

# The History of Romanian Independent Theatre

First of all, I would like to start with the definition of a particular word:

**independent**  
adjective

UK /,ɪn.dɪ'pen.dənt/ US /,ɪn.dɪ'pen.dənt/

Meaning: not influenced or controlled in any way by other people, events, or things, i.e. an independent enquiry/organization.

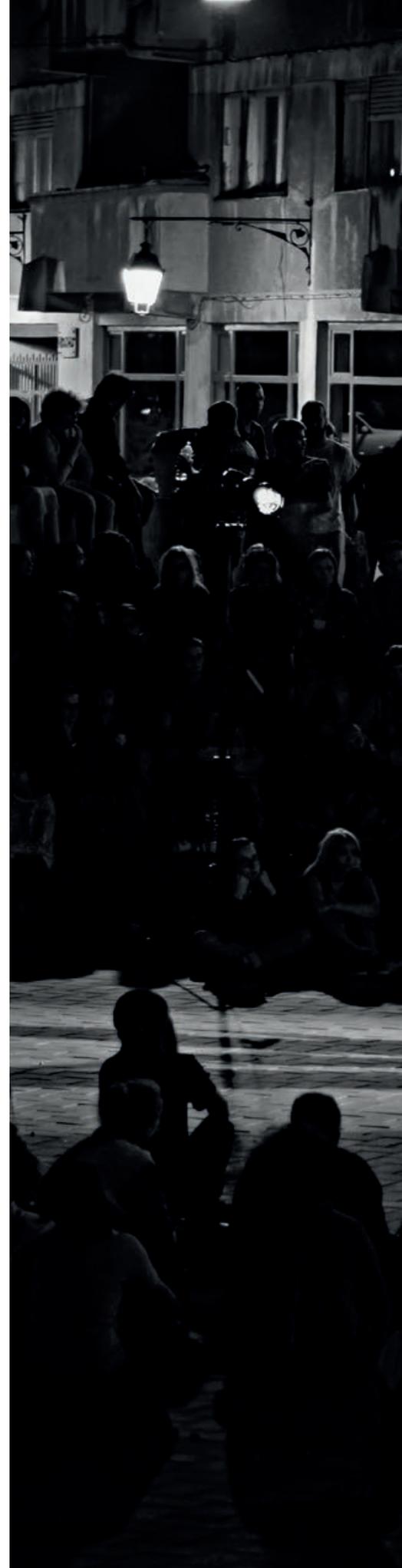
Assuming that the Cambridge English Dictionary is right, and before we start describing the Romanian independent theatre movement, how can this simple definition help us understand independent theatre in general: What does a theatre need in order to be called independent? Not be affiliated with a state or an official institution? Is it a matter of financial or ideological independence? Is an independent theatre free of censorship? What is its relationship with politics? So many questions that go far beyond the simple answer the dictionary gives us. We shall keep them in mind while we follow the history of Romanian Independent Theatre from the early days to the contemporary performances of a diverse set of theatre groups and ensembles.

## The Early Stages of Romanian Independent Theatre

Speaking about the birth of theatre in Romania, we can easily say that it was born free, or in modern terms, independent. At first, it seemed to belong to no one. Only over time, it was privatized and institutionalized. But there still remain a number of diverse and independent structures today.

"Father Agop" is most commonly referred to as the spiritual father of Romanian independent theatre. He may be a legend, but he did indeed exist. He was an actor, director, stage designer, accountant, manager... and whatever odd job that needed doing – not unlike today, in fact.

At the beginning of the 17th century, "Father Agop" had a group that included himself, his wife and a young actor. They played Shakespeare or Molière without knowing the actual words: they only knew the plot, but that was enough. Back then, copyright was not as important as it is today. They played Shakespeare or Molière with just three actors,





and when the play reached its climax, towards the end of the performance, “Father Agop” appeared on stage with a pig’s bladder filled with beans and kicked the young actor in the forehead for the general amusement of the audience. Different times...

The first officially recorded theatre in Bucharest can be dated back to 1783. It was a small, pretty hall – but this all the information we have, I am sad to say. The second theatre to be recorded, however, was called “Teatrul de la Cişmeaua Roşie”. This theatre boasted 14 rows of seats, while its architectural foundation still mainly consisted of hard-trodden earth, lined with red cloth and tallow candles. Then there was Momulo, an innkeeper, who opened his “Teatrul Momulo” in Bucharest in 1833, and which would go on to exist for more than 30 years. A few years later, in 1844, Costache Caragiale also opened the “Teatrul de Diletanţi” (The Amateurs Theatre), where, apparently, a comedy called “O repetiţie moldovenească” (A Moldavian rehearsal) ran quite successfully. From script notes we know that this play also addressed the difficulties private theatre companies faced at the time: no money, no proper rehearsal spaces, and so on – again, not unlike today’s situation in the independent performing arts. In fact, it’s been more than 175 years, but there’s still barely any change.

Then, there was legendary actor Matei Millo, who started touring Transylvania and Bucovina with his theatre group in 1851, before joining Mihail Pascaly’s troupe “Şcoala Dramatică” (The Dramatic School) in Bucharest in 1862. Şcoala Dramatică played at Bosel Hall and also briefly joined the Circus Suhr. The stars of the group were Matei Millo and Fanny Tardini, who went on to become legends of Romanian theatre. In 1868, Mihai Eminescu (then the most renowned Romanian poet) was also hired by the group as a prompter.

In the following years, some other theatre groups started showing up: “Teatrul Bossel” started performing in 1867 and “Teatrul Alcazar” in 1877, and in 1909 Alexandru Davila launched the „Compania Dramatică Davila”, which was then the first Romanian theatre to be financially supported by the state. Famous actors like Tony Bulandra, Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, Mărioara Voiculescu, Ion Manolescu and Gheorghe Storin were part of the company. In 1913, Davila even tried to change the theatre law but failed. In 1912, Mărioara Voiculescu, by then already a star, also went on to successfully run her own company, the “Compania Mărioara Voiculescu”. She would go on to write history and earn a fortune from heavily touring the country. In 1914, Lucia Sturdza Bulandra and Tony Bulandra also started their own theatrical company, the “Teatrul Regina Maria”, which would later become the “Teatrul

Municipal Bucureşti”, or as it is known today: the notorious “Teatrul Bulandra”.

Between 1926 and 1936, Sică Alexandrescu (one of the earliest advocates of Stanislavsky in Romania), opened no less than six theatres: “Teatrul Nostru”, “Teatrul Mic”, “Teatrul Alhambra”, “Teatrul Comedia”, “Teatrul Vesel” and “Teatrul Liber”. He would go on to run them all under the banner of some corporate-style society, a so-called “artistic theatre”, with his eyes only set on selling as many tickets as possible. High hopes, low profiles.

Just before WWII, there were lots of groups willing to play. The most notable is „Maria Ventura Theater”, headed by the famous Maria Ventura herself. She studied acting in Paris and played alongside Sarah Bernhardt. Even though she had already been an actress at the Comédie-Française, she still took part in the independent theatre scene.

And then there are many other groups which also tried to win the heart of an audience, among them: “Teatrul Tudor Muşatescu”, “Teatrul Nostru”, “Teatrul Sărindar”, „Modem”, „Fantazio”, „Teatrul Sărindar”, “Teatrul Savoy”, „Rio”, “Teatrul Atlantic”, “Teatrul Colorado” and, finally, the renowned “Grădina Cărbuş”, home to the famous comedian Constantin Tănase, and equipped with the largest outdoor stage in Bucharest. However, others faced a more tragic end, as for example the manager of “Teatrul Alhambra”, who committed suicide out of despair over his bankruptcy. Sometimes, as anyone reading this might know, one can lose everything due to bad management of a theatrical enterprise.

Right after WWII, between 1945 and 1948, many private companies flourished, but the communist party shut them down at once. This coincided with the instauration of communism, as it led to the nationalization of private companies. Some of the actors thus decided to join state theatres, starting in 1946. (On that note, we could see history repeating itself in 2020, when lots of independent actors left the tiny stages to get a monthly salary at a state or national theatre in order to survive financially during the pandemic – but this is another story.) Since Lenin notoriously claimed that “cultural values are reasons of nationalization”, all private independent theatres were closed for the next 42 years until the regime collapsed during the Romanian Revolution in December of 1989.

The first Romanian independent group after 1989 was “Teatrul Levant”, established in 1990 by well-known Romanian actress Valeria Seciu. In the following years, many more followed: “Trupa pe Butoai”, led by director Victor Ioan Frunză, in 1992, “Teatrul LUNI” from “Green Hours Pub” in

1997 and "Teatrul ACT" as well as "Teatrul Inexistent" in 1998. In 1999, Chris Simion established „Compania de Teatru D'aya". In 2003, Cristi Nedea started "Teatrul Imposibil", Nicu Mihoc started running "Teatru 74" in Tîrgu-Mureş in 2004 and Christian Theodor the Popescu compania "777" in Bucureşti. All of them featured an impressive repertoire but none of them exist today. Other theatres that, unfortunately, also didn't last were: "La Scena", "Macaz" and "Teatrul Mignon" from Bucharest, "Teatrul Ararat" from Baia Mare, "Stage" from Craiova, "Electric Theatre" from Timișoara and "Lorgean Theatre", which was a small theatre located in a flat, hosting very small events with only up to 12 people attending each show. This small flat was also host to a small theatre festival. There is also another theatre in Bucharest called "Point", but there haven't been any news from them for the past few years.

There is a saying among European independent theatres: If a theatrical group manages to survive more than 11 years, they will last forever. Sadly, in Romania not that many succeeded, sometimes because of internal affairs, other times because they simply and naturally disbanded, but most of the time it is because there is no policy in place to protect these artists and companies. There is no such thing as a law for independent theatres in Romania. Nevertheless, the first time the subject was up for discussion – incredibly or not – was back in 1913, although nothing really happened.

Almost a hundred years later, in 2007, Demeter Andras Istvan, still incumbent state secretary of the Ministry of Culture, worked towards a theatre law, which would have also included independent theatres. Sadly, it didn't pass.

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### Romanian Independent Theatre Today

In 2013, the first edition of the “Festivalului Național de Teatru Independent” was organized by “Teatrul Godot” in Bucharest. This was followed by many more festivals across the country, like the „Antagon Festival” in Timisoara, „24h de Teatru” in Sibiu or „Undercloud” and „Fringe” in Bucharest.

In 2016, the Association of Independent Theaters was established, which, among others, has the purpose to work on and make suggestions for a theatre policy. The association tries to speed up the agenda and make suggestions to the Ministry of Culture, but the frequent changes in ministers have resulted in little change for the independent theatre scene. One important thing to know about Romanian culture is that in 31 years, since the revolution in 1989, we have had 32 ministers of culture.

On top of this, in 2015, Ion Caramitru, director of the “National Theatre Ion Luca Caragiale” and president of “UNITER” (the union of Romanian theatres), addressed young actors working in the independent scene this way: “These youngsters who call themselves independent are actually no more than unemployed artists.” No further comment needed.

Nowadays, most independent theatres in Romania are, with very few exceptions, commercial ones. Like it or not, theatre can be a money maker. Well-known actors from national or state theatres also roam the independent stages and attract crowds that are willing to pay for expensive tickets, sometimes even more expensive than your regular state theatre tickets.

In the following, however, I would like to present a list of companies who still exist today – more or less – despite their financial difficulties due to the pandemic:

“Teatrul Fără Frontiere” (Theatre without frontiers) was set up in 1996 by the actress Mihaela Sirbu. Over the years, she has managed to stage some of the most important contemporary plays, mostly translations from English to Romanian, such as “The shape of things” or “Bash” by Neil LaButte. With no venue of their own, the shows take place at „Act Theatre” and they also tour the country. Furthermore, the theatre has been host to masterclasses with important actors and directors from all over the world.

“Teatrul Luni de la Green Hours” was one of the pioneers of independent theatre in Bucharest and was the starting point for many a young theatre artist, from Radu Afrim,

Gianina Cărbunariu, Peca Ștefan, Ana Mărgineanu, Florin Piersic jr. and Ada Milea to many more. Created by Voicu Rădescu in 1997, “Teatrul Luni” had a bumpy ride, from moments of absolute greatness to barely avoiding dissolution. This theatre remains in public memory as one of the first post-communist independent theatres.

“Teatrul Act” was established in 1998 in the basement of an old building in the very heart of Bucharest by the famous actor Marcel Iureș, who wore a constructor’s helmet on the opening day. Alongside theatre directors Mihai Măniuțiu and Alexandru Dabija, Marcel Iureș wanted to create a theatre laboratory and stated that he would never again play in a state theatre. Meanwhile, in 2018, Teatrul ACT became a so-called “institution of public interest”. The theatre celebrated 20 years of existence by launching a retrospective album in remembrance of one of the older independent theatres from Romania.

Established in 1998, the main purpose of „The Cultural-Humanitarian Foundation Logos Theater” is to host performances, acting and dialect-speech classes that focus on cultivating a style after the spiritual and artistic principles of the ancient Greek theatre, of tragedy and comedy - adapted for our times by Rudolf Steiner, with special emphasis on experimenting with the validity of these principles today.

“Compania de teatru D’Aya” was founded in 1999 by Chris Simion-Mercurian, together with world renowned French writer Pascal Bruckner. In 2008, the company started its own international theatre festival, “Undercloud”, which still runs to this day. In 2016, Chris Simion sold her grandma’s house and bought a space for a new theatre in Calea Grivitei nr. 53. There is a fundraiser at the moment and you can actually buy a brick for 53 euros. Doing so will contribute to building the theatre. For more information, go to: [www.grivita53.ro](http://www.grivita53.ro)

“AUĂLEU” was started in 2005, initially in a garage and adjoining courtyard in Timișoara. Since then, it has become 100 % autonomous and independent, both financially and ideologically. Auăleu has played all over, from public spaces to state penitentiaries, both in Romania and Europe. Auăleu usually produces one show a year and plays regularly at their own venue (which is also host to the Scârț Loc Lejer restaurant and The Museum of Communist Consumer, without any financial backing and free entrance), with up to 150 performances annually. Auăleu is a permanent group of 8 actors

and musicians, who mainly play shows based on their own scripts. Some of the language they use has caused offence and they had several run-ins with local authorities. Even so, Auăleu is a partner in two major projects of “Timișoara European Capital of Culture 2023”, “Lumina” and “Theatre as Resistance”.

The “Apropo Theater” is one of the two essential projects of the “Teatrul.Ro Association”, a cultural organization founded in 2006 alongside “The Bucharest Fringe Festival - The Independent Theater Marathon”. Nowadays, the theatre is based in the business neighbourhood of “Pipera”, being the only cultural and independent alternative which puts the goal of decentralization of cultural life – as per the cultural strategy of the city of Bucharest – into practice.

“BIS Teatru” have been around in Sibiu since 2009, staging performances in the backyard of a house owned by the founder of the group, Bogdan Sărătean. Starting in 2011, they have been organizing theatre marathons, so-called “25 DE ORE DE TEATRU NON-STOP” (25 Hours of Non Stop Theater). In 2015, they also started a community project called „Teatrul din Cartier” (Theatre from the neighbourhood). This small company is one of the few in this country to have their own permanent ensemble, repertoire and space.

“Unteatru” started in an old house in 2010 and moved to a bigger space with an adjacent bar a few years later. What do they say about themselves? “The specific element that makes our project special is that we do not betray: “unteatru” is not commercial. “unteatru” is only the framework which we use to present cultural products to an audience. We are a host theatre that wants to promote and increase the visibility of young artists.”

The actor George Remes opened the gates of “Godot Cafe Theater” in 2010. When it had to close in 2018, because of the building’s high seismic risk, it had become one of the most successful independent theatres in Bucharest. More than 300 actors used to play at Godot as years went by, on the basis of 15 shows per week in a hall with 150 seats (with tables). In 2015, Godot sold more tickets than most state theatres in Bucharest. Hilarious, interesting and funny at the same time, isn’t it? Today, the theatre is due to reopen at a bigger location.

“Teatrul de Artă București” is a company established in 2010, 100 % independent. In 2012, the team set up its own

theatre hall in a former barn in Bucharest. “The Art Theater Bucharest” has its own programme, hosting theatre festivals while they also offer personal development workshops which are based on theatrical techniques and practices.

“Center of Educational Theatre Replika” consists of a group of artists specializing in theatre for teenagers (Mihaela Michailov, Radu Apostol, Mihaela Rădescu, Viorel Cojanu, Gabi Albu) and was founded in 2011, with the belief of making a “theatre of partners that educate one another”. Everything is based on good vibes of creativity and spontaneity as well as on the respect for individual and collective contributions. At “Replika”, the shows are for free and everyone is allowed to come and see. It is the only educational theatre in Romania and also the sole one to present public performances by professionals without any entrance fee. The theatre relies financially on project-based funding supported through the “AFCN” (the administration of national cultural fund).

“Teatru FiX” is an independent theatre based in the center of Iași and established in 2012. In November 2017, they moved into a former factory and planned to build a contemporary art center. Two years later, in November 2019, “Teatru FiX” closed its doors due to various reasons. Nowadays, they have all their hopes set on reopening soon.

“Reactor de creație și experiment” from Cluj, established in 2014, supports young artists with their programme “Fresh Start”. Their main focus, however, is on contemporary dramaturgy with their programme “Drama 5”, but also on audience development through “Teen Spirit”, a platform for youngsters. Another important element is “Mini Reactor”, which presents shows, workshops and other activities for youngsters. And “Reactor Social” is a platform that bears a name that makes it easy to understand what it is all about.

„Arte dell’Anima Association” promotes theatre, music and visual arts. In 2015, they set up a small theatre school, where actors interact with young people on the basis of theatrical games. Nowadays, they play more than 12 shows a year and make their space available to other productions by young actors as well as to different kinds of conferences, masterclasses, exhibitions and workshops.

“Teatrul Apollo 111” opened in 2016, with an ambitious programme consisting of theatre shows directed by film directors, such as the likes of Radu Jude (who recently won big at the Berlinale film festival). The concept behind the theatre

was to play each show for only six weeks. Even though, public response was not as hoped for in the beginning, they continued and have since produced some very successful shows, such as “Medeea’s Boys”, directed by Andrei Măjeri.

„Elisabeta Theatre” is one of the biggest and most commercially successful theatres from Bucharest, with several TV stars leading their cast. Frequent and avid theatre visitors do not really attend their shows, but, still, most of the time tickets are sold out.

Last but not least, there are some new companies, which are just starting out. Among them are „Founded” by Andrei Ursu and the “Basca” theatre in Timișoara, with the latter only having staged a few shows so far, even though they already have an audience of their own in the Fabric neighbourhood. The same goes for “Teatrul Nou” (The New Theatre),

based in Bucharest and set up by young actors just before the pandemic, as well as “Giuvlipen”, which is a new project that focuses on Romani culture.

Of course, there is much to be added to this condensed history of Romanian independent theatre, which offers just a glimpse of this ephemeral phenomenon. It is also needless to say that all these companies had their ups and downs, won prizes and went on tour, played before a full house or only in front of two people. However, most of them are still struggling to keep their doors open and remain efficiently and permanently neglected by the state, even while they enjoy the support of a loyal audience.

Ovidiu Mihăiță

Aualeu Circus Mundi show, 2020 in-Timisoara

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