payroll of the student houses of culture. Still, in most cases, a professor was delegated as leader of the teams, with no pay, evidently. It is certain that, after the opening of *Cântarea României*, comedy groups not only grew in number, but also entered a fierce, yet friendly competition, and willingly or not, their audiences and prestige consolidated: if until then most of them were improvised “brigades” that only performed

8. On the other hand, in order for us to understand why, unlike amateur theatre groups in Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia, or Poland, Romanian student theatre seems to not have had a subversive discourse, we must admit that, in Romania, in the case of theatre, censorship always kept monitoring texts, as it did in the case of professional theatre; plus, the chance of theatre groups travelling with money from UASCR or UTC was infinitely smaller.

a couple of representations (one at the school's club, another at the university competition, and, if they were lucky, a last one at the Student Art National Festival), gradually, due to successive amalgamations⁹ and inevitable internal changes, some of them (*BUM*, *Divertis*, *Fics*, etc.) reached an independent travelling life, going around the country, whether on tour or at festivals, to the benefit of forever renewed audiences that were not limited to students. And they were sold-out everywhere they went¹⁰.

Right after 1980, the impetus of some teams – of which the most visible among the constellation of others were probably *Divertis*, *Seringa* or *Opt fără cârmaci* of Iași, *Brigada ASE*, *GEOF*, *Energeticii*, or *Brigada Facultății de drept* (Brigade of the Bucharest School of Law), *BUM* of Cluj, *Tact* Timișoara, *Proparodia* of Craiova, or *Mecanica* of Galați –, is confirmed not only by the prizes they won, but also the affluence of young spectators, who anxiously waited for those jokes, sketches, monologues that hinted at politics. Some of them were captured on home-video-like films recorded by the group members or fans, but most were inevitably lost. Amateur footage and interviews reveal that some texts were based on student life, but very often touched on the food shortages faced by the whole country – a sure way to coagulate the audience; as it happened with the short song below by *Brigada ASE*, accompanied by well-known folk music:

Anicuța neichii dragă / De ce ești așa de slabă? / - Slabă sunt de felu-ntâi / De la supă cea de pui / Felul doi eu îl impart / Cu vecina mea de pat (Dearest Ana, why are you so thin? - Because of the first-course chicken soup / As the second-course I share / With my bed-mate)

followed by a dialogue between the two girls:

Chicken soup recipe: – Onion? – Check! – Carrots? – Check! – Potatoes? – Check! – Chicken? – That's enough, no need for chicken!

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9. Like some theatre student groups, certain Bucharest comedy groups involved students from the Institute of Theatre and Film (IATC) or the Conservatory, whether they wanted to get experience, or were tempted by the small advantages of the tours, festivals, and paid camps.
10. Lucian Revnic, leader of the *BUM* group of the Cluj House of Students, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorul studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

On the other hand, other texts were more or less subtle in referring to party policies: from the mandatory agricultural chores to the female students' exasperating military training, and even travelling abroad; more than that, GEOFF alluded to Ceaușescu himself, though not saying his name, in a sketch in which three "workers" with a ladder tried to drive a nail in a wall to hang an empty picture frame. Of course, as they only had a hammer, they failed to drive the nail in the concrete wall. "Is it in? – No! – Listen, it can't simply be hammered in, it should be shot!" (Younger readers should know that, at the time, there were special machines used to shoot nails or spikes into concrete walls.) After several other scenes, the sketch ends with the three going off the stage uttering the dialogue below referring to the same troublesome painting, in which all spectators saw Ceaușescu's ubiquitous portrait: "– Oy, you forgot to take it down! – Leave it, mate, it'll soon fall down on its own!"¹¹ Or, about the freezing cold houses in 1984-1989, the *Tact* brigade in Timișoara:

I remember the floods of yore. So much water in the pipes that it spilled over!... The whole dorm was flooded. I still have a bottle of hot water essence and use it whenever I take a shower... Two drops per cold water tone!

Or, directly alluding to the economic crisis caused by the "external debt", *Brigada ASE*:

Our activity is based on the concept of saving, regardless of the costs.

In a press interview (as well as in other radio or TV public talks), Toni Greco, a founding member and long-time leader of Divertis, stated loud and clear:

One of our highest purposes was to meanly allude to irritating communist policies. Life in the "80s was very tough because of huge material shortages. There was no heat, no electricity, no hot water, and students' life in the common dormitories was rough. We made certain

11. Viorel Gaiță, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea răsului. Umorul studentesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

jokes in the paper, not saying names, of course. The university environment was deliberately more relaxed. It was way for people to blow off steam and stay off the streets.¹²

Or:

Unless you made jokes hinting at the events around you, there was no point in doing student comedy.¹³

Most of those who were interviewed, whether in the written press or on TV, confirm a similar attitude, regardless of the university they went to. Of course, the main question this raises is how was it possible that censors allowed such performances based on such texts that would never have been permitted on a professional stage? “We were playing cat and mouse”, says Călin Husar¹⁴, one of the leaders of *Brigada ASE*. There were permanent negotiations between the students” and the government’s representative (in Bucharest, the famous comrade Olivia Clătici, of the University Centre, while at the big festivals, comrade Mircea Ursache).

The students sometimes resorted to the classic method of the “white dog”: as it happened in theatre, they introduced a shocking, provocative situation, which was certainly going to be cut out, in order to deflect attention from the subversive strong point the team was aiming for. Other times, they replaced the cut sentences or words with negotiated elements that turned situational humour ten times funnier or simply made the joke’s point of interest even darker. In the same TV documentary, Ciprian Fachiru, of the *Mecanica* group in Galați (which was strictly monitored at a local level), told an exemplary story in this sense:

The text sounded something like: “We turned to our work companion, the computer, to put your wishes on cards, so they are now in the programme.” The references were evident: the (computing) cards hinted

12. Toni Grecu, interview by Alexandru Șerban, *Adevărul*, 14 November 2015

13. Toni Grecu, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorul studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

14. Călin Husar, Toni Grecu, *Ibidem*.

at bread and food ration cards, while the programme alluded to the Romanian Communist Party's programme... This man from Galați said to me: Listen, it's not ok to talk about cards, as people can understand something else; let's change this word." "Well, at our university, we have cards, you know the Romanian computer Felix...", we said... "Yes, yes, I know, but things have modernized now... [*the censor n.n.*] Let's say as follows: *We've got everything on tape so all your wishes are now recorded!*" Our faces simply fell off! Taped? It was a direct reference to the *Securitate*, which we really didn't aim at...¹⁵

Other times, the student group reacted to an act of censorship by using in the show the very censored directions (as Toni Grecu and Florin Constantin recall doing in the show they presented at the 1983 Student Art Festival in Iași): by verbally or non-verbally highlighting the various interventions on the text, you caused uproars of clapping. As Toni Grecu puts it: "The greatest satisfaction came from making fun of censors themselves!"¹⁶ All things considered, it seems that the existence of backstage censorship raised the groups critical potential and the audience's complicit reaction:

Censorship brought us a huge service. How? Before going on stage at a festival, they had to see the text. The person in charge of propaganda read it and said: "What does this say? What do you mean this toolbox costs 500 dollars? You can't say the word *dollars!*" It was forbidden. There were rules against saying certain words in public, including Western currencies. Romanians were not supposed to know other currencies existed. As a digression, if *Miliția* found a dollar on you, you went to jail for years! Back to our story: the censor cut the word "dollars" and wrote above it: [any other currency], of the communist bloc, of course." When I was on stage, I said: "This toolbox costs 500 any other currency." And my colleagues performed the entire text reading the censor's corrections out loud. The audience was on the floor with laughter. They got it. Which brought us the first prize.

15. Ciprian Fachiru, *Ibidem*.

16. Toni Grecu, *Ibidem*.

In fact, some censors paid attention to the moments of the show where the audience laughed and highlighted them in red on the script, in an attempt to later diminish their subversive value¹⁷, which of course led to counter-reactions from the artists: one of the most commonly used and most efficient ways to make people think of politics, thus avoiding script censorship, was to “meaningfully” perform certain classic texts as part of monologues, as per the testimonies of both certain artists, and the censors themselves. For instance, they mention *Cinci pâini*, by Ion Creangă, or *Iarna pe uliță* by George Coșbuc; they simply took the text as it was, with no changes at all, and by employing expressive pauses corroborated with a nonverbal discourse that showed irony or even sarcasm to the original work, caused huge comic contextual effects, all directly connected to politics. Ghighi Bejan¹⁸, for example, told that merely pausing after uttering “The Party”, before saying “Liberal” (in Creangă’s text), brought him standing ovations; the same with the finger counting gesture after saying “We’ve got no...” (Suggesting the shortages of everyday life) before going on saying “... son. But we’ve got... each other.”¹⁹

The silent battle with censorship – minimized by the activists who accepted testifying but marked by a range of examples from the former students involved – intertwined with surveillance by the state police, *Securitate*. Evidently, a former top activist, head of UASCR’s Committee for press and culture, Corneliu Dumitriu, vehemently denies the presence of the *Securitate*, which... “was a busy institution and had no time to monitor students”. However, hand-filmed footage from a student festival in April 1989 (at the last Student Art Festival, which took place in Cluj) shows the members of

17. Ghighi Bejan, *Ibidem*.

18. *Ibidem*.

19. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that, whether they were aware of it or not, the model of reading classic texts in an ironic-parodic key came from professional theatre: in 1970, Bulandra Theatre paved the way for poetry and music recitals as a form of intellectual entertainment, and Florian Pitiș debuted this method in his “reinterpretation” of *Scrisoarea a III-a*, by Mihai Eminescu. In 1970-1971, at Cassandra Theatre Studio, students from several departments (drama and directing) of IATC proposed a performance type called *Divertisment 71 (Entertainment 71)*, which was the result of their playful improvisation exercises, some of which used classic texts performed ironically and parodically.

Brigada ASE daringly mocking a sharp “interview” “by the dean” (employing multiple clichés hinting at a beating in the basements of the secret services: “Talk...!”). Another sketch, by the group of the Petroleum-Gas University of Ploiești, includes the line below, as the audience rolled on the floor with laughter: “Whoever speaks for longer than five minutes at a seminar... meeting... is capable of doing worse things!...”

Unlike his colleague Dumitriu, Mircea Ursache, also an UASCR responsible for the activities of the “Grigore Preoteasa” Student House of Culture in Bucharest, admits that the *Securitate* always monitored that “certain lines weren’t crossed”. In different interviews (one for DIGI FM in 2019, the other for TVM in 2017), both Toni Grecu and Florin Constantin stated that, after 1990, they were approached by a Securitate worker who monitored the Iași student house of culture and offered them *all* the tapes of the Iași representations of the Divertis group²⁰.

2. With the Emperor’s permission?

Still, did any of the many participants to these entertainment shows that rose to such fame among young people suffer any consequences? According to the responsible activists, no. Nevertheless, it’s true that there were local differences – in the big centres, such as Bucharest, Cluj, or Iași, the authorities were of course much more tolerant than in small university centres, such as Galați. But, since they “couldn’t detain the students off the stage” (as Toni Grecu said in his interview with DIGI FM²¹), according to several artists, they took action through the school or university management, whether the dean, the chancellor and so on. Ciprian Fachiru, for instance, tells how, following the pressure on the TCM Galați Dean’s Office, he was blamed by public meeting vote and obliged to repeat the year.

20. In fact, samizdat tapes of performances held by the Divertis group or of concerts by Alexandru Andrieș – songs that were subsequently released on the album *Interzis (Forbidden)* in 1990 – recorded especially in clubs or houses of culture, circulated during the last years of the communist regime. Yours truly probably still has a couple of such tapes in a dusty box.

21. Toni Grecu, *Oameni de colecție - Toni Grecu*, interview by Cătălin Striblea, Video, February 19, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mb7gA1NH6Mc>.

It was a “democratic” meeting. They brought my whole year, i.e. a hundred plus people, in a big room. Several people took the floor saying... “He dispraised and mocked our accomplishments...” And the audience started asking questions: “But what did he say?” “We can’t repeat his words!”
*Laughs.*²²

On the other hand, this reflex endeavour of comedian students, in years of terrible shortages and absurd political dictatorship, brought the audience a temporary (illusory?) sentiment of freedom, or at least hope for freedom. Hence the (self-)heroizing of those who constantly engaged in such spectacular contributions: “Back then, you felt like a sort of James Bond of comedy; saying things that were almost forbidden, that people criticized was cool... It could certainly cost you your future...”²³

Or, in the words of Lia Trandafir of the Brigade of the Bucharest School of Law: “The student comedy movement was a protest, a form of resistance, a safety net, the impudence of youth... and all of the above at the same time.”²⁴

However, the question of “how it was possible” for such a movement to grow so big remains essential. Many of those who spoke in the TVR documentary, as well as in other materials, whether written or audio interviews, now – more than three decades later, admit that the system itself allowed humour to act as a *safety valve* and release the negative energies accumulated because of material shortages and political constraints. Since some authors of the comedy texts written for the stage collaborated, were editors, or simply close to student publications of the UTC (*Viața Studențească, Amfiteatru, Universitas, Convingeri comuniste* in Bucharest, *Alma Mater/Dialog, Opinia studențească* in Iași, *Echinox* in Cluj, etc., or even *Scânteia tineretului*, especially through its cultural supplement, *SLAST*), it is evident that, despite the censorship, cultural and media productions dedicated to young people were surrounded by a broader margin of tolerance/respice regarding critical discourse and subversive allusions. “We made certain jokes in the paper, not

22. Ciprian Fachiru, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorul studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

23. Dragoș Moștenescu, *Ibidem*.

24. Lia Trandafir, *Ibidem*.

saying names, of course. The university environment was deliberately more relaxed. It was way for people to blow off steam and stay off the streets.”²⁵

In a long interview in the same series collected by Simona-Ioana Cucuian in preparation of her doctoral thesis on student magazines, Paul Nancă, editor-in-chief of the magazine *Convingeri comuniste* of the Bucharest CUASCR (Council of Romanian Students Associations) during the last years before the fall of communism and later a member of the *Phoenix* magazine and editorial group, paints a clear picture of the “90s ambiance and the tight, though silent, collaboration between young writers, student journalists and comedy groups; however, he also cannot clearly explain the coercive bodies’ lack of reaction (especially after *Cenaclul de luni* was forbidden in 1983, which was partly reborn in a new formula, under the umbrella of the magazine itself):

... It was our means of resistance in a time when you had a choice between doing nothing and doing whatever could be done, but still doing something to support the idea of culture and people’s spirit alive in general. And we chose to do this... We will never know to what extent we tricked our censors and how much they allowed... This remains a mystery insofar as student comedy groups go, too...²⁶

Evidently, this space of respite was limited by a sort of clear, unspoken net, on the one hand demarcating the things that could be said and those that were forbidden (first of all, jokes and hints to the presidential couple were to be avoided), and on the other hand, through the concessive attitude of the censors themselves, by the editors-in-chief, the leaders of the houses of students or of the festival juries. In the TVR documentary, Ion Cristoiu, deputy editor-in-chief of the magazine *Scânteia tineretului* in 1980-1987, member of countless such juries, and coordinator of the transient publications related to the Amfiteatru Galas, states that the truly important thing was “to avoid a

25. Alexandra Șerban, “Toni Grecu, umorist, liderul grupului Divertis: ‘În comunism, cenzura ne-a făcut servicii colosale,’” *Adevărul*, November 14, 2015.

26. Paul Nancă, *Interviu cu Paul Nancă*, interview by Simona-Ioana Cucuian, Web, October 2, 2020, https://ecreator.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4875:interviu-cu-paul-nanca&catid=23&Itemid=131..

scandal”: crawl through, both as an artist, and as an official, so as not to stir an acute reaction that may have reached the top of the pyramid, i.e. the Central Committee’s Special Department for Propaganda, Press and Print. Moreover, the journalist (who at some point was “punished” by being demoted to editor-in-chief of the *Teatrul* magazine), describes the procedures of this particular (and consistent) kind of evasion: “The main concern of the juries and the organizers was for political nuances to not be discussed, [even] if those on stage said jokes about Nicolae Ceaușescu. We simply turned a blind eye.”²⁷

Still, how can this relative tolerance be explained from a political, institutional viewpoint? Considering that, even at the level of other “amateur artistic brigades” that developed around plants, factories, and enterprises of all kinds, which were scattered throughout the country, especially as *Cântarea României* developed so much, *such slips were impossible* – even if, at certain comedy festivals, groups of workers and students competed against each other – the phenomenon certainly requires applied conjunctural explanations. As we have seen, there are no interdisciplinary historical studies. These should look at both testimonies, press and TV documents, and corroborate them with the archives of UTC and UASCR or CNSAS (National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives).

A majority of the participants themselves admit, intuitively, but repeatedly, that in the ‘80s, and especially in 1983-1987, when UTC was headed by Nicu Ceaușescu (who surrounded himself with a whole suite of greater or smaller activists, from the leaders of *Scântea Tineretului* to those of the UASCR cultural committees), the drag of censorship and the monitoring system were much laxer than in other sectors of artistic life:

Once again, it was a freedom about which we will never know how much we had earned and how much was allowed by the system to keep us within the limits of a time when everything closed down at 10 p.m., from TV programmes (which lasted two hours, between 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.) to restaurants; night clubs were unknown to us back then. However, student clubs were open until later at night. So, after all this time, I ask myself whether this was allowed by the Emperor, in an

27. Ion Cristoiu, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorul studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

attempt to keep us all there and avoid that we went out and played other tricks. [Nicu Ceaușescu] was the head of the UTC, the first secretary of the UTC Central Committee, and it is true that, as a young, open spirit, he allowed certain things, such as this freedom that students enjoyed compared to other Romanian social classes of the time, which extended around an entire seaside resort, such as Costinești, not mentioning the other mountainside camps, like Izvorul Mureșului, Pârâul Rece and certain others, where, once again, performances, festivals, discos took place, the latter also prohibited really everywhere else on Romanian soil. In fact, a few clubs, or discos – call them whatever – in Costinești and the other resorts were actually equipped quite well for the time, with UTC funds.²⁸

However, it remains for proper studies to prove whether this impression/intuition advanced by direct participants regarding the role of that “safety valve aimed at releasing society’s negative energies” is true or not. In any case, to quote Bogdan Teodorescu (writer, former member of the FICS group), “Back then, we had no idea we were valves!”²⁹. On the contrary: “We knew we wouldn’t die under communism. We knew it. And we were preparing for the day when we’d be rid of them.”³⁰

3. “This is not theatre!” Criticism and student comedy groups

The contempt displayed, whether openly or not, by Romanian literary and theatre criticism towards comedy in general is not a novel phenomenon, as it has stubbornly travelled across our modern cultural history in a type of (hypocritical) reflex relative to the preferences of audiences, which, from the mid-1850s, favoured comedy plays and shows. Let us remember that Caragiale’s comedies were first rejected by the audience and the critics, as they were considered vulgar. The world of comedy and even of satirical/humorous

28. Paul Nancă, *Interviu cu Paul Nancă*, interview by Simona-Ioana Cucuian, Web, October 2, 2020, https://ecreator.ro/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=4875:interviu-cu-paul-nanca&catid=23&Itemid=131.

29. Bogdan Teodorescu, in Andy Lupu and Eugen Oprina, *Puterea râsului. Umorel studențesc în anii 80*, Documentary (TVR1, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Trk8A9isop8&t=122s>.

30. Lia Trandafir, *Ibidem*.

lyricism was traditionally marginalized by the past century's literary histories. Very few comedy performances (except for the sophisticated readings of Caragiale) enjoyed an exceptional status in the eyes of theatre critics of Communist times, no matter how smart and surprising the proposals of playwrights and directors. This happened despite the strong, highly vocal presence of subservient comedy writers, such as Aurel Baranga. To our days, valuable playwrights, such as Marin Sorescu, Theodor Mazilu, or Ion Băieșu, are in fact very rarely read and brought to the limelight. The phenomenon is ever more bizarre, as, throughout the years, humour, satire, even buffa works were not only acknowledged and theorised by classic critics, from Titu Maiorescu and George Călinescu, to, for instance, Ov. S Crohmălniceanu, but, especially after 1965, dozens of colloquia, round tables, conferences dedicated to comedy and humour were documented, and starting the turn of the "70s, a multitude of such festivals were organized, both for professional, and amateur performing arts institutions.

Despite the fact that, in 1977-1989, the cultural press throughout the country, as well as *Teatrul* magazine, published (out of obligation, of course) dozens of synthetic articles and accounts dedicated to amateur festivals, the theatre critics willing to look at the phenomenon rarely or not at all focused on student humour. I am referring not to activist journalists who wrote as directed, but to real critics, such Valentin Silvestru, who supported and even theorised comedy performances³¹ (who otherwise wrote in a 1985 journal page that, for five years, he had been the president of the *Cântarea României* jury for the sections "artistic brigades, satirical groups, amateur light shows"³²), or Victor Parhon, who, for years, wrote a column dedicated to amateur

31. In this sense, see, among many others, Valentin Silvestru, "Dificultățile umorului pe scenă [Difficulties of Humour on Stage]," *Contemporanul*, May 17, 1979, Valentin Silvestru, "Formula de viață a brigăzii artistice [The Formula of Artistic Brigades]," *Contemporanul*, July 29, 1979, as well as Valentin Silvestru, *Umorul în literatură și artă [Humour in Literature and Arts]* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1988).

32. Valentin Silvestru, "Pagini de jurnal 1944-1985 [Diary 1944-1985]," *Teatrul* 6 (1985), 87: "At the same time, it is the broadest space for the manifestation of popular irony, the most representative – due to its sharpness and optimism – critical expression against everyday shortages, anachronistic mentalities, the masses' hottest, most efficient plea for labour, honour, and justice, through artistic means."

festivals in the *Contemporanul* magazine³³. Of course, the exception were the accounts and reports in *Viața studențească* or *Scânteia tineretului* (which claimed to be critical publications, so to say). In the rare cases when they did mention these (in *Contemporanul*, or in the local press, when the Student Art Festival unfolded outside the capital city), the section dedicated to “brigades” was treated superficially or was completely inexistent, to the benefit of the section dedicated to theatre groups.

We find it equally interesting, and at the same time symptomatic, that, during the two years when the former deputy editor-in-chief of *Scânteia tineretului*, Ion Cristoiu, was appointed editor-in-chief of *Teatrul* (1987-1989), despite the fact that the editorial policy changed completely and the young generations of artists and students from IACT or Târgu Mureș received unprecedented attention, the articles and columns dedicated to amateurs, even those at *Cântarea României*, disappeared almost in full; while comedy performances and festivals were *not mentioned at all*, although the new editor-in-chief had been and continued to the very end to be their shadow supporter, a member of almost all juries, and coordinator of the transient publications at Costinești or Pârâul Rece, and even turned to many writers directly connected to the student (comedy) movement who wrote in *Suplimentul Literar Artistic al Scânteii Tineretului* (*Artistic Literary Supplement of Scânteia Tineretului*), such as Ioan Groșan, Ioan Buduca, Radu G. Țeposu, Toni Grecu, Doru Antonesi, Paul Nancă, etc.

In other words, willingly or not, theatre criticism ignored student humour. The fact that a privileged system journalist who had worked in youth press for a long time maintained this ignorance as chief of the specialized magazine – despite bringing at *Teatrul*, from time to time, a plethora of former collaborators from *Scânteia tineretului*, from George Stanca and Mihai

33. Nevertheless, we can refer to a review signed by Traian Pop Traian in 1985, “În obiectiv, teatrul studențesc” (*Focus of Student Theatre*), following the Timișoara Student Art Festival, when a dramatization of Mircea Nedelciu’s exceptional parodic sketch “*Tânguire de mior*” was performed in the Amphitheatre of the School of Agronomy (p. 15-16, as a short, yet enthusiastic regional stage of the “Grigore Preoteasa” Student House of Culture brigades), created by radio producer Dragoș Șeuleanu, “Jocul serios de-a satira [Serious Game of Satire],” *Teatrul* 7–8 (1985): 36–37.

Tatulici, to Paul Nancă, Radu G. Țeposul, Eva Catrinescu, Aurelia Boriga, Graziela Bârlă, or Doina Berchină – seems to confirm that *this was not the critics' reaction to protect the youngsters' attempts at subversion*, but a rejection that rather conveys that *"This is not theatre!"* And the new editor-in-chief treated it as a natural fact.

There is one single exemplifying intersection between student humour and professional theatre, i.e. Ștefan Iordache's 1989 recital entitled *Astă seară stau acasă (I'm Staying Home Tonight)*, performed at *Teatrul Mic*, based on a text by Toni Grecu and Doru Antonesei. Until new testimonies, how Dinu Săraru chose this reportorial option remains a mystery. All in all, the performance was a fiasco, as critics reprimanded the text's very bubbly fragmented character that raised the spirits of young audiences in houses of culture or open amphitheatres of student camps:

In spite of all these more than promising premises, we must state from the very beginning that the recital *Astă seară stau acasă* was disappointing. [...] First of all, there is no doubt that, due to its inconsistent character, the text signed by Toni Grecu Arhire and Doru Antonesei who made up of a series of little jokes that were somewhat funny (some of them), unoriginal (many others), all of them fleeting, was not enough for a performance of over two hours. Naturally, the punchlines are not the highlights, the adornments of a narrative structured designed to be funny but substitute the situation itself. We have no doubt that the text was written precisely for this performance, but it is evident that it lacks any dramatic structure.³⁴

Who commissioned the "text written precisely" for Ștefan Iordache and why? It is clear that it was somebody who was already familiar with the kind of humour they had produced for years in totally different spaces than those of professional theatre, but did not anticipate that both the audience and the critics or the journalists at the premiere were not accustomed, nor had the taste, or the proclivity for such a text format, especially considering

34. Cristina Dumitrescu, "Ștefan Iordache în *Astă seară stau acasă*," *Teatrul*, no. 2 (1989), 61-62.

that, as it is easily understandable, on a famous stage in the capital city centre it was depurated of all political-subversive allusions.

Present-day historians, critics, and sociologists should take a closer look at this contemptuous attitude of the critics towards popular comedy performances, including those created by theatres or revue departments all around the country, which, when discussed, were placed in less visible spots of publications. For it is rather clear that, for about two hundred years, the fabric of the Romanian theatre movement preserved a silent, strange contradiction – from the end of the 19th century on – with the system that coagulated a bourgeois aesthetic *canon*: in its understandable attempt to “educate” the public by marginalizing theatre discourses considered as “commercial”, the post-romantic aesthetic canon granted privilege to the obsession of the masterpiece, of “great *dramatic art*”, both in specific literature and in terms of performances³⁵. The of 20th-century canon’s gradual coagulation around broad, metaphorical directing art that included several levels of meanings and overbid allegoric stage images thus exiled performance types that were greatly appreciated by the public (revue, “variety”, stand-up, etc.), all the way to a type of insignificant limbo that can be regarded as irrelevant or inexistent – a form of supreme contempt that explains why the intellectual world only devised proper specific tools to evaluate “minor” genres after the year 2000. And even since...

Of course, this systematic underestimation of popular culture, first and foremost aimed at entertaining, is not specific to Romanian art criticism, as by the end of the 1980s, it reigned over almost all cultural and even academic environments in both Europe, and across the ocean, including film studies, a young art that is – one would say – popular by definition. It is the result of several sociological, ideological, and not least political factors that – following the post-WW1 assumption/assimilation of various avantgarde aesthetics – deepened the fault line between high culture (protected under

35. For instance, regarding dramatic literature, see Ovid S. Crohmălniceanu, *Literatura română între cele două războaie mondiale [Interwar Romanian Literature]*, vol. III (Bucharest: Minerva, 1975), and the unpublished doctoral thesis by Miruna Iacob, “Umorul literar al experienței comuniste [The Literary Humour of Communist Experience]” (PhD Thesis, Brașov, Transilvania University of Brașov, 2018).

the opaque umbrella of the autonomy of aesthetics) and popular culture³⁶; all this despite the academic-dictatorial pressure exerted by totalitarian ideologies before and after the Second World War, as both fascism and communism more than overbid the very “popular”, “mass-oriented” character of artistic products. Naturally, propagandistic pressure causes equal reactions³⁷.

Moreover, in our case too (decades later), as in the cases of other European cultural spaces, the contemptuous lack of interest in so-called “minor” genres, such as duos, sketches, stand-up comedies, imitations-impersonations, etc., was to a great extent deepened by how quickly they turned from live performances to TV shows. The very fact that these authors/scriptwriters/actors rose to fame extremely fast when they were picked up by TV stations (in the West, often getting control over production, contracts for series, or, in former Communist countries, reaching an icon status), led to their decline from “great artists” to “minor entertainers” – a faulty opposition of adjectives that, in fact, lacks a well-grounded axiological and theoretical system.

“*This is not theatre!*” is a consistent label-like assertion through which, in other spaces, too, but specifically in Romania, the theatre world has looked at all types of theatricality and performance that don’t quietly fit the often museified shelf of “art theatre”; or, with due generous tolerance, the back row of “sensational theatre” (which at least, willingly or not, takes place in theatre venues). The sentence “*This is not art!*” is a conviction which in no way considers that in entertainment shows, too, by using theatre means, certain artists address an audience, sometimes the same, other times different from, and at times including spectators of professional theatre. As a direct

36. For the major/minor experience in other cultural spaces, see Jean-Marc Moura, *Le Sens Littéraire de l’humour* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2010); Daniel R Smith, *Comedy and Critique: Stand-up Comedy and the Professional Ethos of Laughter* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2019); Eric Weitz, *Theatre & Laughter* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

37. For example, see Alison Dagnes, *A Conservative Walks into a Bar: The Politics of Political Humor*, 1st ed (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); Gregory Williams, *Permission to Laugh: Humor and Politics in Contemporary German Art* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2012); Rachel V. Kutz-Flamenbaum, “Humor and Social Movements,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 3 (March 2014): 294–304.

consequence, such a claim, so deeply rooted in mentalities, cannot outline, through consistent evasion, a coherent, efficient evaluation system for the qualities of *other forms of theatre communication*.

Leaving theory behind, one may rhetorically, yet exemplifyingly, raise simple, heritage questions, such as: are the short monologues written by Dan Mihăiescu or Octavian Sava for Toma Caragiu, whether intended for live reading or TV shows, theatre texts or not? Is Toma Caragiu's interpretation, which has by now become truly popular, like the texts themselves, specific to theatre art or not? Are the sketches and duos created by Mihai Maximilian for Stela Popescu part of theatre art in general? How about Stela Popescu who, like Toma Caragiu, was able to perform any kind of roles, from comedy to drama, from Brecht to Chekov – is she an actress or has she lost this status for having been hugely successful in both revues and on TV? And so on, to *Divertis*, *Vacanța mare*, *Vouă*, or *Las Fierbinți* groups, considering the necessary, infinite nuances of any evaluation, on condition that it is an honest, argument-based, professional assessment. Evidently, a mere honest interrogation shows that judgements such as “This is not theatre” are downright superfluous as long as we agree that these types of entertainment *are theatre, a certain kind of theatre*, as technically and phenomenologically speaking they can be regarded as nothing else.

Going back to our student comedy groups, many of which competed as “artistic brigades”: the theatre critics’ superior attitude of ignorance can actually be explained by that fact that the “genre” itself had been, in the minds of most intellectuals in the “80s, already depreciated from the “60s, when specific, urban theatre audiences saw it as a mainly propagandistic genre, reminiscent of the sad “agitational” times. Critics themselves, especially those who were trained and enjoyed a certain level of authority after 1965, could not make an exception. And young critics followed or took on the unsaid rule. Especially after the unprecedented expansion of *Cântarea României*, taking part in and writing about amateur festivals and competitions had become a chore, and avoiding “brigades” most likely started as a defence mechanism of both the critic himself and of professional theatre, implicitly. This is why, except for the explosion of satirical and comedy groups on TV, after 1990, the amateur movement, oversized because of the great national festival, does not seem to have left visible marks on Romanian theatre life.

However, as it is evident, this self-protective reflex of theatre critics missed that which likely was the most interesting and freshest phenomenon to turn a typically propagandistic artistic formula into an open, outright platform that showed visible, systematic subversion against the political regime, if not contested it altogether. A platform that saw the participation of thousands of sympathetic spectators, one that still awaits proper critical research.

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