

The actress in research – between emotion and reason

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Abstract: Our presentation aims to identify the challenges faced by an actress-researcher and possible solutions. When referring to “the spectacular nature of a creative act,” we inevitably think of emotion, the unexpected, and experience. On the other hand, research is defined by objectivity, pragmatism, and precision. Doctoral research in the field of performing arts represents a challenge – a clash between the actor's visceral nature and the researcher's rationality. This year's conference theme, *Culture and Creation: Doctoral Research as a Cultural Act*, provides an interesting perspective on my research topic – in what way can the actress and the researcher or doctoral candidate coexist? The article *The Actress in Research – Between Emotion and Reason* aims to answer this question, drawing from my study of the concept of the complete actress in contemporary theater. In my research, I have linked the idea of the complete actress with activism – both on and off the stage. This introduces a new challenge for the actress in research: finding a balance between activism and doctoral studies. The profession of acting is deeply connected to the concept of humanity. In sociology, humanity is defined as the largest social group, envisioning the possibility of uniting all people into a cohesive unit of action with a shared goal of addressing major issues. Thus, we can associate actors with the desire to effect change in the world and the drive to touch the hearts and minds of people. My doctoral research, *Hypostases of Femininity in Contemporary Theatre*, brings me closer to my own answers and helps me understand that one of the most important reasons I chose to be an actress is to rewrite and redefine the destiny of women.

Keywords: emotion, reason, theatre, culture.

Introduction

The doctoral research *Hypostases of femininity in contemporary theatre* was born out of the vital need to understand the goal and role of the actress both in society and in the world of theatre. From the sociological viewpoint, one of the main characteristics of humanity is that people, by their nature, aim for certain goals. This is also why people started to organise themselves in social groups, understanding that achieving goals cannot be done in total isolation. Everything we do in life is caused by seeking or chasing a goal.

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Goals can be material and pragmatic, such as choosing a partner, a home, a career, or immaterial and hard to quantify, such as the desire to cause change in the world, to help, or to create a community. The latter are aspirations pertaining to the ideal and artistic universe and most of the time they involve exposing ourselves, vulnerable and sincere. We can thus deduce that any action we perform is for a certain goal. Moreover, though, people want to understand the motives behind desires, as well. And that is how the question “Why?” appears. In our childhood, there is an age called the *age of why*, when children focus on the relationship between cause and effect. As time goes by, this question remains constant and it is only the topics that change.

One of the most common questions is “Why have I chosen this profession?” The answers can, of course, vary greatly – fame, money, tradition, parents’ expectations. But art, and especially theatre, leads to the appearance of specific questions and answers. The answer is quite rarely (perhaps almost never) about money or safety. It is said that theatre is a vocation or gift. It is fascinating to think that there is a profession where someone goes up on stage and pretends to be someone else, in front of other people who are watching and accepting what is going on. In the beginning of my doctoral research, I formulated an opinion which is controversial, especially for our time: “It may sound utopian or naïve, but theatre has the power to change the world.” I will add now that actresses could be the first ones here and my research focuses on the concept of *complete actress*. The topic of this year’s conference, *Culture and creation. Doctoral research as a cultural act*, brings us an interesting perspective and opens a new direction in research: “How can the actress and the researcher or doctoral candidate coexist?” The article *The actress in research – between emotion and reason* aims to answer this question, starting from my study about the concept of *complete actress* in contemporary theatre. In my research, I associated the complete actress with activism, both on stage and off it. I have thus identified a new challenge for the actress in research – finding a balance between activism and the doctoral research.

The actress in research – between emotion and reason aims to identify the challenges of the *actress-researcher* and their possible solutions. When we talk about the “spectacular nature of an act of creation,” we inevitably think about emotion, about the unexpected, about an experience. On the other hand, research is identified with objectivity, pragmatism, and precision. A doctoral research in the field of performance arts is a challenge – a clash between the actor’s visceral nature and the researcher’s rational one. As we have seen, we can associate the acting profession with the need to bring change into the world and with the desire to reach people’s souls and minds. Robert J. Landy and David T. Montgomery talk about the concept of change in the theatre: “In very many ways, the purpose of theatre is change. The spectrum of change goes from a change for the better of one’s state in the case of a good comedy to a

change in one's thought, inspired by a challenging drama. In the context of social theatre, the main goal is to develop the participants' critical thinking – a development which inevitably leads to a change in perspective.”¹

The research I am conducting brings me closer to my own answers and I am starting to understand that one of the most important reasons why I have chosen the acting profession is in order to rewrite and redefine women's fate, by any means possible, including academic research. This is where the *why* of my research comes in and that is why it becomes so important to understand an actress's mechanisms – to identify those that really work in order to produce change. A first example of a woman in arts who is animated by the same goal is Patricia Erens, who describes women's representation in cinema over time: “The story of women in movies is mainly a history of how men depicted them. The image of the big screen heroines varied throughout time, from idolisation to infamy. Their fate depended on economic and social pressures and their physical aspect varied according to fashion and the manipulated trends.”²

The *goal* is an essential concept when we think about the situation of the *complete actress in research*. As we have seen already, many times, goals are related to affect, and, as we well know, emotion cannot be very visible in academic research. When the acting profession is defined by emotion, humanity and activism, it becomes difficult to master these aspects within objective, precise research. This is where we need balance – a crucial concept in the discussion about theatre, activism, research and the definition of the *complete actress*. When we talk about activism, we need to put in the balance our perspective on that social issue and the needs of the community members. In the case of research, objectivity needs to be stronger than emotional involvement. Theatre can cloud objectivity, as it is closely connected to emotions and the soul. That is why, when we talk about the *actress in research*, we need to highlight the separation between emotional involvement and social involvement.

Women's voices in theatre and research

On a global level, we can see many contradictory aspects regarding women's status. On the one hand, when it comes to presidential elections in many countries, we see more and more women in the final stages (Maia Sandu, Elena Lasconi, Kamala Harris, etc.). On the other hand, abortion is illegal in 22 of the US states and in two European countries (Malta and Poland), while access to abortion becomes difficult in numerous countries, including Romania. A recognition of the fact that misogyny is political and social in

¹ Robert J. Landy, David T. Montgomery (2012). *Theatre for Change – Education, Social Action and Therapy*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, p. 1 (our translation).

² Erens, Patricia (ed.) (1979). *Sexual Stratagems: The World of Women in Film*, Horizon Press, New York, p. 13 (our translation).

nature comes from the UK: “The new Labour government, which has a progressive orientation, will include extreme misogyny among the forms of ideological extremism, according to a statement sent out on Sunday by the UK Home Office.”³ UK Home Secretary Yvette Cooper has said that hatred towards women is on the rise.

In Qatar, women were denied participation to the United Nations conference in Doha. In Italy, a protest was organised against femicide and the participants threw red paint on the Spanish Steps in Rome in memory of the 130 women killed in Italy last year. In Gambia, Parliament rejected the proposed law which aimed to make genital mutilation (forbidden by law since 2015) legal again. The reason why the law was proposed was related to the cultural and religious aspect of female circumcision, which is in fact a serious breach of women’s right. In Argentina, three lesbian women were killed in May, when a man set them on fire with a Molotov cocktail. Romania is on the last place regarding gender equality according to the latest report of the *European Institute for Gender Equality* and on the last but one place with regards to women’s political power.⁴

The road to diversity, inclusion and equity is long, complicated and by no means straight. We see significant progress being made, but we also see actions causing a regression of the woman’s status. But what is most important is that the discussion about gender equity is wide open. Moreover, women’s voices become stronger and stronger. Finally, women are no longer forced to be silent.

We can see the silence imposed on women as a form of violence. People who cannot tell their stories are deprived of their fundamental rights. Depriving women of their right to vote was a way to keep them silent and a form of aggression. Women who are afraid or who do not have the necessary space to talk about sexual harassment and rape are silenced. Abortion is a way to keep them silent. Domestic violence becomes political from the viewpoint of this silencing. Imposing silence also means enforcing a lack of credibility – we can often see that women are reticent about telling their story, because they are not believed. Silencing creates victims and strengthens aggressors. The recent investigations regarding sexual harassment in the Romanian academic environment proves that women’s voices are still small and that there is still no safe space for women’s experiences to be shared. Silencing women is a form a violence and support for the aggressors, with significant political and social effects.

Fortunately, we live in a time when more and more women break the silence. Our voices become stronger and surer. Even if fear is still felt in our voices, our stories are the only way to become free. It is important to remember

³ <https://www.digi24.ro/stiri/externe/guvernul-britanic-include-misoginia-printre-formele-de-extremism-ideologic-2899251>, accessed on 19.08.2024

⁴ See <https://centrulfilia.ro/>

that stories can come in different forms – testimonies, interviews, films, shows, music or even *doctoral papers*. Women will be equal to men only when their stories are as valuable as men’s stories. In my research, I analysed the relationship between activism and fame a lot, proving the influence of actresses who are socially involved on public opinion. If we analyse the close connection between fame and activism, it is interesting to note that, in most cases, those celebrities are not experts on the topics they support. Which raises the question “Why would an actor or singer’s discourse be relevant regarding a global social issue?”

One explanation can come from the emotional aspect of activism – a cause we are supporting or for which we are fighting usually has emotional and personal implications. When I am asked why I fight for inclusion and women’s rights, the answer is simple: I don’t want others to go through what I have gone through. Traumas and negative experiences are most easily healed by offering help to others, which also gives them a meaning and a positive direction. Thus, sometimes, it is easier to empathise with an artist we like than with an expert or academician. An actress supporting women’s rights and enjoying the three defining elements of attitude change (charisma, credibility and fame) has a chance of appealing to more people than a “normal person.” But if the same actress is also an expert in that social issue, her reach and credibility can be much greater. This is how valuable the experience of an actress in research can be and that is how activism and research can complete each other. By doing the se things correctly and carefully, the actress in research can be a perfect combination of emotion and objectivity. It would be interesting, therefore, to think about research not as a form of activism, but as an instrument for strengthening credibility and fame, caused by the objective, precise character of the research.

Beauty – advantage or challenge

Beauty in theatre is an important direction of research for the study of the complete actress. The question “Is beauty in theatre an advantage or a challenge?” can be regarded and studied from multiple perspectives. First of all, it allows us to go back to the issue of the female character types. If we think about the myth of beauty in drama and its effects on women’s status, we can say that beauty is one of the most deceptive traps of clichés and stereotypes. If we look on the social level, we can see that an actress’s beauty, especially if she is young, can be dangerous for her, raising the question of ethics and morality. It is not news that men in important social positions can abuse their power. The best example is the *Me Too* movement, which had cases that were proved legally. Statistically, these cases occur especially in the case of men in positions of power and in artistic environments. Silencing women has allowed aggressors with strong voices and public positions to make victims

for too long with no one stopping them. Rebecca Solnit describes a few cases of men who used their fame and power to silence those they abused: “Roges Alles, Fox News CEO, whom a few women accused of sexual harassment in the workplace, persecution, exploitation, blackmail and psychological abuse for over 50 years, Bill Cosby with serial rapes facilitated by drugs for just as long and Jian Ghomeshi from Canada, accused of unimaginable abuse by several women.”⁵

Seeing and understanding beauty as a source of power can be a deceptive concept. It is indeed hard to deny that beauty and attractiveness are a source of privilege. But, apart from its ephemeral nature (because, in women’s case, beauty is closely connected to youth), it is important to mention that the force of beauty is manifested by its power to attract. In essence, it is not a source of power independently, because it has no value without someone else’s (financial, political, social or decision) power.

From this perspective, we could even say that beauty and, more precisely, the way women have been taught to relate to it, can encourage and increase dependency.

Regarding the *actress in research*, it is important to mention that, in the 21st century, beauty is many times identified with frivolity and a lack of depth. At the opposite pole, intelligence and depth are usually associated to a sober or even common physical aspect. This is seen in drama, cinema, on stage or even in an academic environment. The latter is defined by depth, seriousness, and importance, and that is why women in this environment often tend to hide or minimise their beauty. This minimisation of beauty is problematic and all the more difficult in the case of actresses, whose bodies and physical aspect are an integral part of their profession. As I have said, female beauty can be associated with frivolity, while attributes such as confidence, authority and power are perceived as predominantly masculine. By rethinking their physical aspect, actresses in an academic environment more easily and quickly express traits such as strength, intelligence and power, which are associated with masculinity. But changes of their physical aspect, through which women make themselves smaller, more modest and basically invisible are not a sustainable solution for fighting gender roles and stereotypes. Ideally, femininity should be consciously assumed in the academic environment – this is the only way we can begin to associate it with aspects such as academic integrity, power, authority, etc.

Another interesting research direction from the perspective of an actress’s beauty in the academic environment is the relationship between femininity and confidence. Looking at traditional gender images, we notice that confidence is predominantly a male attribute. In the past, women were taught

⁵ Rebecca Solnit (2020). *Mama tuturor întrebărilor* [The Mother of All Questions], Black Button Books, București, translation by Anca Dumitrescu, p. 27.

to be nice, kind, and modest, while concepts such as pride, assertiveness, and authority were specifically masculine. It is interesting to notice that, among women's depictions in the past, modesty was an excessively used trait. Let us see the example of the woman who is gorgeous, but unaware of her own beauty – a stereotype of classical drama. The allure of the woman who does not know how beautiful she is has been intensely promoted in art. A woman who does not realise her own beauty is depicted as being much more attractive than the one aware of her own beauty – as the latter is described as vain and full of conceit. Something about women who do not realise how beautiful they are is incredibly attractive to men.

This way of seeing a woman's beauty translates to numerous social aspects of the relationship between men and women and significantly influences the path of an actress in research. Sadly, the effects of the separation between femininity and confidence go way beyond the physical aspect and are very complex. Considering that confidence in women has been blamed for a long time, they will not enjoy any success the same way that men do, whether that success is professional or personal. Women's successes are minimised first of all by themselves. Another negative consequence is that women tend to not be as vocal or assertive. They will not support their own views with the same intensity, because, many times, in the case of women, confidence is mistaken for being aggressive or emotional.

The separation between confidence and femininity can also be seen in the *leadership styles* used by women. It is important to mention this aspect, since a woman in an academic environment may have various positions of authority. Kurt Lewin, a pioneer of social psychology, has identified three main leadership styles within organisations and groups: *autocratic (authoritarian) leadership*, *democratic (participative) leadership*, and *laissez-faire (permissive) leadership*. There are major differences between leadership styles of women and men, starting precisely from the concept of authority identified predominantly with masculinity. Studies suggest that women more frequently tend to use participative and transformational leadership styles, compared to the more authoritarian or transactional styles traditionally associated with male leadership. Sadly, preferring these leadership styles relates more to a social conditioning or constraint than to choice. Social challenges are huge for women, especially due to gender roles. Regarding leadership styles, women often choose more inclusive approaches in order to fight leadership stereotypes.

Activism

In 2024, we cannot speak about a *complete actress* without also speaking about activism. Radu Apostol brings an interesting perspective regarding the actor's civic conscience: "Artists should not be only the promoters of their own art, more or less inspired merchants of cultural or handmade products, but

should also take on a civic and social conscience similar to the artists in the theatre company that Hamlets leads in *The Mousetrap*.”⁶ I believe that having a voice, telling our stories, being listened to and taken into account are among the most valuable forms of liberation. Today’s actresses, female directors and female playwrights are the pioneers of liberation.

What is significant about women’s stories depicted in art is that they have a double value. First of all, they open the way for gender equity, giving value and credibility to the female voice. But, moreover, the power of women’s stories offers a better understanding of women’s experiences. More simply put, if men watched more stories about women, they would understand them better.

Activism in our time has multiple facets and numerous channels – and one of them, I believe, can be doctoral research. But, in this case, rules are much stricter than in the case of other channels, such as art or protests, since balance is absolutely essential. What is important to remember about activism is its relation to the social context and environment in which we live – how prepared that society is for discussing certain social issues. We use the term “prepared” from several viewpoints – education, level of information, openness, and civilisation. For example, we cannot use the same type of activism in France and in Romania and expect the same results, as France is a deeply progressive, liberal country, much more advanced than Romania. The road to equity and inclusion is an education and learning process, and Romania is still at the beginning. A very strong, aggressive form of activism about any issue or field can have a negative boomerang effect in a traditional society like Romania. In the case of social actions, it is important to highlight what that community really needs, not what we believe should be said or solved. That is why it is absolutely necessary to talk about balance in activism, since balance is the one that predominantly paints the picture of the *complete actress*.

Major social change has always occurred after significant forms of activism. Shock clearly opens the discussion of a certain social issue, especially in the times of social media. But we cannot give a clear answer about the positive effects it has on solving the problem. Shocking people by means of an extreme gesture is not necessarily good. In the case of persuasive messages, *constancy is more important than cognitive dissonance*. Sociological studies have shown that the frequency with which we are exposed to persuasive messages is predominant in determining the attitude change process.

Another important aspect about balance in activism is the need for significant research and documentation. That is why an actress’s doctoral research can be immensely beneficial for her activism. A celebrity or, in our case, a *complete actress*, cannot randomly choose a social issue to debate and

⁶ Radu Apostol (2018). *Teatrul social – Perspective asupra rolul teatrului în raport cu societatea* [Social theatre – Perspectives on the role of theatre in relation to society], UNATC Press, București, p. 9.

support. A very good example is found in the women's sexual liberation movement in the '70's. Early feminism regarding female sexuality focused first of all on women's right to be sexually active anytime, anywhere, and with anyone. But it is very important to understand that sexual liberation is much more than that – the right to abortion, easy access to contraception, the importance of tests, and sexual education in school. Without these aspects, women were not really in control of their own sexuality. The '70's were a time when sexual liberation was synonymous with promiscuity in the Western world. What contemporary feminism, which has much more information and documentation and is not as drastic, has taught us is that, although sexual liberation can mean promiscuity, it can also mean chastity, marriage, and one partner for life. Just like in Hegel's philosophy, it is important to keep in mind that two things can be true at the same time. Liberation actually means the right to choose, whether we talk about sexuality, politics or education. That is how important *research, documentation, and information* are in celebrities' activism.

Another important aspect about balance in activism is fighting stereotypes. This is particularly important in the case of the actress in research. "Actress" and "researcher" may seem like totally opposite concepts. Art, theatre, and actresses are identified with freedom, emotion, non-conformity, rebellion, passion, etc., while the researcher and the academic environment are identified with concepts such as seriousness, rigour, strictness, rules, codes, etc. Blending the two can have a significant effect on fighting stereotypes. Many times, society imagines a feminist as a short-haired woman wearing no makeup, with loose clothes and harbouring deep hatred for men. They will imagine that someone who fights for making cannabis legal is a long-haired hippy wearing colourful clothes and driving a van painted with colourful spirals. An animal rights activist is seen as a "single cat lady" – an unmarried woman with a houseful of cats.

And yet we have the feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who wears high heels and is the image of the makeup company *Boots*. Moreover, she often talks about the tendency she had in her youth to hide her high heels and makeup in order to have credibility and about the strong semantic charge of the word *feminist*. "Feminists are women who are not happy because they cannot find husbands. So I decided to call myself a Happy Feminist. (...) Since feminism is not African, I decided to call myself a Happy African Feminist. At some point I got to be a Happy African Feminist Who Does Not Hate Men and Who Likes Lip Gloss and Who Wears High Heels for Herself and Not for Men."⁷ In the case of making cannabis legal, we can give the example of MEP Nicu Ștefănuță – an educated person, vice-president of the European

⁷ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2016). *Feminist(ă), Feministi* [Feminist, Feminists], translation by Anca Dumitrescu, Black Button Books, București, p. 10.

Parliament, married, with children, destroying the stereotype of the marijuana-smoking hippie. Joaquin Phoenix, an animal rights activist, redefines the stereotypical image of a single person with a lot of animals. And an actress in research can become an unstoppable force by blending opposite elements such as emotion and rigour. We can continue to give examples, but what is important to keep in mind is that authenticity is a priority in activism. We don't need to turn ourselves into a poster for a social issue. Sincerity and authenticity absolutely suffice.

Also, activism does not have to always be sombre, serious, and shocking. Especially with regards to feminism, *humour* has often been used for opening important discussions. Sometimes, it may be easier and more beneficial to challenge social constructs in a disarming manner, rather than by some dramatic social action. Humour offers a simple and pleasant way to bring difficult, controversial topics in the discussion. Moreover, comedy also brings many other positive aspects – it fights the image of the angry, frustrated feminist, it proves that women can be funny and normalises topics which used to be considered taboo. Actresses like Lily Tomlin, Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, or Lena Dunham prove the power of comedy in activism. The writer Mesa Story Melton speaks about the value of humour in activism: “Humour has long been useful as a nonviolent form of rebellion in which the oppressed can speak out in a way that is viewed as less threatening than other popular ways of expressing discontent. Unlike protests or violent action, comedy provides a safety net for the activist who utilises it (...). Comedy has also proved to be an important way of coping with personal tragedy (...).”⁸ Even though humour is not recommended in a doctoral paper, it is important to mention that the specific academic language can be used in a less “stuffy” way. One proposal would be to use a general, common, more accessible language together with the specialised one, so that the doctoral research could have visibility both for the limited, niche target audience and for the general public.

Another important aspect about balance in activism is imposing a distance between the social involvement and the emotional one and this is maybe the most important aspect of the topic of the *actress in research*. Emotional involvement often leads to the clouding of objectivity and critical thinking, two fundamental concepts of activism and research. I can explain this aspect from my own experience. With regards to my research, this has been my biggest challenge. The topic of my paper is very important for me on a personal level and it has been difficult for me to impose a distance between emotion and objectivity, especially at first. Robert J. Landy and David T. Montgomery discuss the issue of emotion in social theatre: “Ironically, although theatre is associated with emotion and the inner life of actors and

⁸ Mesa Story Melton (2018). *Familiar: An Artistic Exploration of Feminism Through Comedy*, Honors College Thesis, p. 7 (our translation).

characters, influenced by years of interpretation of Stanislavski's classical text *An Actor's Work*, most artists in social theatre stay away from psychological processes and the power of emotions, some of them accepting Boal's idea that catharsis reduces the power of social actions."⁹

Conclusions

Our research leads to the conclusion that, in 2024, the *complete actress* cannot separate herself from activism. Whether we are talking about simple forms, such as an informed and consciously assumed choice of roles, projects and people with whom she works, or about including activism in performances and doctoral research or about participating in protests and social actions or about a simple mention of a social issue in an interview – all these forms of activism, from the most simple to the most complex, are essential in proving how strong and important a woman's voice can be. Theatre creators who use women's stories are the first on the path towards equity and inclusion. Also, taking into account aspects such as constancy, charisma, documentation, information, authenticity, and humour is crucial for the efficiency of activism.

In the doctoral study *Hypostases of femininity in contemporary theatre*, I have analysed the numerous challenges faced by actresses – their physical aspect, stereotypes, gender roles, and age. In the case of an actress in research, other difficulties are added – the conflict between emotion and objectivity, the separation between femininity and confidence, female beauty being identified with frivolity, the balance of activism in academic research or imposing a distance between research and emotional involvement.

The article *The actress in research – between emotion and reason* has identified a series of solutions, such as: consciously assuming one's femininity in the academic environment, using means of communication pertaining to the sphere of authority, using accessible language in research, authenticity and sincerity, fighting the stereotypes about leadership by diversifying leadership styles, studying a community's level of openness to certain social issues, etc. I have also identified some benefits of actresses in research – fighting stereotypes, research seen as a new form of storytelling, consolidating credibility and fame, diversifying the target audience, or intensifying women's voices in the academic environment. This identification of benefits has brought me the most joy, as it proves that the actress in research has the power to create a space where other voices can get the courage to be heard. And this is actually the ultimate goal – not just reflecting the world, but actively participating in transforming it.

The article borrows information from various fields connected to theatre – sociology, psychology, world literature, and marketing. A lot of this article has been a discussion of what silencing women means and its political and

⁹ Robert J. Landy, David T. Montgomery, *op. cit.*, p. 175 (o. t.).

social implications. It has been very important for me to write about silence from the viewpoint of being deprived of rights. Silence inevitably creates victims and strengthens aggressors. Stories are a form of liberation and the representation of women's experiences in theatre and cinema is essential for reaching equity. If I could sum up this article in just a few words, those would be *the voice of actresses in research*. In this context, the actress in research becomes a symbol of a woman who consciously assumes the power of her voice and uses it towards education, inclusion, and change. Research and theatre together become instruments not only for understanding the world, but for rewriting it, as well.

The path towards equity and inclusion is a learning process – an aspect which I have felt throughout this year. The woman I am now is largely the result of valuable reads I have had during the past year and a demonstration of the power of the messages to which we are exposed. In the end, I believe that stories, the desire to cause changes, empathy and the fight for equality are characteristics of both contemporary theatre and personal rediscovery.

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