

AN INTERVIEW WITH RADU JUDE AND GIANINA CARBUNARIU

Reasons for making the *Uppercase Print* play and film.

Gianina: In 2011, I spent a few months going through files at the National Council for Studying the Securitate Archives (CNSAS) because I was interested in how each of them was built up, but also because I was trying to figure out what this “collective novel” with so many authors – Securitate officers and collaborators – would mean today. In 2011, there were about 20 kilometres of files in the CNSAS archive. When I returned, a few years later, the length had doubled. In 2011 I brought out the play *X mm out of Y km*, in which I used as scenic material ten pages from the file of writer and dissident Dorin Tudoran. I only learned of Mugur Călinescu’s case in 2012, from Marius Oprea’s book *Şase feluri de a muri* [Six Ways to Die]. I wanted to read the original file, so I contacted historians Mihail Bumbuş and Mihai Burcea, who gave me access to his two case folders, “The Panel” and “The Pupil”, and to recordings of their interviews in 2007 with some of the officers who handled the case in 1981. At first, I was mostly interested in the phenomenon of enrolling high school pupils as collaborators in the ’80s, because I had learned, from discussions with experts in Romania and abroad, that they were surprisingly numerous here, while in other Eastern European countries enrolling minors was more of an exception. I chose Mugur Călinescu’s case because his file had both references to the phenomenon of enrolling minors and mentions of an exception, which the file, written in a highly standardised language, had failed to completely obscure. Mugur’s story is that of a 16-year-old in a small town who, coming up against an oppressive mechanism that gradually cuts him off from friends and family, still manages to convey, even in his statements under interrogation (obviously constricted by standard formulae), signs of free thinking at a time when people were afraid of their own thoughts. The file and the interviews with former Securitate officers are not mere “traces” of an episode in recent history; they challenge us to question the society we live in now – which was one of the goals of this play.

Radu: I saw the play sometime in 2012 and I remember talking to Şerban Pavlu (who had seen it too) about how a film inspired by the same case would never work – the only reason it worked on stage, claimed Pavlu, was that this kind of playwriting is unusual and... anyway, I can’t remember all his arguments, but we both thought a film based on the play would only add to the long list of anti-Communist films – which are necessary, but mostly either excessive, or bad, or both, despite their good intentions. In fact, I believe it’s precisely the good intentions of these films/plays that are debatable. At any rate, I kept thinking of the play and I suppose the decision to turn it into a film ties in with my increased interest for archives, developed after seeing the play. In retrospect, I find that what Gianina managed to do isn’t just a theatrical success, but also very close to how I myself am interested in using archive materials to build up some of my films – including some that are still in the project phase. Besides, being a cynic, I am incapable of constructing a positive character. Gianina is a humanist and does it constantly, her plays are full (among other things) of credible positive characters. I wanted one of my own and Gianina lent me one.

There is more. I’ve just about had enough of my own ideas and wanted to make a film that would be a genuine collaboration, to make a different start. If the film looks quite a bit different from what I’ve done so far, it is also due to this collaboration, this different starting point. The experience has been positive and I’ve repeated it by making an archive-material documentary

with historian Adrian Cioflâncă (*The Exit of the Trains*). Also, among other things, I'm preparing an essay-film with Christian Ferencz-Flatz, a philosopher and film theorist.

Working with archives

Gianina: I had already explored the construction mechanisms behind a Securitate file, so in the second play I made based on this kind of ready-made material I tried to follow the story as well. The rehearsals were quite different from the usual process of making a play. For one month I read and discussed the 200 pages of the file with the actors, while stage work took about three weeks. That was because I wanted all of us to have a common language. We were artists from different generations – some of us were born in the same year as Mugur Călinescu and had had direct contact with that reality (actress Cătălina Mustăţă), but there were others, such as myself or Gabriel Răuţă, who were both 12 in 1989, or younger colleagues who were only a few years old at the time of the Revolution (Alexandru Potocean, Mihai Smarandache, Silviu Vîlcu). So our experiences were rather different. I made a selection of the material, picked a chronological order (because documents don't always follow a timeline in the file) and chose a dramaturgy based on restructuring the texts, imagining potential situations in which they were produced, but without adding a single word. We were not interested in a faithful "re-enactment" of the case or its period. This is a play that tries to push the limits of a document and of theatrical production at the same time: Is such a document a trustworthy "trace"? Can theatre recreate a reality starting from "traces" of it? After all, how does one read an archive? Who is the author of this type of "dramatic" text – those who gave the statements, those who requested them, those who transcribed recorded conversations, the Securitate as an oppressive system, we who "rewrite" it all with theatrical means?

Radu: I kept Gianina's ideas and questions for the filmed part, adding a few extras from the same file. The criterion for choosing the TV archive materials that break up the narration was chronological. In other words, I looked for footage broadcast by the National Television at the time when Mugur Călinescu's story was unfolding, only abdicating from this principle two or three times – because, in my work of visual archaeology in the National Television Archive (where materials are less than perfectly indexed), I happened upon things that were so good, so to the point, that I kept them. After all, they belong to the same period, they are already history – remaining traces.

On the concept of the play/film.

Gianina: I attempted a performance exercise playing on the line between reality and fiction. That, I thought, was the great challenge, both artistically and ethically, not the reenactment of a "slice of life". I made the "script" visible at all times through live video projections of the statements/sketches from the file or even texts written by Mugur (the originals, taken from the file). At the same time, the play is a work of fiction from the point of view of how the material is treated on stage (props, projections, acting, lighting etc.) So whole scenes taken entirely from the file, such as those based on transcriptions of conversations in the house, were perceived by the public as fiction – because they had a dialogue, a conflict, they appeared to be "well-written" by a playwright. On the other hand, the scenes in which two Securitate offices were acting out "what was heard and seen in the house", trying to lend a sort of rhythm and, perhaps, some ironic poetry to a highly standardised language – they were perceived as actual fragments from the file, though they were a collage of brief observations compiled from dozens of pages on file.

Radu: Gianina took a Securitate file, chose fragments from it and made a collage. By putting together the documents (and dramatizing them here and there) she created a story, a coherent narrative construction. Of course, this narration can be questioned in many aspects – and it has been done, I believe, or should be done by historians, theatre critics a.s.o.

What I decided to do beyond what Gianina did (or, rather, not beyond, but differently) was replacing the collage with montage. I use the word “montage” in the meaning S.M. Eisenstein gives it – more in his theoretical texts than in his films (most of them compiled in the volume *Towards a Theory of Montage*, as of yet not translated into Romanian, of course). Put briefly, the main idea is that joining two pictures through montage can generate a third, formed in the mind of the viewer, whose meaning results from the juxtaposition of the two pictures and is absent from either one of them, being born only through their joining. Eisenstein was, of course, referring to cinema, but the Golden Age of montage is right now: anyone who sees a meme on the internet actually sees, most times, a variant of Eisensteinian montage. (To pick a random example: the stupid meme in which a photo of Romanian President Iohannis is put next to a picture of Hitler, generating the idea that Iohannis is a Nazi. The idea is absent from either of the two pictures, and only appears when they are put together.) Anyone who scrolls through Facebook and pays attention can see a post or a picture of, say, a burning rain forest followed by a McDonald’s ad and get an idea from mentally connecting the two posts/pictures. That was more or less what I tried to do – systematically breaking up Gianina’s story (her collage) and turning it into a work of montage, in which each picture collides with another and their joining generates new ideas for the public. Of course, meanings are not as easily found as in Internet memes; I would say this is essentially a poetic approach, if we take poetry as Malraux saw it: “All true poetry is no doubt irrational insofar as it substitutes a new system of relations for the ‘established’ relations between things.” I believe montage is not just a way of poetising, but a very serious way (though it should be used with caution, as it can easily lead to fakes or propaganda of various sorts) of understanding and constructing history. Besides, this procedure has made the film highly accessible and entertaining, from my point of view: It doesn’t just tell the story of Mugur Călinescu as pieced together by Gianina from his Securitate file, but offers hundreds of other small stories. Those who get bored with the first have every chance to like the second and so on.

Why the theatrical mise-en-scène of the film? Why a “filmed play”, in other words? Several people have already asked me that and I think nothing is more contemptuous among filmmakers than to call a film a “filmed play”. First of all, contrary to such opinions, I believe there is no such thing as “filmed plays” to begin with; there are plays and there are films. A filmed play becomes a film (and it is relevant and amusing that Jonas Mekas was awarded in Venice for his “documentary” when the film – *The Brig*, 1964 – consists of 16-mm footage of a play at the Living Theatre). Of course, we can only use the name “filmed plays” for the horrors produced by our televisions under the name of “television plays” or for actual recordings of plays (even on foreign TV channels). I’ve never understood why theatre directors or actors accept to have their plays recorded so badly, with no attention to their rhythm, the acting and, most of all, the mise-en-scène, which is systematically massacred by cameramen and television directors more used to filming political talk-shows, at best. I’d love to do television plays – maybe some of that desire found its expression in this. Besides, the possibilities of film as a medium are so ample, and this is only an attempt to explore a few of them; this combination – a “play-document-televised-cinema” – is successful, I believe. And one more thing: I am proud to say that the film is even more theatrical than Gianina’s play, or that her play is more cinematic than the film, in fact.

Teamwork and managing the budget for the play/film.

Gianina: Our producers were the dramAcum Association and the Nitra International Festival in Slovakia, as part of a project called Parallel Lives – 20th Century through the Eyes of Secret Police, in partnership with Odeon Theatre in Bucharest. The international project invited guest artists and experts from all six partner countries. We all worked with archives from former political police bodies. The budget was fair for a play in a studio-size space, and included bringing it to the participating European theatres (in Germany, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic, and Slovakia). The artistic team was formed gradually during this work process which required greater involvement than if we had started from a written script. Besides, the fact that the “characters” and “situations” were actual persons and destinies created a special sort of pressure, a kind of artistic responsibility. It is one thing to do (yet another) unsuccessful Shakespeare; it is completely different to aesthetically “bury” a real fact in a pointless play. I believe this is what we were all afraid of. The artistic team formed close ties over the six years of touring and shows at Odeon Theatre. We still discover nuances and connections to what happens today when we meet for rehearsals before another show.

Radu: I got funding through the Romanian Film Centre call schemes and wanted to make the film quickly, without waiting for extra funding for years. So I had to plan everything to fit a rather small budget. We only had six days of filming – a performance I am proud of, but not one I hope to repeat. In this I was supported by the whole production team – particularly Ada Solomon, Carla Fotea and Cristina Iliescu, the film’s assistant director. Marius Panduru is by far Romania’s fastest director of photography (on top of being immensely talented), and Irina Moscu’s sets were designed for efficient filming. I am glad Irina accepted to work on this film, I admired her for her sets in Radu Afrim or Alexandru Dabija’s plays. It was a very pleasant encounter. All the actors were excellent and diligent, but I’d like to particularly mention Șerban Lazarovici, the teenager who played Mugur Călinescu. The fact that he was rejected from the acting entrance exam at the Romanian Theatre and Cinema Arts University is, I think, further proof of his genuine talent.

Opinion on each other’s work

Gianina: I think the film asks some extra questions, sprung from using a different language, different instruments of artistic exploration specific of cinema in general and Radu Jude as a director in particular. This is not a film about “a story”; it “blows up” the story by using archive materials more diverse than the ones in the play. The selection and use of visual references from the National Television archive, along with micro-scenes from the file and statements of former Securitate officers, generates multiple layers of meaning and brings up questions about the seen and unseen parts of society, about the ambiguity of any archive, about the feelings of nostalgia and anti-nostalgia we sometimes experience simultaneously. By its very nature, a play disappears with time, but a film “remains” and has a chance to speak to a wider, multi-generation audience, which I find to be a more profound, more durable act of retrieval of a gesture that might otherwise have remained anonymous.

Radu: I admire Gianina Cărbunariu not only for the subjects she picks, but also for her mise-en-scène – which is what I often find limited in a number of political plays. I can understand that as a valid option, I can understand the desire to focus on the message, but I can’t help it,

I'm the kind of spectator who cares about the form as well, and Gianina usually comes up with formal proposals that I find highly interesting. There is a moment in *Uppercase Print* that I wanted to replicate in the film, but it wouldn't have been as powerful and amusing as it is in the play: the one in which the characters, all of them teachers participating in the meeting to destroy Mugur Călinescu, humbly get on their knees to speak their opinion into a microphone placed on the floor. It is a purely theatrical moment, and it's such moments that make the whole play worth seeing.

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

- 2021 BAD LUCK BANGING OR LOONY PORN
- 2020 THE EXIT OF THE TRAINS (documentary)
- 2020 UPPERCASE PRINT
- 2018 "I DO NOT CARE IF WE GO DOWN IN HISTORY AS BARBARIANS"
- 2017 THE DEAD NATION (documentary)
- 2016 SCARRED HEARTS
- 2015 AFERIM!
- 2012 EVERYBODY IN OUR FAMILY
- 2011 A FILM FOR FRIENDS
- 2009 THE HAPPIEST GIRL IN THE WORLD
- 2006 THE TUBE WITH A HAT (short)

CAST

Șerban Lazarovici

Bogdan Zamfir

Ioana Iacob

Șerban Pavlu

Robert Arsenie

Bogdan Romedea

Alexandru Potocean

CREDITS

Director

Radu Jude

Writer

Gianina Cărbunariu

Radu Jude

Producer

Ada Solomon

Cinematography

Marius Panduru

Sound design

Dana Bunescu

Editor

Cătălin Cristuțiu

Set designer

Irina Moscu