

“I Want to Become a Better Person, Not Only a Better Artist”

An interview with Andrei ȘERBAN by Eugenia SARVARI¹

Andrei Șerban was born in Bucharest in 1943. In 1969, after graduating (in Radu Penciulescu’s directing class), he received a scholarship at La MaMa Theatre in New York, followed by an astonishing international career in theater and opera. He worked in more than forty countries. In the USA, he was associated with Robert Brustein’s American Repertory Theatre Company and worked in many famous theatres and Operas in New York, Seattle and Los Angeles. Back to Romania after 1989, he was the artistic and executive director of the National Theatre in Bucharest between 1990 and 1993, but his international career continued. His *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy – Medea*, at „La MaMa”, 1972; *Electra*, at the Sainte-Chapelle, in Paris, 1973; *The Trojan Women*, at „La MaMa”, 1974, reunited in a trilogy at „La MaMa” (1974) and, then, in 1990 at the National Theatre in Bucharest, are considered the most original staging of the Greek tragedy at the end of the 20th century. Between 1992 and 2018 he was Professor at Columbia University, New York. Many volumes were dedicated to his work as a stage director. He published the autobiographical volume *O biografie* (2007, Polirom).



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Eugenia Sarvari: *You left Romania in 1969, with a “suitcase containing a few personal belongings, enough for three months” and you landed in New York, waking up in a “cultural melting pot” – the words are yours and can be found in your autobiographical book, O biografie (A Biography) – and then you became a stage director on five continents. How made you up your way in this enormous world?*

Andrei Şerban: I believed in the law of accident. Also the journey itself interested me more than the destination. It did not matter where I was as long as I can be free. To search and discover different Americas, landscapes for the imagination, was a blessing. I was very fortunate to find remarkable wiser people who helped me grow and open my mind and enrich my vision, teach me to become more generous and tolerant, less pretentious.

E. S.: *The coupé show Arden of Faversham/Ubu roi from „La MaMa” marked not only your American debut, but also the meeting with Peter Brook and the invitation at the International Centre for Theatre Research in Paris. What did this meeting mean to you?*

A. Ş.: I look at the notes I took almost half a century ago, at the time when I started working with Brook’s International Center in Paris (and then in Iran) and I am fascinated to see that the same things concerned me then as today: I wrote in my notes: “I want to become a better person, not only a better artist”. Another note: “Inspired by the example of Brook, from now on I will try to be different, like Peter is always different in every situation, fresh, questioning, searching, he is so unpredictably alive.” Brook opened my interest for this fundamental question: what do I want? This came as a surprise to me, and it did not come from my head. It was simply the realization of what I am. What I am as an artist also as a human being, after half a century, I am still trying to discover.

E. S.: *From Persepolis to South America, from Tokyo to Los Angeles, or Sank Petersburg, you made theatrical travels for many lives. How were your performances and workshops received in so many different horizons?*

A. Ş.: Traveling in so many places, meeting people from so many cultures opened my appetite to understand more, to see not so much the differences between us, but what connects us all, the same fears, the same desires, the same aspirations. I wish to understand more still. But theatre was for me the best and most direct medium to build a bridge for connections and relationships beyond language. Theatre can create this universal sound that vibrates and spreads hope and opposes the negativity in the world today, that is so un-necessary.

E. S.: *Are Western students / actors, more involved, with more imagination, different from those in Romania? Are there fundamental differences between theatre in the West /America and Romanian theatre? Between the work atmosphere there and here?*

A. Ş.: The American students used to be fearless and take risks. But now with the "me too" movement things get more confused. Students are asked to report any sign of misconduct from teachers and colleagues alike. Out of protection for so many wrongdoings in the past, there is also a tendency to restrain creativity and create suspicion. In an acting class one can sense a certain censorship and artificiality. That is provoked by a new Puritanism that is the very old American tradition. Today in universities the attitude is changing from one extreme to the other: before too much permissiveness, now exaggerated political correctness! Europe is catching up slowly the same problems!

E. S.: *How is Romanian theatre seen in the world?*

A. Ş.: It is not very well known.

E. S.: *Are your Romanian roots emerging, showing themselves in a certain way in your creation, in theatre and/or opera?*

A.Ş.: Yes, they are present, but these roots appear naturally without me being conscious. The roots define me and I am glad when they appear to surface. I am actually proud of my roots, they give me energy, make me stronger. But I am not trying to exploit or manipulate this aspect for political cliché propaganda or nationalism.

E. S.: What were your expectations when you got back to Romania in 1990?

A. Ş.: Hoping naively to transform the National Theatre in a vibrant and fresh organism and accepting the position of general manager in order to lead that institution towards the future. After three years I gave up. I was naive to think the impossible!

E. S.: What was, for you, the meaning from Sarah Kane, at your return back to the country in 2006, at the invitation of Ion Vartic, the director of National Theatre in Cluj, and a new Seagull, the fourth, staged last year at unteatru, in Bucharest?

A. Ş.: I simply love to surprise myself by doing such opposite texts, written by Sara Kane and Chekhov. One should never make it easy for oneself. Sarah Kane is an impossibly difficult writer to stage and Chekhov is equally difficult. I love challenges. Why should anything be easy?

E. S.: Why a different kind of theatre school is needed, a theatre school invented through the foundation of Andrei Şerban Traveling Academy?

A. Ş.: We all need to go back to school. We have very little education at the emotional level. Theatre deals with emotions and we know very little in that department. Young people are given a very poor training these days. I feel responsible to help them and after a quarter of century teaching at Columbia in NY, I feel that I have something to offer to the young generation of actors in my own country.

E. S.: Your creations of the last period "make visible the invisible". They show us human suffering, but they also have a very strong political accent – and, by saying that, I think of The Good Man from Szechwan, Much Ado About Nothing from „Bulandra” Theatre, The Merry Widow from the National Romanian Opera in Bucharest, Richard III from Radnóti Miklós Színház in Budapest, or even the last Seagull from Unteatru. Is this a direction that you wish to give further on to your work?

A. Ş.: I want to stay away from giving a direction, I am not here to give any messages to anyone, I work in order to experience together with actors and audience the joy and pain of being alive. Any true creation is free from interpretation. Each one of us can choose what we want from the stage. Each one thinks differently. But if we feel for a second the same, then it's wonderful. But one has to refrain from teaching others what to feel and think.

E. S.: *Where is Andrei Şerban home, the only Romanian stage director from the Larousse?*

A. Ş.: I don't know where is home at this moment. The world is so unsettled, so dangerous, so much frustration and negativity. Home cannot be found in a country, or a building, there is no island where one can find peace. Outside one finds only chaos. But there is a home inside each one of us. And for me the only way to look for home is in the heart.