

**A Freely Shared Personal Voyage through American Performing Arts\***  
– Review –

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*Cristina Modreanu* is a theatre critic, professor at CESI (Research Centre of Imaginary Studies, Bucharest), editor in chief of *Scena.ro* magazine and former director of the National Theatre Festival (2008–2010). *Performative Utopia* is her fifth book, after a complex article collection dedicated to Romanian theatre directors (*Chess to the Directors*, Romanian Cultural Institute Publishing House, 2003), a book focused on the complex process of travelling in search for the most interesting European theatre performances (*The Inner House*, Bucharest: Camil Petrescu Cultural Foundation, 2008) and other volumes about the works of two of the most talented and peculiar Romanian theatre artists: Măştile lui Alexander Hausvater (*The Masques of Alexander Hausvater*), Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, 2005 and Mihai Măniuțiu – *Spațiul cameleonic* (*Mihai Măniuțiu – The Cameleonic Space*), Cluj-Napoca: Editura Bybliotek, 2010.

This fifth opus represents not only the synthesis of a Fulbright post-doctoral grant the author was awarded at the Performance Department of Tisch School, New York University: more important, I think, is the fact that Cristina Modreanu offers us the first Romanian contribution centred entirely on contemporary American theatre, after more than thirty five years from the legendary *American Theatre Today* by Ileana Berlogea (Cluj: Dacia, 1978) – one of the few books in contemporary western theatre that marked its way in our cultural memory under communism.

First of all, we have to notice that, in her forward chapter, Cristina Modreanu invites us to see the three-part composition of the book in a direct relationship with the cultural life of New York itself – and on some parts the writing style conserves this personal journey tone, as if the reader is a joyful and direct witness of facts, places, experiences or even simple everyday situations, captured both on the streets or inside theatre halls. Though the general impression is one of discipline, attention and rigour, attesting the author avowed goal to address young (but also of age) artistic and particularly academic audiences.

Modreanu grounds her volume on one first section, larger than the other two, resuming in short articles fresh impressions about the most prominent avant-garde artists

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\* Cristina Modreanu, *Utopii performative. Artiști radicali ai scenei americane în secolul 21*, (Performative Utopia: Radical Artists of the American Stage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2014), 194p. ISBN: 978-973-50-4451-0

and performers in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The title of this section is relevant in itself: *Reconstructing/ Reimagining / Revisiting*. The articles do not look at all like brief dictionary entries, suggesting that nowadays the reader can find all the needed information about a personality or another on a simple internet search. Instead, the author prefers to concentrate on the process of reinterpreting, from a contemporary perspective, the specificity and the importance of each and every one of the artists in question. From Martha Graham, Meredith Monk, or Foreman to Marina Abramovic, her procedures of brief reconstruction usually interweave documents, archives and actual spectating of the most important performances, following the traces of cultural memory.

Following, in a dedicated and personal way, Richard Schechner's suggestions from *The Captive Avantgarde*, Modreanu catches the trend of the dialogue/commentary performances between artists of today and the legendary artists and directors who influenced them – as the one made by Richard Move in *Martha@... the 1963 Interview*, a production on Martha Graham. Or the one who reinterprets Robert Wilson's work and poetics, in *Bob*, by Anne Bogart. Complex and enthusiastic analyses are dedicated, in the same time, to Laurie Andreson's present or older performances and, even more substantiated, to Wooster Group's more recent theatrical projects.

The second part of the book, dedicated to the *Political Stage*, is, in a way, more subjectively involved: the first two articles capture in vivid images characters, situations, particularities and the general atmosphere of the Zuccotti Park in the autumn of 2011, when the movement of Occupy Wall Street begun. One can feel the curiosity, the growing interest and the debates/conversations the author is involved in, as a foreign visitor but, in the same time, as a mature student involved in an academic program. The roots of the movement, its spirit, the fervour, the inner participative organization of the extended protests, the catchphrases and slogans, the substantial theatricality of these actions (recurrently a topic of the actual academic debates she followed these days) are all described with subtlety and nuances, as in some kind of observational documentary. Still, the most interesting part (and also the most arguable, as in any process of personal reflection) is the article dedicated to the relationship between the Street and the Stage, a short intermezzo of critical approach concerning the new energies of American political theatre:

“Once the desert of cynicism of postmodernism has been crossed, a new wave of hope pushes again on stage the political theatre (...) The political theatre of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has a profound interrogative dimension, he ask loudly the questions, trying to generate not an unique answer, cut different answers, as in a huge and global brainstorming (...) If the goal of today's political theatre would be integrated in a single need, then it could be how to transform us all, the one who participate in it, in Antigone.” (Modreanu, 2014, p.120)

The climate of enthusiasm, group reflection and protest seem to have influenced the author's focus on the socially and politically involved productions, performances and companies, some of them offering the very substance of this part of the volume. She starts her theatrical investigations with an analysis of *Stories from Liberty Plaza*, an interactive cabaret performance produced by The Civilians, based on a large set of interviews with direct participants at the Occupy movement. The selected material was

rewritten as a series of monologues focused on hot topics: the economic crisis, the war between the average citizen, the corporative system and the banks, the failure of the American democracy, etc. Then she documents the work of the Detroit based Foundry Theatre, whose performance *How much is enough?* – forum-theatre experiment – debates the distance between the real human needs and the artificial consumption practices. But her attention and enthusiastic empathy goes to the revival of the old *Living Newspaper* experiments (a theatrical form invented by the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and imported in America by the Federal Theatre Project a decade after) – a “performance mixed-media” by Liz Magic Laser produced for the Performa 2012 in New York and entitled *I Feel Your Pain*. The group conducted by the young director is collecting, re-editing, dramatizing and acting fragments from actual news, interviews and adds, and combines all this material in a complex canvas of filmic and live theatrical performance, whose aim is the de-structuring of the political / propaganda discourses practiced by the everyday media.

“... Liz Magic Laser puts in a vertical position a critical metatext addressing the demagogical public discourse, the lack of professionalism of journalists who bear a good part of responsibility in the process of stuffiness of a critical perspective in public opinion”. (Modreanu, 2014, p. 135)

The last part of the book gives the name for the book itself: *Performative Utopia* and it is focused on several personal encounters with some of the most experimental artists and groups of the present-day New York: Young Jean Lee, Heather Kravas, Radiohole and Witness Relocation, and even a reinvented dialogue-biography about Susan Sontag, produced by Builders Association. It seems interesting to note that the author’s tone becomes somehow more and more personal, much like the brief, airy and reflexive notations from a diary – inducing a special, person-to-person relationship with the reader. Hence, Cristina Modreanu’s book manages to become, in the same time, a very precise and accurate map of old and new directions in today’s American theatre and performing arts, but also, even more importantly, a generous and freely shared personal voyage .