

Theatre, my life journey

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Figure 1 – *The Dragon*, a show by Irina Niculescu, May 2011, Know Theatre. Photo: Author's archive.

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Abstract: The article is an autobiographical account by a theater artist who sees herself as a “theatrical nomad.” She recounts her journey from childhood in Romania, influenced by puppet theater, to her studies in Prague, where she deepened her connection with animated forms of theater. Back in Romania, she performed during the communist regime, using metaphors to bypass censorship. Later, she traveled to the United States and other countries with her performances and, for love, eventually moved to the U.S. and then to Geneva. Throughout the text, she reflects on her artistic vocation, the social impact of theater, and her choice to live as an itinerant artist dedicated to creating meaningful performances for both children and adults.

Keywords: Theatrical nomad; Puppet theater; Censorship; Itinerant artist; Artistic vocation.

Teatro, minha jornada de vida

Resumo: O artigo é um relato autobiográfico de uma artista de teatro que se vê como uma “nômade teatral”. Ela narra sua trajetória desde a infância na Romênia, influenciada pelo teatro de bonecos, passando por seus estudos em Praga, onde aprofundou sua relação com o teatro de formas animadas. De volta à Romênia, atuou durante o regime comunista, usando metáforas para driblar a censura. Mais tarde, viajou para os Estados Unidos e outros países com seus espetáculos e, por amor, acabou se mudando para os EUA e depois para Genebra. Ao longo do texto, ela reflete sobre sua vocação artística, o impacto social do teatro e sua escolha de viver como uma artista itinerante, dedicada a criar peças que toquem crianças e adultos de forma significativa.

Palavras-chave: Nômade teatral; Teatro de bonecos; Censura; Artista itinerante; Vocação artística.

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Intro

I view myself as a nomad theatre artist!

The nomad, in Deleuze's (1987) thought is a symbol of freedom, fluidity, and non-conformity to rigid structures and territories. He represents movement, multiplicity and "becoming". The concept of the artist as a nomad continues to resonate in contemporary art, with many artists exploring themes of displacement, globalization. And the challenges of finding a place in a rapidly changing world.

But how did I become a nomad artist? How to describe a long journey in a few words?! I travel through the mysterious world of my memory, searching for my steps from year to year, people, countries, shows, conferences, courses, cultural exchanges, festivals...and I try to put things in order. I discover how difficult it is, because an emotion I didn't know before invaded me.

Looking back at the beginnings, I think that my love of travelling, of discovering new places and meeting people started in my childhood. I was born in Bucharest, Romania. My parents loved to travel around the country and each summer they chose a region, we made our backpacks and we went from village to village, climbing the mountains, visiting hundreds of years old churches...When I was fifteen years old, I continued to travel but this time with friends from school and each trip was an adventure

Due to Margareta Niculescu, my mother, who was stage director and the manager of *Țândărică Puppet Theatre*, I bathed and breathed in theatre and dance, went to see shows of all kinds and sometimes rehearsals. In the *Țândărică Puppet Theatre* I had the privilege to go see the backstage after the shows ended, spend time in the sewing and sculpting workshops and in the artists dressing room, I got to see the secrets of "making the theatre magic", but this hasn't taken any bit of my surprise and fascination of seeing the magic moment when the stage curtain opened and the puppets came to life. At 18, I read Peter Brook's book *The empty space* and Antonin Artaud's *The theatre and its double*. The ideas were completely new to me. *Theatre as a temple for catharsis*! Could

theatre have such a profound effect on the spectator? I was deeply touched. Nevertheless, I didn't think of becoming a puppeteer or making theatre.

At that time, Romania was a communist country and a dictatorship with many restrictions of all kind. Despite being aware of it, I loved my country and assumed living there. I was fortunate to have parents who encouraged me to think with my own head.

When the cult of personality of the leader became extreme, when everything became black or white, I decided to become a psychiatrist and psychologist, but after three months of preparing for the admission exams, I abruptly changed my mind.

I announced to my parents that I wanted to study theatre directing and make theatre for children. It was a definite decision. I wanted to make shows which touched children deeply, made them feel that they were individuals, make them discover that life had nuances.

I was ready!

Prague (1971 – 1975)

Four years at the Theatre Academy of Performing Arts – *Dívaldelni Akademie Muzických Umění* or simply, DAMU. For the first time on my own! For the first time being a foreigner in a foreign country!!! Speaking the language as a beginner, as a foreigner. Everything was new, I was twenty years old and I started a new life.

I was coming from a place where theatre was highly esthetic and refined; at the school in Prague, inspired by professor Jan Dvořák, I discovered the vibration of raw materials and their theatrical potential, the relation between the puppet and the actor. I knew it a little from the Romanian folk puppetry played at fairs in the countryside, but in Prague I saw it from a different perspective. A new kind of theatre was just starting to be explored and it marked me. I was lucky to learn it from the best master, theatre director Josef Krofta, who contributed to the opening of puppet theatre on the big stage and made the relation between the

puppet and the actor manipulator become a powerful and sometimes social political metaphor.

Today, few artists know his name, nevertheless he traveled with his shows and teaching all over the world and his impact on a new generation of artists was immense.

At that time, I decided to explore this kind of theatre, take it with me and develop it further.



Figure 2 - *Ariel*, Theatre Kattas, Norway, 2001. Photo: Author's archive.

Romania (1975)

Back home the world was changed. The cult of personality was at its peak.

The president and the first lady were considered and presented as “the father” and “the mother” of all Romanian children, at the age of kindergarten. The world seemed upside down. The surveillance was generalized.

In those times, theatres were full every night. People were expecting to hear something different, something true and important, expressed in metaphors which made them laugh or cry and reflect.

The preview of the new shows had to pass the censorship instituted by the Ministry of Culture. Later, in order to be able to deny or cover up that official censorship exists, the Ministry of Culture demanded that the directors practice self-censorship. It was an incredibly perverse idea but it didn't stop theatres to make shows using poetic forms to express the unspoken.

We were all certainly marked by the social-political context. In a way, this situation helped me make my choice: what side was I on, what did I want to do with my life...

Making theatre for children and sharing with them something important and profound about life was essential to me. Make them feel that they were individuals with their own personality.

Why theatre for children? Because it seemed to me unfair to grow up in a colorless world and if I wanted to touch and make vibrate the deep strings of their soul, this was the age to start with.

The offices of *Țândărică Puppet Theatre* occupied the first floor of an old beautiful villa. On the floor was a former ball room where the theatre organized different internal meetings about four times a year. I managed to take over the room and I made a puppetry research laboratory where together with the young generation of artists I explored in all possible ways the relation between the puppet and the actor, the meaning it can carry and the impact the puppet can have on the spectator. How can we make the puppet transmit an emotion and what kind of emotion. How can the puppeteer invest the puppet and make it

become alive. Later on, with the help of a friend designer we transformed the space in an auditorium for small shows for adults. We covered the tall windows with gray velvet curtains recycled from his theatre and we made a small amphitheater. The audience could count at the most sixty people. I remember the first show I made there, the *Beautiful electric passions*, a comedy for adults about the ascension to power and the corruptive effect of power.

We spent long hours of work in improvisations, exploring the relation between the actors and the little marionettes, the capacity of the puppet to transmit emotions, and the impact the little puppets can exercise on the public – we decided the subject but text was written after the experimental period. The show had a strong political substance and it was placed in an imaginary Belle Epoque. The spectators were surprised and delighted by the humor juggling on the edge of danger, and they burst into laughter expressing that they understood the meaning of it all; a moment later they looked around discretely, to see if their laughter was noticed and if someone was watching them. The show used metaphors to tell the truth; it was a surprise for us all that we passed the censorship, even though by that time we had the “self-censorship”. Maybe the fact that the puppets were very small, delicate, and fragile contributed to the *laissez passer*.

I was decided to make theatre which said something important to both children and adults.

I was very young and I believed that my theatre “will *change the world*”, well! A little bit”

I belong to the generation who opened the closed space of the puppet theatre, took the puppets out and placed them next to the actor, making their relation meaningful. This is common thing today but at that time it was new!

Several of the shows with the young team of *Țândărică Puppet Theatre* toured Europe and I started to be invited abroad to make shows: Charleville-Mézières, Namur, Warsaw, Montreal and Geneva.

The United States

In 1982, I was invited to tour the United States, Toronto and Montreal for 10 weeks and give a series of conferences and workshops on directing in puppetry. People were friendly, curious, ready to play and to discover something new. The incredible art museums of the cities I visited were my main nourishment. Actors' theatre was quite conventional at that time, since it was after the epoch of the *Open Theatre* and the *Living theatre* and contemporary choreographers were already classics. I went to *Lincoln Center* to see their former avant-garde shows on video. In New York I saw a show by *Bread and Puppet* and a month later I went to meet Peter Schuman and visit his theatre art museum in Vermont. I have cherished that meeting ever since and gained a life-long friend.

In Boston I saw *Mothers and whores* by *Underground railway puppets and actors*. It was a one woman show. The actress Debra Wise was telling stories about the women's existential condition in the United States and singing; she was accompanied by a musician, John Lewandowski. A romantic and adventurous love story started and three years later John was going to become my husband. But in December 1982, I could not imagine to leave my country!



Figure 3 – *Faustina 1*: Original Play, Script, and Staging by the Company. Photo: Author's archive.

Back home

I went back to Bucharest, to my theatre and my theatre team. My home was where my theatre was. I made the show *Nocturne Stravinsky* with the opera *Renard* played by opera singers from the National Opera in Bucharest, puppets and actors, and a free adaptation of *Petrushka* on Stravinsky's music. At the same time I worked as a guest assistant at the directing chair of the *Institute of Theatre and Cinema Arts* (IATC), which later became the *National University of Theatre and Cinema* (UNATC). I believed that theatre is a universal language and that through our shows we will change the world. Well, a little. We haven't changed the world yet but I haven't lost the hope. There is still time.



Figure 4 – Irina, Montreal, *The Walk of the Wild Horses*. Photo: Author's archive.

Becoming a nomad

In 1984, I was invited by John Lewandowski, co-director of the *Underground Railway Theatre* to go to Boston and stage Stravinsky's *Soldiers Tale* on a contemporary powerful anti-war satire written by Cathy Cevoli. Cathy made a new contemporary text, used a sharp sense of humor and composed her text on music the same way the original text was composed by C.F. Ramuz. We

opened the show in January 2025. The music was performed by Boston chamber orchestra *Collage*. The work process was a difficult adventure, a new way of working in a short time. Cevoli's story was about a young man who is attracted with beautiful promises to enroll in the army. The situation resembled the army publicity passed on television at that time and the Devil received a completely different meaning. We performed in Cambridge *Massachusetts* in the famous *Sanders Concert Hall* and later that summer at the *National Puppetry Festival* in Los Angeles. In Cambridge, it shocked some spectators and critics, who were taken by surprise by the novelty of our contemporary adaptation of a "classic piece". Later that summer the show was performed at the *Puppeteers of America National Festival* in Los Angeles where it was considered by the critics the highlight of the festival. At that point John and I were married, and I was making a show in Geneva, celebrating the opening of the new puppet theatre of the city, *Theatre Marionnettes de Genève (TMG)*.

When I went to Boston, I was not planning to leave my country and move to the United States. I wasn't prepared to stay. It just happened: John and I were madly in love, we were happy, we were thirty-three years old and we decided to "dance together to the end of life" like in Leonard Cohen's song.



Figure 5 – *Ariel*, Theatre Kattas, Norway, 2001. Photo: Author's archive.

And this is how I became a nomad artist!

I am not a hero. I didn't run from communism even though I was not a communist and I didn't believe in it. I didn't leave for a better economic situation even though life in Romania wasn't easy and the artists wages were barely covering the bills. I had "my theatre" and theatre was my home and my life. Leaving Romania, I left behind my roots, my childhood, my school years and friends, my parents, and the stories of my grandparents to live with a man I fell in love with.

After I left my country, I tried to make my own theatre company twice. The first time was in Boston, after the birth of our son. The name of the company was *Fools' gold*. I liked it a lot. It contained the essence of theatre. We made all the papers, registered it, composed the Board of Directors, and decided the beginning repertoire to start in september. But surprise: John was invited to Geneva to take over the *Theatre Marionnettes de Genève*. How could we say "no!" to such an opportunity. A new theatre building and amenities, generously subsidized by the city and the county of Geneva.

In december 1989, we packed and moved to Geneva where we lived, worked and raised our son for 15 years. Together with John, I changed the old fashion marionette theatre style, where the new shows used to be rehearsed and performed on a recorded text, I trained actors into puppetry and puppeteers into acting. We produced a three-year cultural exchange between *Țândărică* and *Marionnettes de Genève*. I made a show for adults bringing artists from Bucharest and Geneva to work together and we rehearsed in both countries. It was an enriching professional and human exchange. I continued to travel and make shows, teach performing with puppets in Geneva, Charleville-Mezières, Seville, Riksteater of Oslo, Agder teater, in Tonsberg and Bergen, in Buenos Aires, Tainan, Bucharest and New Delhi.

In 2000, I made again a company: *Carte Blanche - Company Irina Niculescu* and I made two shows. My team was composed of some of the best

actor-puppeteers, lighting masters and technicians who followed me from the theatre *Marionnettes de Genève*. We had little money but I was building a team and discovering the difficulties to have your own company and be responsible of the funding. Nevertheless, I was already known in Geneva and had open doors.

In 2005, we left Switzerland and moved back to the United States for family reasons. First Ann Arbor, Cincinnati followed, then Chicago. Shows, teaching, making events, spaghetti theatre dinners, slam shows and giving conferences. Everywhere I went I enjoyed creating events to bring people together. And then Canada: teaching directing at the University of Quebec in Montreal. My work in Cincinnati opened a new way in puppet theatre. I made several shows, two operas with puppets, actors and live orchestra. The show I loved most, *The Dragon*, a free adaptation of the play with the same title by Evgheny Schwarz talked about two kinds of dictatorship: the dictatorship of evil and *the dictatorship of good*. After the show, a lady in the audience told me: "in the communist countries at least people knew they were controlled and manipulated. Here, in this country, people are convinced that they are free."

I haven't changed my belief in the power and importance of theatre to make a better world. I continued to try to touch people's hearts. Make them laugh...make them cry...make them think! I made friends everywhere and I know that I left something important with people I worked with.

I learnt a lot working in different cultures. I experienced different ways actors work, I met actors who questioned everything, wanted everything explained and analyzed before they went on stage to try out, actors who jumped in the fire from the very beginning and discussed afterwards, famous theatre designers who tried themselves in puppet theatre for the first time, coming with the humility of a beginner and were impressed by the complexity of the work in puppetry, writers who worked together with me during and after rehearsals and writers who requested to give their permission for every word cut from the script to better fit the situation on stage. I initiated international events because I like to

bring people from different cultures together, and I believe that working together is enriching for everybody. I had a home everywhere I lived.

Then why do I consider myself a nomad artist

Maybe it is because even though I speak several languages and I understand many more, I reach my total freedom of expression in my “own language”- Romanian...Or because I missed having my own company and the feeling that I plant the seeds and see them grow...You see, a nomad artist is everywhere a stranger, a foreigner, comes and goes, it is a citizen of the world.

Citizen of the world! I like that!

Reference

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