

## THE THEATRE AS PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL LABORATORY

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“All the world’s a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts...”

William Shakespeare, *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII)

“Time is passing, time comes yet,  
All is old, and all is new;  
What for good or ill is set  
You can ponder and construe;  
Do not hope and do not worry,  
What’s a wave, will wave away;  
Though enticing with a flurry,  
Cold remain to all they say.”

Mihai Eminescu (1850-1889), *Gloss* (1883), translation  
by Daniel Ionița

**Abstract.** This article proposes a creative perspective on theatre as “political laboratory”, but also a political instrument of democratization, discussing a variety of interesting aspects and offering a new way of understanding what theatre means. Theatre is such a complex concept, so closely related to human existence and the cultural human space. This is the reason why we approach here the cultural perspective, which is also philosophical and political. The study is founded on classic and modern philosophical resources (Pythagoras, Plato, Erasmus, Hobbes, Arthur Schopenhauer) and contemporary ones, seen this way either by relevance or by both relevance and times (such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus, Richard Rorty), as well as on specific studies dedicated to the theatre (e.g. those of Dzifa Benson, René Bloch, S. Lev-Ari, Teya Sepinuck, Holden Taylor and Augusto Boal). After a brief incursion into the *theatrum mundi* and the permanence of the theatrical and political qualities of human life and times, the study proposes several types of political theatre – theatre as catharsis (the civic theatre), theatre of the oppressed, of witness and theatre of the Holocaust, theatre of empathy, solidarity and hope, each with a political specificity.

**Keywords:** *Theatre; Solidarity, Hope, Safe Place; Holocaust*

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*Theatrum mundi. Theatrical and Political Times*

The theatrical and political times are most likely a permanence of human condition and existence. In various manners, as in the notable examples of philosophers, such as Petronius credited to have said *quod fere totus mundus exercet histrionem* (“because almost the whole world are actors”), Pythagoras, Plato (who looked up to Pythagoras as a religious founding figure and probably was influenced by the latter in thinking of human beings as puppets directed by the gods), Erasmus, Hobbes, Arthur Schopenhauer (the world is a “theatre” constructed by human mind), Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and poets, such as William Shakespeare in his comedy *As You Like It* (Act II, Scene VII), Sir Walter Raleigh or the Romanian poet Mihai Eminescu, all great thinkers acknowledged the transitory and the performative quality of the human existence and resorted to the metaphorically universe of meaning labelled as “the world is a stage” as well as people generally might have experienced it at moments of awareness by experiencing life.

Theatre offers its own philosophy and experience of becoming. While it was never mere entertainment, lately theatre brings about a remarkable set of political “tools”, approaching themes such as freedom, individualization, becoming, achievement, aspiration, solidarity, estrangement, marginalization and oppression hopefully fostering catharsis, empathy, a renewed spirit of togetherness and an emancipation from the restraints of ideology and indoctrination.

Theatre is basically a laboratory where performance fulfils the roles of transformation in a Chemistry or Physics laboratory, namely a laboratory of ideas and it is political for setting order or inducing newer subversive or revolutionary orders of individual and societal improvement and emancipation. “Performance can fundamentally be said to be a transformation of ideas and dreams and all those other little understood human impulses into outward action. In this very basic sense performance happens with every word and gesture. It also presupposes a process of evaluation by a spectator”, as Dzifa Benson noticed.<sup>1</sup>

Performance and being inter-relate in obvious or ineffable ways transforming the ontology and becoming, transforming the possible and making a more meaningful politics, or, contributing to politics in a more meaningful manner.

Dzifa Benson captures the idea of the performance transcending everything, including the human self, in a summon of faculties (sensitivity, observation, knowledge, experience, memory, imagination etc.) and a unparalleled awareness of life as a microcosm, but especially as a gateway to glimpses of sublime. However, beyond the aesthetic aspect, there is the political aspect: acknowledging the mechanisms of order, leads to acknowledging oppression and the acknowledgement of the possibilities for emancipation via empathy and solidarity throughout hope and despair.

Theatrical performance is a way to understand delusion and self-delusion better, to come to terms with the persona we employ and with the numerous

<sup>1</sup> Dzifa Benson, “Performance Is The Thing”, *Philosophy Now*, Issue 57, 2006, [https://philosophynow.org/issues/57/Performance\\_Is\\_The\\_Thing](https://philosophynow.org/issues/57/Performance_Is_The_Thing).

facets of the world, or not to come to terms at all and revolt, and revolutionize and instil change. What we are is what we can imagine in that wondrous effort of ironist Rortian redescription<sup>2</sup> and what we can perform, thus affirm *for* our personal and collective being and existence, in a sort of “Nietzschean existentialism”<sup>3</sup>.

Possibly, performance philosophy is a contemporary emerging subfield examining differently human action and human interpretation and bridging otherwise the “seeming” and the “being”, by examining the world through a fascinating and unique artistic magnifying glass; but for the purpose of this study, the political aspects are more urgent.

### *Theatre as Catharsis* – *the Political Transformative Dimension of Art*

Ancient Greek Theatre<sup>4</sup> was far more than entertainment, presenting civic, religious, and psychological institutive dimensions of the human condition as the turnsole paper in a chemical lab. Among these, most complex was the “engine” of Greek tragedy<sup>5</sup>, particularly as described by Aristotle in his *Poetics*<sup>6</sup> – katharsis.

Performances evolved as part of religious festivals honouring Dionysus and, in time, they gained official status: they had the important support of the Athenian state that educated citizens to understand seen as a collective act of civic duty. The metaphorical counter-part of a more aware community, the chorus narrated sung danced to give unity and clarity to the message that had to be understood and to the main lesson that clarified the moral dilemma. *Hamartia* (the “tragic flaw” or “error in judgment” triggers the drama), then *peripeteia* changes everything for the noble hero and unchains the narrative flow, *anagnorisis* marks the clarifying moment when the exemplary character realizes the truth about his error and about the *hubris* (arrogance toward gods) that brought about the tragic situation. The cathartic path unfolds from *eleos* (pity) and *phobos* (fear) to an intense emotional release with three valued results: the moral renewal, the intellectual acknowledgement of a specific civic moral and psychological lesson and a reinforcement of social, ethical, and religious norms within society via the shared common experience.

<sup>2</sup> “There is no answer to redescription than a new redescription”, this is how meaningful change takes place and this happens in the cultural realm in the extended conversations (in conversationalism). See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, Cambridge University Press, 1989, p. 45, 103; Henrieta Șerban, *Richard Rorty, o filosofie pentru multiple înfloriri*, Pro Universitaria 2025 and Victor Popescu, “Unlimited Semiosis or Endless Redescriptions? Peirce, Eco, And Rorty on the Limits of Interpretation”, *Revue roumaine de philosophie*, Vol. 66, No. 1, 2022, pp. 85-103.

<sup>3</sup> See Friedrich Nietzsche’s “affirmation of being” and his concept of *amor fati* (love of fate), in *The Gay Science* (1882) as his personal ambition and “reason, warranty, and sweetness of my life”. See also Jeremy Foster, “Nietzsche and Wallace on Self-Affirmation and Affirmability”, *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Vol. 48, No. 3, 2017, pp. 375-401.

<sup>4</sup> E.g., *Oedipus Rex* or *Antigone* (Sophocles) or *The Bacchae* (Euripides).

<sup>5</sup> “Tragedy” a notion derived from *tragos* and *ode*, thus, meaning “goat song”, say, sacrificial song, if we think of the current sacrifices of goats...obviously appropriate to approach the terrible topics of human suffering, fate, and divine intervention.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle divides the art of poetry into verse, drama (comedy, tragedy, and the satyr play), lyric poetry, and epic poetry. Aristotle, *Poetics*, Joe Sachs (trans.), Focus Philosophical Library, Pullins Press, 2006.

This moral purification through art of the one and many within the same theatric experience constituted the foundation of the Greek civic feeling ad duty.<sup>7</sup> Marina B. McCoy interprets the performed aspect of tragedy and narrative placing the accent on the sharing of the experience of tragedy in political community which becomes more vulnerable and more responsive. Thus, *katharsis* becomes not only a means for moral purification but it gains the concreteness in the participatory process of emancipation of community, as a “rebalancing” redemption for the community as a whole. The distinct political function is as important as the aesthetic one.

Although theatre as catharsis has a contextual historic specific and purpose (as a civic, social and psychological exercise of overcoming the temptations to stray from social, ethical, and religious norms within society, it also functioned as a sublimated artistic release, allowing citizens to process deep anxieties in a public and artistic enjoyable setting), it can be interpreted as a type of “theatre of witness”, which has many more aspects, artistic means and finalities nowadays.

A few mentions that connect to the next category we address – Theatre of witness and theatre of Holocaust – are topical at this point. Even more, it is appropriate to introduce here also the concept of “Jewish theatre”, since it is related logically with that of “Holocaust theatre”. As tragic as the Greek theatre, the Holocaust theatre is a heterotopia of fate and tragic human condition. Interestingly, there are significant similarities between the Greek and Jewish theatre, starting with their ancient roots: the Greek theatre was honouring Dionysus, featuring male actors, masks, and mythological tragedies, while the early Jewish form of theatre were inspired by religious celebrations within community, such as the music and dance of Miriam.<sup>8</sup> A source of inspiration is found also in the daily and ordinary life of the Greeks: agriculture is one of such sources of inspiration, followed by their belief in gods, but also in demons, the myths and legends about the seasons, the struggle between winter and summer, but also between sun and frost. Hellenistic Jewish theatre in antiquity sometimes imitated Greek structures, while the modern Greek-Jewish theatre of the 19<sup>th</sup> century is exemplified as a specific cultural form, a secular blend of Sephardic culture and modernity.<sup>9</sup>

### *Theatre of Witness and Theatre of the Holocaust*

In this article we are studying the theatre of Holocaust as a type of theatre of witness. We should begin by defining “Holocaust” and in this respect we rely on the definition proposed by Mihai Chioveanu in his work *The Holocaust, a*

<sup>7</sup> Marina Berzins McCoy, “Tragedy, Katharsis, and Community”, in Aristotle’s *Poetics*, *Wounded Heroes: Vulnerability as a Virtue in Ancient Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford, 2013; online edn, Oxford Academic, 1 Jan. 2014), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199672783.003.0007>, accessed 10 Mar. 2026.

<sup>8</sup> René Bloch, “Part of the Scene: Jewish Theater in Antiquity”, *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, 2017, pp. 150-169 and S. Lev-Ari, “The Origins of Theatre in Hellenic and Judaic Cultures”, *Hellenic and Jewish Arts: Interaction, Tradition and Renewal*, The Howard Gilman International Conferences, ed. by A. Ovadia, Tel Aviv, Ramot, 1998, pp. 385-92, 386.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

*warning from history* as following: “[...] the systematic, mass murder, sponsored by the state, Nazi Germany and its allies, in concentration and extermination camps [...]”<sup>10</sup>

Holden Taylor<sup>11</sup> studied contemporary political theatre distinguishing three categories: “theatre of witness”, “theatre of the oppressed” and traditional theatre. As a result, he noticed that many themes emerged: personal effects of theatre, interpersonal effects of theatre and societal effects of theatre. Teya Sepinuck who wrote a book titled *Theatre of Witness*<sup>12</sup> sees this type of theatre as a performance that gives voice to the marginalized, forgotten or unheard in society, this way creating a safe forum for audiences to bear witness to real-life accounts of suffering and transformation. As a synthesis of real life experiences transforming into theatre the unheard tragedies of prisoners (and of their families’ tragedies), of refugees, of immigrants, of the survivors and perpetrators of domestic abuse, of ex-combatants, of teenage runaways, of people living in poverty or without homes, of families of murder victims, of women in transition, of people in recovery and of the survivors of war, this richness of thought and feeling captures most of the existential experience of mankind on the road of (continuous) restorative justice and spiritual self-discovery.

In order to emphasize the political dimension, our interest is placed mostly on the civic and liberating result, more precisely, on the activism and critique that might follow from these varieties of “cathartic theatre” – “the theatre of witness” and the “theatre of Holocaust” seen as a “theatre of witness”, but one of unrivalled tragedy. While theatre in general can be “empowering, cathartic, relationship building, awareness raising, society critiquing and future imagining”<sup>13</sup>, the individual might be moved deeper, “to the core”, especially when they experience empowerment and catharsis.<sup>14</sup> The theatre of witness is a transformative theatre and we are interpreting this way the “theatre of Holocaust”, too.

Not many theatrical explorations got to be capitalized in the theoretical perspective of this category of theatre and its lessons. R. Skloot<sup>15</sup> capitalized his experience concerning the impact and the morals of Holocaust in theatre. He showed that this type of theatre cannot be otherwise than experimental in order to capture the tragedy, while allowing for the possibility for hope and becoming a source of empathy. His essay captures how “theatre of Holocaust” can be most effective and successful in confronting the *Shoah*<sup>16</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Mihai Chioveanu, *The Holocaust. A warning from history*, Bucharest, Romanian Institute of Recent History (IRIR) Publishing House, 2005, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Holden Taylor, “You, Me and Society: Political Theatre and Its Impacts” (2013). Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 1592. [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1592](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1592).

<sup>12</sup> “The purpose of [Theatre of Witness] is to give voice to those who have been marginalized, forgotten or are invisible in the larger society, and to invite audiences to bear witness to issues of suffering, redemption and social justice”. Teya Sepinuc, *Theatre of Witness*, London and Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2013, p. 14. This way the “theatre of witness”, cultivates “confidence and mastery”.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>15</sup> R. Skloot, “The Theatre of the Holocaust: Its Past and Future”, *Holocaust Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2013, pp. 25-42.

<sup>16</sup> The Hebrew term for catastrophic destruction (the Holocaust).

Ann Rider<sup>17</sup> appeals to cognitive science research to gather insights into the structures of empathy, relevant for the pedagogical strategies that assume empathy always leads to the development of social virtue in students, aspect that can be extrapolated for the audiences. The essay implies that Holocaust narratives that disrupt empathic response are more likely to produce a particular form of empathy, “cognitive empathy”, more robust and with a more beneficial social impact. More precisely, this cognitive empathy (of the lesson learned about the fact that we have deep suffering in common with all mankind) on the one hand, facilitates the critical social understanding of the Holocaust and, on the other hand, it channels the past to civic consciousness into a present of humanistic and democratic activism at present. Examining Elie Wiesel’s *Night*, Imre Kertész’s *Fatelessness* and Ruth Klüger’s *Still Alive*, the author identifies what kinds of empathy are potentially produced in Holocaust literature and suggests textual typologies to guide “empathic” instruction, providing a sound theoretical basis to other endeavours of the “theatre of Holocaust”.

As far as we can assess the topic, the Theatre of the Holocaust encompasses performances created starting from the experience of the Holocaust as a form of resistance and survival, as well as any postwar dramatic works that attempt to dive into the trauma, memory, and ethical dilemmas of the genocide, with emphatic and civic purposes.

The theatre of Holocaust also plays, or it may play, a role in shaping national identity by reinterpreting historical narratives and ordering the multitude of stories that are included into the collective memory, selecting which and how are remembered or forgotten, especially during times of crisis.

Dramaturgic plays may approach the drama from the perspective of maintain some sense of human sanity and dignity, as forms of resistance (for instance, through satire and mocking the Nazis), others assume the function of testimony, others explore the moral choice, or, the topic of moral ambiguity etc. The works of George Tabori (*The Cannibals*), Joshua Sobol (*Ghetto*), and plays exploring the “monologue of the body” by Charlotte Delbo are probably the best known.

### *Theatre of the Oppressed*

Within the context of neoliberalism and individualism the narratives of inequality and its discontents multiply. Even more, the shift towards private, individualized consumption has, in some contexts, reduced the perceived importance of collective public spaces like theatres, as well as their fundings. Activist and non-activist artists often face financial insecurity, more or less subtle censorship and direct, or indirect, repression. From this perspective, the theatre itself is rather oppressed, becoming in turn a subject of the categorial narrative of oppression. The very reason of being of the “theatre of the oppressed” today is granted by its ability to be a battleground for social and political ideas and a sanctuary for human connection.

<sup>17</sup> Ann N. Rider, “The Perils of Empathy: Holocaust Narratives, Cognitive Studies and the Politics of Sentiment”, *Holocaust Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3, 2013, pp. 43-72.

Holden Taylor<sup>18</sup> theorized the “theatre of the oppressed” in contrast with the “theatre of witness” which placed the accent on therapy, healing and catharsis as explained in Augusto Boal. There is no harmony and passivity in the “theatre of the oppressed” and the artistic, aesthetic and poetics of the oppressed emerges from the revolutionary vein, or, at least from “a rehearsal of revolution”, for a more active type of “spect-actor” who becomes restless and infused with a sense of fulfilment solely through real action. Spectators turn into protagonists and the empowerment is felt stronger as part of a process in motion where each is important and has a voice. The “theatre of the oppressed” cultivates “confidence and mastery” to a greater extent than the “theatre of witness”.

We cannot entirely agree with the idea supported by Taylor regarding the literature on political theatre, presenting as following a different/personal definition for political theatre. This would contrast the standard literature. Michael Kirby<sup>19</sup> has pertinently pointed out about this subject that he contends political theatre being actively and intentionally concerned with matters of the state. The Theatre of Witness which has been subject to far less analysed under the aspect of the “political witness” who is apparently passive but actively acting in fact as a critical instance within society. In our vision of political theatre, the theatre of witness has a “natural” and important place; as in the doctoral work of Caroline Wake, we see a correlation between the theatrics of the witnesses and theatrics of the testifiers, so that any investigation concerning the theatre as a political stance, as a political form, as well as a political laboratory, should interpret and interrelate the roles of both. As in H. Taylor, indeed the three distinct levels: personal, interpersonal and societal have impact and relevance in the political theatre, to be acknowledged separately and in connection, too. The identities are dynamic and their dynamic is as well political – this is a significant aspect in the conception of theatre as a political laboratory for us. We see theatre (as all art) as a persistent reminder, in the sense of a powerful militant form engaging and reengaging the audiences, first, with the consciousness of their humanity and, then, with an acute sense of the higher stakes of freedom and solidarity derived from that awareness of being part a of humanity and representative of humanity, too. role in constantly reminding audiences of everyone’s humanity. This, and Rorty’s emphasis on sentiment valuation – that the arts can best connect people in solidarity<sup>20</sup>, while revitalising their awareness as free human beings’ part of a free, dignified and tragic humanity – have been constituting the orienting dimensions in the analysis of theatre as political form and laboratory.

<sup>18</sup> Holden Taylor, “You, Me and Society: Political Theatre and Its Impacts” (2013). Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 1592. [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1592](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1592).

<sup>19</sup> Michael Kirby, “On Political Theatre”, *The Drama Review: TDR*, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1975, pp. 129-35 (esp., p. 129).

<sup>20</sup> See also Henrieta Anișoara Șerban, *Richard Rorty o filosofie pentru multiple înfloriri, Libertate, cunoaștere, solidaritate și speranță*, Bucharest, Pro Universitaria, 2025. The ironist faces full force this solidarity of the human suffering, and of the oppressed, in the attempt to *re-describe* the situations, the encounters and the world, with the hope of contributing to an extended community and to more solidarity among people.

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*Theatre of Empathy, Solidarity and Hope*

Inspired by the philosophy of Richard Rorty and his transformation of the refusal of cruelty into a philosophy of solidarity and hope, via ironism and redescription and, simply put, via the courage to acknowledge the world in one's own terms, to redescribe it and, then, also to take actions and change it to better fit your novel redescription, the category of the "theatre of empathy, solidarity and hope" represents something novel and important that we are proposing and consider very important. This is a category constituted around the need to foster empathy and social connection especially in contemporary times characterized by disconnection, fragmentation and estrangement, paradoxically, despite the apparent opportunities brought by the social networks. Projects like HOPE – History of Peace for Education through Theatre" and "Theatre for Hope and Healing" emerge directly from the efforts of the artists to answer this need and they employ creative methods to connect people, aiming to inspire reflection, and drive social change. The "theatre of empathy, solidarity and hope" is a necessary type of theatre nowadays and one that is less described as such in the few theoretical attempts on the subject.

As a significant observation, in Augusto Boal's artistic experiments, the individuals in the audience become active and interactive, "spect-actors". This way the individuals rehearse increased activism and participation, increased connection and increased empathy for the oppressed, while they exercise a type of solution, all at once. Theatre becomes a specific type of political commentary and criticism, one that constructs a better sense of "us" while extending a criticism of power. From this perspective, the active spectator is a fervent for a "theatre of empathy, solidarity and hope", not only an ingredient for the "theatre of the oppressed", becoming also a leader of opinion and possibly an initiator of educational change and of new artistic and educational programs beneficial for empathy, solidarity and hope.

The current war in Gaza created the opportunity for readdressing the topic of solidarity in Augusto Boal's artistic experiments, too, experiments created to answer the question about the role of drama education and applied theatre academics and practitioners in solidarity. Thus, the theatre can become a practice of solidarity, not mere public rhetoric. What does a practice of solidarity look like, who is its audience, and what limitations does its performance reveal are aspects clarified in the artistic experiments as well as they become transparent within the human interventions of humanitarian medical teams and NGOs on the scene of war in Gaza.

In the moments of an event such as this one, people tend to find ways to help those who are suffering or facing an unpleasant situation. Not all people, though. And here is the role of the humanitarian forces of mankind. The theatre of the oppressed and the theatre of Holocaust can prove to be educators of solidarity and sources of compassion and relief.

We may easily recall in connection to the theatre of the oppressed and the theatre of Holocaust those moments in the "life" of the Romanian Jewish theatre

when it was necessary for some Romanian actors to be in solidarity with Jews colleagues and they chose to do that, confirming the political, liberal, democratic, generous, solidary and human vein of theatre as a political laboratory where liberal, democratic and solidarity ideas are brewed. It is about choosing if one wants or not to prove solidarity and, if applicable, to help. To live, to exercise our power and occupy our territory, we humans, and animals of all kinds, need to perceive the world in which we live. This perception takes place on three levels, but we want to place particular emphasis on Ethical Consciousness – the human level: this level is exclusive to the human being. It consists of giving meaning and value to the decisions we take. One interrogates oneself. Second is the level of ethical turmoil and of ethically justified choice. Third level is Ethical confirmation: the value/valuation granted to each act and projects engages the human being in this kind of actions into the future, creating an ethical pattern of reaction that shall prove “reactive” for a long time. It is also a creative mode of relating to mankind and the world: it requires the invention of alternatives.<sup>21</sup>

Jewish theatre in Romania went through many difficult periods, emerging from dire political contexts, one of which was that in the beginning of 1940. Not just the Jewish theatre was affected, but the entire territory of Romania, along with its Jewish population. In the fall of that year, more specifically on September 6, Carol II abdicated, and General Ion Antonescu became the new ruler. While in power, the military-fascist dictatorship was also established, along with the principles and political priorities on the basis of which our country was to function from that moment on. Thus, political context was imposing an ideology of total nationalism, which presupposed intolerance towards ethnic pluralism and the elimination of “foreigners”, especially Jews, as part of the new project of modernizing the Romanian nation. The period and its political horrors are captured in many documents. Among these, worth mentioning is that Yad Vashem – the World Holocaust Remembrance Centre – published an article *The Holocaust in Romania*, which includes, among other things, a subchapter entitled “Anti-Jewish attacks orchestrated by the National Legionary State.” The Minister of Religion and Culture issued Resolution No. 42181, which stipulated that all state and private theatres, as well as opera houses on Romanian territory, had to dismiss Jews from their institutions. A few days later, on September 26, Ministerial Decision No. 44400 was issued, allowing Jewish artists “[...] to perform only in all-Jewish theatres and groups, on private stages – in compliance with the general operating rules of the theatre law – and having the obligation to mention on their signs and in all advertising materials the specification: ‘Jewish theatre’”.<sup>22</sup> This is how The Barascheum Theatre appeared: a place where Jewish actors had the possibility to create art and perform, a safe place for them in all this context.

<sup>21</sup> Augusto Boal, *Hamlet and the Baker's Son: My Life in Theatre and Politics*, London, Routledge, 2001.

<sup>22</sup> State Archives – Bucharest, Department of the Ministry of Religions and Arts, General Directorate of Romanian Theatres and Operas File no. 62/1940, tab 87.

Derived from The Theatre of Holocaust we may consider another, namely the Theatre *during* the Holocaust, focusing on the Romanian space, in particular. Felicia Waldman, Coordinator of the Centre for Jewish Studies at the Faculty of Letters of the University of Bucharest, writes in her article “The Barascheum Phenomenon in World War II Romania” that the theatre’s name comes from the significant figure in the Jewish community in Romania, Yehuda ben Mordehai (Iuliu) Barasch. *Barascheum* or “Casa Iuliu Barasch” was first mentioned as a conference hall in 1879, when Saniel Marcus held the Khazars conference. Initially, the first newly created theatre troupe did not operate at the Barascheum hall, but tried to obtain authorization to operate at the Roxy Hall, which was not possible. Why? This hall was located far too close to state institutions such as the National Bank of Romania, the Prefecture, the Post Office, the Court or the University and it was ideologically considered inappropriate to give such symbolic importance to the Jewish theatre. Then, Isaiia Răcăiuni requested an authorization to operate for a group of actors on September 30, 1940, to begin their activity in a Jewish theatre in a Jewish neighbourhood. A month later, under the leadership of the writer Felix Aderca, the actors Alexandru Marius, Alexandru Finți, Beate Fredanov and Maria Sandu applied to the state for an authorization for a new theatre troupe to operate, a group in which the actors Renee Pressiano, Marga Hagiescu, Nuți Petroniu, Eugenia Arbore, Ion Focșăneanu-Pache, Jean Revo, Mișu Einhorn and Victor Godeanu were also included. So, the Barascheum Theatre can be seen as a Theatre of Witness, as a Theatre of Holocaust, as a Theatre during Holocaust and as a Theatre of Solidarity, too, considering how these concepts have been defined in this study and consistently with Teya Sepinuck’s interpretation. Indeed, the Theatre of Witness is a model of political performance that gives voice to those who have been marginalized, forgotten or unheard in society, creating a safe forum for audiences to bear witness to real-life accounts of suffering and transformation.

Considering that the word solidarity emerged from its Latin *solidus*, implying something complete, consistent, and resonant with the act of “finding common grounds” with others, we can talk about the theatre of solidarity as a creator of “organic solidarity” as in the perspective of Emile Durkheim, although this type of theatre is not a form to be linked in any relevant way to the industrial society that Durkheim analysed. created “organic solidarity”. The concept is more aligned with the perspectives of Ferdinand Tonnies and August Comte who have emphasised the collective and universalist dimensions of social values and moral responsibilities that bind individuals together in solidarity.<sup>23</sup> The concept of solidarity has been valued and used in its political and humanistic realities as well as in its ideological legitimizing connotations: from the early 1900s Marxist revolutionary solidarity of the working class. At occasions, the concept of solidarity is theoretically diluted into matters of “love” and “friendship” underlining the responsibility of enactment on the individual.

<sup>23</sup> See also Katelin Helene Siemens Neufeld, Katherine Beata Starzyk, Danielle Gaucher, “Political Solidarity: A Theory and a Measure”, *Journal of Social and Political Psychology*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2019, pp. 726-765.

However, it is far more important as an indicator in ethics, political thought in moral philosophy and for political reality. The concept of solidarity is still under-theorised, despite its appearance around a wide range of traditional as well as recently emerging debates. In December 2023, *The British Association for International & Comparative Education* defined solidarity<sup>24</sup> by foregrounding its absence within academic (in)action in response to the war in Gaza: its importance is demonstrated through its want, or through the ‘active and deafening silence’ that replaces it. One might conclude, then, that the opposite of solidarity relates to direct harm. Those who publicly condemned this move were horrified at the misuse of the term ‘solidarity’, interpreted here as a promise of mutual support against growing migration.

A negative reality of the phenomenon of under-theorised concept of solidarity (and in general) is the limitation of inclusive and more extensive research. No, this is not an argument for exhaustive research, while it is one for the more inclusive capitalisation on theoretical and intellectual sources that are very offering, but remain sidelined, by mere human fallibility reflected in human misunderstanding or prejudice, too, as the case, for instance, with the ignored Rortian perspective on solidarity albeit in 2023 it was more than three decades “old”.

In Rortian perspective, solidarity should be with the extended community of people, which it also creates via emancipation from exclusionary traditions of political thought and political life. Public performances of solidarity are exercise of ironism, redescription and constitution and reconstitution of the extended community of the human beings in the perspective of Rortian philosophy. By problematising the public gestures of solidarity in performances it becomes apparent in a phenomenological way whatever value is most important in bringing people closer and which are the impediments for setting common goals and common interpretative horizons, a crucial “ingredient” to overcome and transform for the better this world of rising polarisation, tribalism and culture wars, not just a philosophical approach, not just an utopian blueprint, but a reality which could be experienced during the performance of solidarity (on and off the theatrical scene).

It is important to mention at this point that there was also a type of solidarity in the cultural world, especially in the previously mentioned context, during the Holocaust in Romania, treated by the authors Adina Babeș, Lya Benjamin, Gabriela Vasiliu, Anca Ciuciu, Dumitru Hîncu, Hary Kuller, Marius Popescu, Liviu Rothman (editor), in the volume *Dignity in Times of Hardship*.<sup>25</sup> The 8<sup>th</sup> chapter, titled “Solidarity in the World of Culture” argues that the period of World War II represents an important moment in terms of the starting point of this solidarity in the world of culture. The decree laws from that time envisaged

<sup>24</sup> Laila Kadiwal, Mario Novelli, Pauline Rose, Yusuf Sayed, Maha S, Shuayb and Arathi Sriprakash, “What does ethical solidarity look like for academic professional bodies in times of unfolding genocide?”, 17/12/2023, <https://baice.ac.uk/hub/what-does-ethical-solidarity-look-like-for-academic-professional-bodies-in-times-of-unfolding-genocide/>, accessed 16 March 2026.

<sup>25</sup> Liviu Rothman (editor), *Demnitate în vremuri de restricție* [Dignity During Hard Times], Bucharest, Printing House of the INSHR, 2008.

that all works written by Jewish authors should be removed from bookstores, second-hand stores, libraries and cultural magazines. Moreover, a list was even issued with all the writers who would be banned from that moment. At the same time, the chapter shows that out of responsibility and responsivity, certain Romanian writers opposed this exclusion. One of the most significant examples offered is that of George Călinescu with his *History of Romanian Literature from the Origins to the Present*. He mentions in his study his colleagues in the same profession, including Anton Pann, Cilibi Moise – Jewish philosopher, C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea, Ronetti-Roman, A. Steuerman, Giordano, Moses Gaster, Lazar Șăineanu, A. I. Candrea, etc.<sup>26</sup> The same phenomenon of solidarity took place in the world of theatre, and we learn more about the resistance in this cultural area in the second subchapter entitled “People of the Theatre” of the chapter taken as reference. Constantin Tănase was among those who helped his Jewish colleagues, continuing to pay their salaries. Among those who worked for the Cărăbuș Theatre were the actors Nacht Stroe and the sisters Henrietta and Feodora Gamberta, Nacht Stroe also being one of the actors of the Barascheum Theatre.

Along with Constantin Tănase and the actors Grigore Vasiliu Birlic and Vasile Vasilache, the president of the Actors’ Union, George Vraca, contributed to the mutual aid of their colleagues, “[...] he provided the Jewish actors (a strictly forbidden thing) with a symbolic amount [of money] from the union’s funds, [...]”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, at the Barascheum Theatre, at the performances organized by the actors who found refuge in this place, their Romanian colleagues came as spectators.<sup>28</sup> We can take these illustrations as indicator of the potential of the theatre of solidarity to act as the luminous and hopeful societal and political outcome of the theatre of the oppressed.

*Hamlet and the Baker’s Son*<sup>29</sup>, the autobiography of Augusto Boal, is detailing his journey from a young boy in Brazil to a revolutionary theatre practitioner, exemplifying how the theatre of the oppressed becomes an empowering source of solidarity for democracy against disempowerment, military dictatorship, exile. The topic of the democratization of Art is thus the general framework for all the categories that we have identified in analysing theatre as a political laboratory, one of democratic recovery, democratic strengthening, democratic education. Boal’s work broadly covers the shift from traditional staging to “Invisible Theatre” and eventually to “Legislative Theatre,” where theatrical performance directly influences policy-making. This path into the deepening

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 175.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 178.

<sup>28</sup> Sara-Ioana Munteanu, *From the Barascheum Theater to Jewish State Theater*, unpublished dissertation, July 2025, Bucharest, University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, European Studies Program, Department of Cultural Studies, and “Avram Goldfaden and the Beginnings of Jewish Theatre in Romania”, in order to be published in *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations*, Vol. XXIII, No. 1, 2026.

<sup>29</sup> Augusto Boal, *op. cit.*

of democracy, by art, political values, political emotion, legislation policy, in a crescendo from the artistic ineffable to the political concretization resonates with the ideas in Richard Rorty's "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality", where the author argues that the defence and support of human rights is more effective through cultivating empathy and sentimental education rather than via rational, philosophical justification. Rorty posits that a "human rights culture" is developed by expanding empathy through storytelling, with efficient effects in reducing cruelty, rather than relying on abstract, universal truths.<sup>30</sup> And the resonance with his ideas is present further, in the refusal of mirroring, in the sense that, as in his philosophy, theatre is not just a mirror: it is a way of thinking, understanding and thus knowing the world that is constructive and not a simple, transient "reflexion". Contemporary, politically charged theatre, such as those exploring "post-dramatic" techniques, aims not just to reflect society, but to actively change it by creating a "political laboratory". As a consequence, contemporary theatre acts as an important agent of social change and political dialogue, addressing issues like racial disparity, gender bias, and environmental crises while fostering community engagement. While it emphasizes repressive systems and one may take that as mirroring, it functions amplifying marginalized voices, and, through methods such as "The Theatre of the Oppressed", it is fostering critical reflection and civic action, so, it is not quite a mirror, but more a "construction tool" and a political weapon.<sup>31</sup> This is what happened also in the case of the Jewish theatre, especially in the case of Barascheum.

The Barascheum Theatre's repertoire consisted of both the writings of well-known playwrights and the writings of Jewish authors, focusing particularly on plays in the category of comedies and satire. With these theatrical means, this theatre was the place of the ones who were oppressed, controlled by the state, it was a political laboratory, but not in a direct way. Most of its actors were carefully observed by the state, followed by the authorities, the Security that had the control at that time in Romania and in Bucharest. Theatre functioned to capture the oppression, but also as a factor of empowerment, fostering togetherness and solidarity *against* oppression. The Barascheum was also a site of cultural reflection and representation, acting as a platform for marginalized voices, providing a safe space where Jewish actors could continue their activity, in a free, yet carefully controlled way by the state.

The Jewish community was united by the same cause, by the same problem, creating and extending a specific repressed community. Jewish actors were deprived of the right to practice their profession, being also forced to find a place where they could continue acting, with joy and pleasure. Indeed, in their case,

<sup>30</sup> Richard Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality", *On Human Rights: The Oxford Amnesty Lectures*, ed. Stephen Shute and Susan Huley, New York, Basic Books, 1993, pp. 111-134.

<sup>31</sup> See Ilaria Riccioni, "The Social and Political Impact of the Theatre in Contemporary Society", *Studies in Critical Social Sciences*, Volume 1, Brill, 2023, pp. 16-40 and also Taylor, Holden, "You, Me and Society: Political Theatre and Its Impacts" (2013). Independent Study Project (ISP) Collection. 1592. [https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp\\_collection/1592](https://digitalcollections.sit.edu/isp_collection/1592).

the performances strengthened community ties, and the community was united around the artistic project. But we can identify also the phenomenon of the extension of the community emphasized in a historical investigation doubled by a symbolical and political interpretation. “Ikuf” was initially a cultural association named “Idischer Kultur Ferband” – Cultural Idish Association and in 1945, thanks to Iacob Mansdorf, the IKUF Theatre was born. Here, professional artists, who came from all over the country to learn the art of acting, found a place to perform. On October 17, the premiere of the play “Ich leb (I Live)” took place here, at IKUF. As Israil Bercovici mentioned in his book *One hundred years of Jewish Theatre in Romania 1876-1976*, the play “[...] presented an episode of the resistance organized by prisoners in a fascist camp, the main role being played by Iacob Mansdorf himself.”<sup>32</sup> One year later, in 1946 it appeared the Jewish Democratic Committee, “a mass political organization”, formed by “Jewish organizations of all shades, aiming to represent the interests of the Jewish population [...]”<sup>33</sup> In the summer of 1948, 1<sup>st</sup> of August, Jewish Democratic Committee, together with IKUF Association, establishes The State Jewish Theatre in Bucharest. Thus, the construction, persistence and extension of the Jewish theatre community was slightly encouraged by the audiences, by gestures of solidarity, by the politics of subversion that run contrary to oppression, as well as by the humane feelings accompanying life and *Theatrum mundi* as an invisible warmth.

Speaking about the *Theatrum mundi* or theatrical and political times in the beginning of this article, was announcing the specific interpretation of the theatre as a representation of the life of the human being – an artistic performance – and of man’s performative faculties as part of the human intellect. Theatre is capturing the preoccupations of the human world and some of its most hopeful directions of development, as if in a prolonged catharsis of the human species. It is a permanent revival of the human aspirations for life, along with perpetual recalling of the specific human reservoir of traditions, religion, myths redescribed in their capacity of political reform for novel forms of artistic opposition to oppression, for renewed solidarity, acting as guardians of human dignity and of democracy. The very transition from theatre of witness and theatre of Holocaust, emphasized the broad and varied forms that artistic performance can infuse into a theatre of solidarity meant to actualize solidarity with every act shared into this unique community which has theatre in common. Illustrating these aspects with the Jewish theatrical experience in Romania, captures the efficacy-in-versatility that theatre uniquely enacts throughout the ages of human history and human existence. Theatre is not just a space of culture, it is an artistically created space of hope and solidarity, one where people experience hope and togetherness, solidarity, at times of marginalization, estrangement and alienation, and which otherwise (in the absence of theatre) would not exist.

<sup>32</sup> Israil Bercovici, *One Hundred Years of Jewish Theatre in Romania 1876–1976*, Kriterion Publishing House, Bucharest 1982, p. 206.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

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