

**Octavian Saiu**

HONG KONG METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY

# The Georges Banu Effect

## The Critic as Artist and the Artist as Critic

### **Abstract**

This article is a portrait of, and a tribute to Georges Banu (22 June 1943–21 January 2023), one of the most influential theatre critics of our time. It is meant to be a reflection on the uniqueness of Banu's personality, between Romania and France, between Romanian and French, between criticism and artistry. Focusing on the impact of Banu's words, it highlights the major traits of his style, which contributed to a different perception of criticism as a profession and as an act of cultural memory. The conclusion is that Banu's charismatic presence in the theatrical scene of the past decades was as meaningful as his written critical legacy.

## Keywords

Georges Banu, theatre, theatre criticism, presence, memory

## Abstrakt

### Fenomen Georgesa Banu: Krytyk jako artysta, artysta jako krytyk

Portret Georgesa Banu (22 czerwca 1943–21 stycznia 2023), a zarazem hołd złożony jednemu z najbardziej wpływowych krytyków teatralnych naszych czasów. Tekst został pomyślany jako refleksja nad wyjątkową osobowością Banu, oscylującego między Rumunią a Francją, między rumuńskim a francuskim, między krytyką a sztuką artystycznym. Skupiając się na oddziaływaniu języka Banu, autor charakteryzuje główne cechy jego stylu, które przyczyniły się do zmiany postrzegania krytyki jako zawodu i jako aktu pamięci kulturowej. Autor podkreśla, że charyzmatyczna obecność Banu na scenie teatralnej ostatnich dekad była równie znacząca jak jego spuścizna krytyczna.

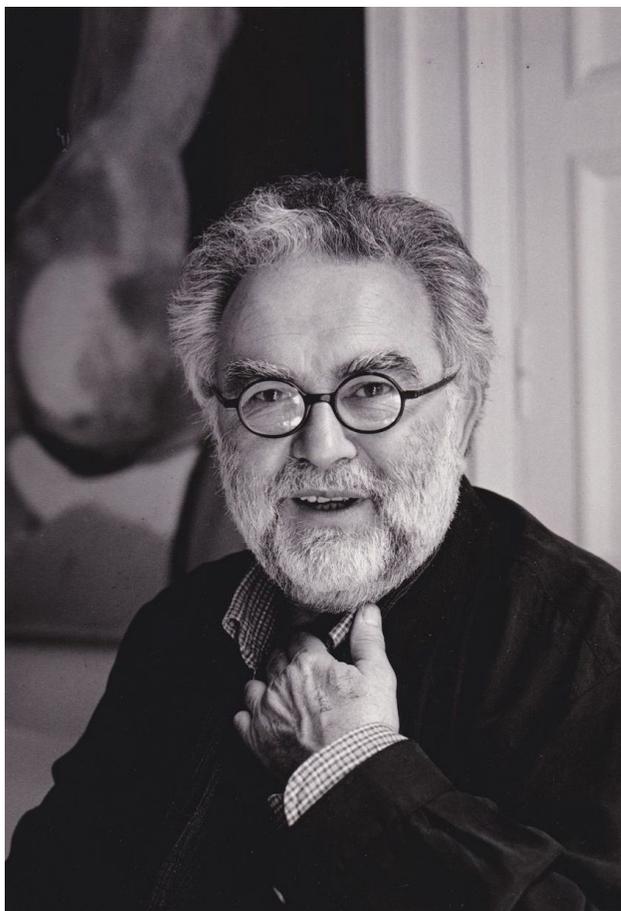
## Słowa kluczowe

Georges Banu, teatr, krytyka teatralna, obecność, pamięć

What is the true role of the critic in the magnificent universe of theatre? To comment with expertise, certainly. To judge with severity, possibly. To capture the essence of each performance and turn it into the lasting memory of words, perhaps. Indeed, there are many critics who can pass a competent judgement and pen interesting remarks, but few, so few who can really convert the experience of watching theatre into the virtue of writing about it. Those who are able to do so are blessed witnesses of an art form whose great miracles never survive, but may be prolonged only through their gift. They love it for what it is: the fleeting experience of a single moment in time, which vanishes behind the curtain. They take that experience with them, however, in order to share it with others. Their readers have the chance to discover not only what it was like, but what it would have been like if they themselves were there. They become what Theodor Adorno called “imaginary witnesses” of something in which they never in fact partook. More than any recording or live-streaming, more than photographs or other traces of live theatre, this noble dimension of criticism evolves into cultural memory in the most inspiring possible way. Yet such accomplishments are so rare that in the entire history of the stage only very few cases can be recalled. The rest, the vast majority of examples, are exercises in futility, simple or complex commentaries meant to serve the illusionary cause of telling everyone whether a show was good or bad and why.

Never loved, sometimes feared, and at times respected, critics forget about the blessing of being close to the miracle of theatre and dwell so much on the curse of having to evaluate it. Faithful to the etymology of the word, a critic is inclined to judge even that which she or he cannot fully comprehend. They do it by default, embracing the cliché that striving for objectivity is the unwritten law of everything they pen. They do it with conviction, ignoring the feelings they may harbor about the story, about the staging, about one actor or another. They do it with perseverance, panicking that otherwise they would lose their professional credibility. They do it without much sensitivity, obsessed with the rational legitimacy of their own verdicts. They do it because it is their alleged duty—nothing more, nothing less.

What about the exceptions, then? Or, rather, what about the exceptional cases? They are the ones who redeem themselves for being critics—as Beckett would put it—and they also expiate the entire profession for the fault of merely signifying an expression of relative judgments. They turn this profession into a vocation. They are remarkable for that reason, as well as for many other reasons. One such personality was Georges Banu, a towering figure of a field to which



Georges Banu

---

PHOTO © GABRIEL-AXEL SOUSSAN

he wittingly yet reluctantly belonged. At the beginning, when he discovered theatre, he wanted to become an actor. He started studying acting, but soon realized that there was something else he desired from the universe of the stage: he wanted to remain in its proximity, without being part of it *per se*. That was happening in his native country, in Romania, a place he would leave in order to discover the world, the world of theatre, and the theatre of the world. He moved to France, to Paris, and started all over again. Back home, he was already known and respected. In the heart of Europe, he was simply an immigrant, another intellectual refugee.

From that uncomfortable status, through hard work and thanks to a sort of intellectual brilliance rarely encountered amongst his colleagues, he became one of the most important and influential theatre critics of his time. In fact,

everything he wrote and everything he did—conferences, talks, debates, panel sessions, award ceremonies—was meant to change the general perception of criticism. Far away from the type that views a performance and reviews it by the next morning, Banu understood the law of time in theatre better than any of his colleagues. He allowed experiences to settle in his memory before writing or indeed talking about them. He was patient, and always displayed a rather relaxed mindset, as if he knew that the passion for the stage and the love for its artists takes more than a night to become meaningful.

Inspired by Nina Berberova—the author of a late-published novel about being faithful to art by somewhat remaining in its shadows—he coined an expression that is as deeply touching as it is subtle and delicate: “criticism as accompaniment.” Admittedly, the phrase sounds much better in French or Romanian than in any possible English translation. This is the qualifying truth about everything that Banu wrote, rooted in a tradition of expression and expressiveness that resonates specifically in only those two languages. He captured the spirit of French in what he articulated, trying to emulate one of his models: Emil Cioran. Cioran’s powerful metaphors about the catastrophe of being human were revealed through perfectly melodic sentences and carefully choreographed paragraphs. Their rhythm is as significant as the very ideas they expose. In a similar fashion, Banu’s writing was not just an account of cultural experience, an exercise in speculative or critical thinking. It was, it is literature. Beautiful, poignant, symbolic, rich, sensual, elegant, clear, ambiguous, poetic. Not a single sentence is dry, not a word is banal.

He turned the art of watching a show into the craft of echoing its emotions, the pleasure of the theatre into the pleasure of the text—to borrow the expression from Roland Barthes, another model of his. His passion was never understated, as he chose to include in his writings only the adventures of discovery that made a strong impression on him and to leave out what he did not deem significant enough. He was, therefore, a graceful and gracious critic. He reached out for the highest ground when discussing theatre, and even when he couldn’t find it, he reminded everyone else that it still existed. His verdict was always implicit, often intimated by means of an absence. What he described, however, was so much more than what he actually saw. To read him is to discover a sense of idealized theatre, halfway between the reality of a performance and the unlimited potentialities of imagination. In one of his books, about memory and theatre, he defined the Proustian process of remembrance as an inevitable act of fantasy, equally valid and elusive, personal, intimate, never marked by the sterile objectivity of journalistic reports.

He once added in a public talk that nothing could be more important for anyone writing about theatre than being close to those who create it. This is why he considered himself a blessed accompanist, following various artists in succession without ever becoming inescapably linked to any of them. He was near Grotowski, Brook, Barba, but also tenderly close to Warlikowski or Fret. He was there for them, with them. He simply was there. He understood like no one else the value of presence in theatre, and he never wasted that presence in either time or space. His book, *Rouge et or: Une poétique du théâtre à l'italienne*, is a statement of faith and a declaration of love for the temple of European performance, the Italian-style venue with its velvet curtain and gilded ornaments. His definition of theatre was simple and compelling: the fulfillment of the moment. Again, no English translation would do justice to the original: *l'instant habité*.

Everything for him was about that presence reflected by one single sublime moment of time in a shared space—the supreme gift of both the actor and the spectator, the beginning and the end of an entire art form. And what a celebrated presence he was, whether descending into the underground of the experimental avant-garde in Eastern Europe or occupying an elegant seat in a traditional Parisian theatre. He loved being there, more than anywhere else. He lived and breathed for it. As if nothing could possibly have mattered unless it was related to it, to that presence in which life and art were equally concentrated. He was always, permanently on the delicate threshold between the two, between life as it is and art as it could be, as he was undecided between what he called love and unlove for theatre. Such paradoxes and dualisms founded his cultural persona. His entire being was dual. Those who met him could easily attest that all he ever spoke about was theatre, and yet when he was at the theatre, enjoying it, he was already shaping his own interpretation—taking notes, trying to capture something vivid into his own words, so that he could later tell others about it. His was a shared presence, conveying its own stories and offering itself like a testimony of unrivaled treasured experiences.

He had seen so much theatre, and he could remember it all. He could write about it effortlessly and talk with ease about performances from the past of which others, most others, had only heard. He could then refer to the latest premiere of one promising director or another. He could bring all such threads together into a story that was invariably his own. No theoretical underpinning was necessary, which is why he seldom used any. No footnotes were required, which is why he hardly introduced them. No bibliography was needed, which is why most of the time he chose not to include one. He was talking about the stage from his vast experience as a spectator, as a witness, and everything he said was genuine because it was personal. It might not have been altogether historically

precise, but that was never the actual point of what he shared. The validity of his views rested on a type of intellectual authority that defied conventional norms of depth and accuracy. There was no one like him, so why would he have tried to be like everyone else? He was, and will remain, unique: Georges Banu—the critic as artist and the artist as critic. In fact, the artist critic.

This uniqueness can be discovered in his writing, but it was even more intense in the way he spoke about theatre. Those listening to him were transfixed, taken into a different world. The pitch of his voice and the structure of his sentences were always matched, commanding instant attention. His polished metaphors sounded spontaneous; his insights were strikingly enlightening. The ending of each talk was on the ideal note, foreshadowing the applause he was never ever too shy to receive. There was indeed something spectacular in all his presentations, though not in the immediate and shallow sense of articulated expressiveness. Without any props, avoiding the common techniques of public speaking, he simply knew how to put on the spectacle of words. He was not rhetorical, but he aimed for a certain effect, and he never failed to achieve it. Even those distrustful of theatre would eventually become intrigued by his ideas, counterpointed by strategically placed jests, riddles, and personal stories. Not always true, sometimes exaggerated, those stories were his own series of self-portraits in miniature. Something about a private conversation with a great writer. Something about a painter who confided in him. Something about a detail he noticed in a museum. Something about a trip somewhere far away. Something about a friend who gave him a precious present. Such tiny nuances were made public because he needed them in order to return to the density of his theatrical remarks. This was another dualism about him: he searched for the details so as to look at the big picture. His voluptuous metaphors about actors, directors and set designers were incomplete without the minuscule stories that colored them throughout all his speeches.

Hours and hours of recordings are still available: presentations, conversations, documentaries. Hundreds of pages of articles, journals, and books. Yet what they all offer is nothing but a set of reflections of his personality. The rest is silence. The silence that, while he was alive, he only endured when seated amongst others in order to watch a show together with them. The silence that was never his trademark, because he enjoyed being read, heard, listened to, celebrated, feted. His indulgent presence almost demanded so much attention, for which he longed on each occasion, that the essence of his being cannot be perceived through all the traces that he left. Perhaps this is the very reason why he never wanted to rely on them, choosing to relish any opportunity to share his live, unmediated, immediate presence. Those who were there with him knew that they

were privileged to witness something special. Now, more than ever before, they know that it was in fact something truly extraordinary: the Georges Banu effect, which could turn the elusive art of theatre into a personal, attainable paradise.



### Bibliography

- Banu, Georges, éd. *Kantor, l'artiste à la fin du xxe siècle*. Arles: Actes Sud, 1990.
- Banu, Georges. *Mémoires du théâtre: Essai*. Arles: Editions Actes Sud, 1987.
- Banu, Georges. *Rouge et or: Une poétique du théâtre à l'italienne*. Paris: Flammarion, 2008.
- Banu, Georges, éd. *Ryszard Cieslak, acteur-emblème des années soixante*. Paris: Actes Sud, 1992.
- Barthes, Roland. *The Pleasure of the Text*. Translated by Richard Miller. New York: Hill & Wang, 1975.

### OCTAVIAN SAIU

Professor at Hong Kong Metropolitan University and PhD Research Professor in the Doctoral School of Sibiu University, Romania. He holds a PhD in Theatre Studies from the National University of Theatre and Film (NUTF) in Romania, a PhD in Comparative Literature from the University of Otago in New Zealand, and *Habilitation* (Higher Doctorate) in Theatre and Performing Arts. He is a scholar as well as a professional cultural and academic consultant. He serves as the President of the International Association of Theatre Leaders (IATL).

---