Performing Archives: Documentary Theatre and Digital Tools in Performing Romanian State Surveillance Archives

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Abstract

Performing Archives investigates how contemporary theatre can activate state surveillance archives through performative strategies that challenge institutional memory and foster civic engagement. Focusing on the CNSAS archive and the performance "Nostalgia Up&Down", the paper examines how theatrical re-enactment, multimedia interventions, and ethical reflection can render the distortions, silences, and contradictions within the Romanian secret police files. The research aims to understand the ways in which memory, testimony, and archival material can be ethically and creatively recontextualized in the post-communist present. Combining archival analysis with technological mediation, the project explores how theatre can function both as a critical apparatus and as a reparative civic gesture. This research demonstrates that documentary theatre, supported by digital tools and produced within a socially and politically engaged theatrical space such as Replika Center, can reactivate forgotten or hidden histories. Through its performative means, theatre becomes a space for inquiry and critical reflection on surveillance archives. The performance "Nostalgia Up&Down" illustrates how archival documents can be brought into the realm of living memory. Technology contributes to this transformation, amplifying the experience of witnessing. The archive is no longer merely a trace of the past, but a point of departure for civic and ethical questions rooted in the present. In this way, theatre emerges as a form of symbolic reparation and a gesture of solidarity with those whose voices were once silenced.

Keywords: performative archives, state surveillance, documentary theatre, digital dramaturgy, collective memory, ethical re-enactment

1. Research Purpose and Questions

Performing Archives reflects on the role of theatre as a medium for activating and interrogating state surveillance archives, particularly those produced during authoritarian regimes. This paper focuses on the Romanian context, where the National Council for the Study of Securitate Archives (Consiliul Național pentru Studierea Arhivelor Securității) CNSAS archive - repository of the Securitate's extensive documentation - offers both a historical resource and an ethical challenge. The project investigates how theatre can reframe such documents not merely as evidence of the past, but as volatile sites of memory, distortion, and complicity.

The central objective is to explore the potential and limitations of performance in destabilizing official histories and creating space for civic reflection. By recontextualizing surveillance materials through performative strategies – including direct readings, facial tracking technologies, and multimedia overlays – theatre performance "Nostalgia Up&Down" proposes a new dramaturgy of witnessing. The performance confronts the bureaucratic logic of surveillance with the embodied presence of the performer who mediates the relationship

between the document in the archive and the public, inviting spectators into a shared act of remembering, interpreting, and questioning.

This study formulates a set of guiding questions:

1. How can theatre operate as an activating force for dormant archives?
2. In what ways does live performance alter the epistemic authority of the document?
3. What ethical considerations arise when working with archival materials that implicate ordinary citizens?

Moreover, the project interrogates how digital technologies – such as real-time face-tracking and augmented scenography – remap the aesthetics and ethics of documentary performance. These tools are not mere embellishments but dramaturgical agents that mirror the archival distortions enacted by the state. In parallel, the role of the Replika Center as an independent, civically engaged space underscores the institutional context in which such experiments become possible and meaningful.

Ultimately, this investigation seeks to understand how historical traumas – censorship, artistic precarity, forced migration – reverberate in the present, and how theatre can transform archival silence into performative presence and public accountability.

As Louise Boscacci (2015) shows in a literature review focused on the archive in contemporary art, the concept of the ”archival impulse” becomes essential. A large number of artists use archives as a performative tool to intervene in official memory, at times creating a form of ”counter-memory” – something that reconfigures absences, traumas, and systemic surveillance.

In order to explore these research questions within a concrete framework, the investigation anchored itself in a creative space – Replika Center – characterized by a clear mission and a well-defined concept: educational theatre. Replika Center, whose ”institutional ecology” – understood as the way an institution functions, adapts, and co-evolves within a broader social, economic, political, and cultural context (Abrutyn, 2012) – provided a fertile artistic environment for research and performative experimentation with archives.

2. Replika Center and the Institutional Ecology of Archival Performance

The Replika Center is a theatrical space that can be regarded as a pioneer of educational theatre in Romania. Its artistic approach is defined by practices that generate empathy, stimulate critical thinking, and establish spaces for collective learning for both the audience and the creators.

This commitment to educational theatre is reflected in key productions such as ”Familia Offline” (The Offline Family), which addresses the trauma of child-parent separation due to migration; ”Foamea noastră cea de toate zilele” (Our Daily Hunger), an immersive performance, a participatory hybrid between theatre and memorial service dinner, exploring economic precarity; ”Totul e foarte normal” (Everything is Normal), which facilitates intergenerational dialogue about sexuality and identity; ”Limite” (Limits), a sharp one-woman show about the shortcomings of the Romanian educational system, inspired by a true event of harassment and bullying; ”Trei.Três.Tria.”, in which three actresses from three countries reconstruct, with irony and sensitivity, fragments of their personal and political histories; and ”MASKAR (între)” (Maskar. In between.), which confronts anti-Roma prejudice through community storytelling (Replika, 2025). Each performance is grounded in artistic research on the subject it explores and functions as a form of performative pedagogy, transforming theatre into a creative space for negotiating collective experiences, encouraging dialogue and social responsibility (Apostol, 2018).

In a structurally fragile cultural ecosystem, the Replika Center was founded in 2015 in the Tineretului neighborhood of Bucharest, with the aim of integrating educational theatre into community life. Its mission revolves around empathy, participation, and artistic practices that

spark critical thinking. A theatrical space in which the themes explored in performances are continuously debated with the audience, in an effort to find solutions collectively and to engage in mutual education – thus, theatre becomes a form of popular pedagogy that brings communities together (Michailov & Apostol, 2021).

Its continuous activity over ten years demonstrates a model of cultural resilience, despite the lack of core funding, without a constantly employed administrative staff, or modern infrastructure. Independent artistic initiatives prove their long-term civic potential, functioning as a public good and reconfiguring the relationship between art, education, and community.
Replika Center operates in an industrial building – a space that has undergone multiple transformations since 1903, when it housed the first Italo-Romanian Hat Factory – now converted into a theatre venue, where all administration, programming, and maintenance are carried out voluntarily by the artists involved. Its funding comes primarily from project-based grants (e.g., AFCN, Creative Europe, Erasmus+), but covering ongoing operational costs remains a major challenge. Despite financial and infrastructural precarity, Replika supports long-term artistic research and remains committed to marginalized voices and underrepresented audiences, aiming to develop and promote artistic research programs and creative works focused on urgent themes and issues in contemporary society, while valuing an art that stands in solidarity with the world we live in (Replika, 2025).

From the very beginning, the Replika Center has sought to integrate new technologies into the creative process of its theatre productions. In 2017, the performance ”Familia fără zahăr” (Sugar Free Family) – which explores perceptions of family as a fluid construct, where belonging is continuously redefined and relationships shift according to unpredictable variables – unfolds in a virtual setting composed of dynamic projections cast across the entire stage, including the props and the all-white costumes of the performers. The show features a remarkable scene in which an actor interacts with Alexa, Amazon’s voice assistant, in a demanding improvisation exercise due to the unpredictability of the AI application responses and the requirement for flawless English diction. Although the scene is deeply melancholic – illustrating isolation, cultural disconnection, and the loneliness of a character spending Christmas conversing with an AI in Singapore – it simultaneously conveys a sense of hope: family is not defined by rigid norms, but by the genuine desire to be together and to share, even though technology (Popovici, 2017).

Since 2021, the project ”Digital Re-Generation Lab for the Performing Arts” has been developed to foster collaboration between professionals in the performing arts and experts in emerging technologies – such as hardware and software development, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and the Internet of Things (IoT). The aim of the project it was to explore how these technologies can support the digital transformation of performing arts, increase production capacities and digital literacy, and improve access to cultural content for broader audiences, both nationally and internationally. VR enables users to experience immersive simulations of real or imagined environments; AR blends real-time physical surroundings with virtual data; and IoT connects physical devices and objects via the internet to exchange and collect data. Together, these tools open up new creative and participatory possibilities for the future of performance.

This creative dialogue between the performing arts scene and developers from the field of new technologies – aimed at jointly exploring formats for production, communication, and audience engagement in new artistic works – continued in subsequent artistic projects, including the theatre performance ”Nostalgia Up&Down”. Created within a European project, the performance is based on artistic research exploring several themes related to the status of the artist and the role of art, from the final decade of the Socialist Republic of Romania to the present day. It addresses key issues such as censorship in the performing arts, the self-financing policies of the 1980s cultural sector, the merging of cultural institutions during that period,

artist-led protests, illegal migration, and labor abroad in the 1980s, probably the worst period of time when individuals in Romania were confronted with flagrant violation of civil rights and liberties. The performance integrates digital design and new media art to enrich its exploration of these socio-political themes from the 1980s and their contemporary relevance.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Digitalization and Technological Innovation in Contemporary Theatre

Theatre has historically embraced technological innovation as part of its ongoing evolution, adapting new tools to enhance both the creative process and the audience experience. From the natural use of acoustics and mechanical devices in antiquity, to the introduction of electric lighting, recorded sound, and multimedia video projections, theatre has always maintained a continuous process of negotiation with the technological advances of its time. In this sense, all these emerging technologies – including augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), artificial intelligence (AI), and interactive media – should not be viewed as a rupture, but rather as a continuation of this historical trajectory.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that digital tools are reshaping the theatrical field across multiple dimensions: scenography, dramaturgy, institutional organization, and modes of audience engagement. Augmented and virtual reality, for example, are no longer mere novelties for experimentation, but are increasingly becoming integral components of many theatrical scenographies, enabling immersive visual landscapes and interactive narrative structures.
The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2016 production of "The Tempest", using real-time motion capture and digital projection to animate the character Ariel, exemplifies this shift. Similarly, productions like "Loveseat" (2019) and the work of companies such as ARShow reveal how AR/VR technologies are extending the boundaries of live performance and opening pathways for remote, hybrid, and ecologically sustainable theatre practices (Xu & Zhang, 2022) (Pike, 2023).

Concurrently, the rise of intermedial theatre – defined by the integration of live performance with media such as film, sound, and digital projections – has deepened the narrative and aesthetic complexity of contemporary works. Performances like "Fraulein Julie" by Katie Mitchell or Rimini Protokoll's "Remote X" series challenge the unity of time and space typical of traditional theatre, engaging the audience in multisensory and layered experiences that reflect the fragmented, hypermediated realities of the digital age (Scheer & O'Gorman, 2021).

The digital turn also extends to participatory and interactive formats, where audience members contribute to the unfolding of the performance through real-time input via digital devices. This trend is visible in productions such as "The Justice Syndicate" or "The Twenty-Sided Tavern", where audience voting systems influence plot outcomes. At the same time, generative AI systems enable performances that respond dynamically to audience input or co-create in collaboration with human performers. However, these developments have sparked critical debate: while they promote engagement and personalization, they also risk reinforcing platform-controlled participation structures and uneven access to creative agency (Schäfer, 2021) (Abuzuraiq & Pasquier, 2024).

Scholars such as Dixon (2015) and Kozel (2008) emphasize that digital performance extends the sensory and epistemic dimensions of theatre, allowing it to address questions of presence, authenticity, and political immediacy in new ways.
Despite these advances on the artistic front, the digital transformation of theatre institutions at the organizational level remains limited. Research by Castelo (2019) indicates that although many theatres use basic digital tools, their application is often fragmented and inefficient, hindered by lack of investment, training, and digital culture. The successful integration of digital technologies into the structural operations of theatres requires a broader shift in

organizational values and competencies, involving not only technical upgrades but also leadership, institutional adaptability, and staff development (Serpa, Sá, & Ferreira, 2022).
Finally, the literature points to several risks associated with digital theatre. These include the aesthetic standardization brought by large-scale generative technologies, the erosion of theatrical presence through overreliance on visual spectacle, and the ecological footprint of resource-intensive digital productions. Scholars caution against the commodification of theatre into predictable, media-driven formats that dilute its core qualities of spontaneity, intimacy, and ephemerality (Carson, 1999) (Pike, 2023) (Bernstein, 2017).
Thus, the integration of digital technologies in theatre must meet its defining features and not undermine them. The digitization of the performing arts should reconfigure artistic practices, institutional models and the relationship with the public. It should be seen as a tool that, when used carefully, can enrich the expressive vocabulary of theater while preserving its human core.
In the theatre production ”Nostalgia Up&Down”, the integration of facial tracking technologies and their real-time overlays onto a scenographic surface marked by a barcode – combined with layered video elements – transforms the stage into an active interface for the reactivation of documents from the communist-era secret police archives and the recontextualization of historical trauma. The relationship between performer and archive becomes dynamic, mediated through complex digital layers that invite spectators into a shared process of co-experiencing and witnessing repressed or silenced histories. In this framework, digital technologies function not merely as aesthetic enhancements, but as dramaturgical agents that enable the performative activation of archival material, contributing to new modes of memory-making and critical reflection within contemporary theatre.

3.2 The Archive as Performance in Contemporary Documentary Theatre

In recent decades, numerous scholars and artists have critically challenged the traditional understanding of the archive as a passive repository of the past – one that is accessed only sporadically for informational purposes. Within the field of performance arts, this reevaluation has taken on both critical and creative dimensions, leading to a reconceptualization of the archive as an active, processual, and affective space. Clarke, Jones, Kaye, and Linsley (2018) propose an expanded perspective on the archive, understanding it not merely as a collection of documents but as a “performative process,” composed of layers of reactivation, recontextualization, and artistic intervention. In this view, the archive does not simply preserve traces of the past; it animates them, generating new meanings and possibilities for aesthetic, political, and social expression.

This perspective is supported by Sara Callahan (2022), who notes that archival practice has become a dominant aesthetic strategy in contemporary art, particularly in contexts marked by symbolic violence, historical erasure, or marginalization. Similarly, Kathy Michelle Carbone (2017) explores the so-called “archival turn,” showing how contemporary artists engage with archives through various artistic and creative formats in order to expose systemic absences, produce counter-narratives, and mobilize memory as a form of action. In this sense, the archive becomes an “affective object,” capable of generating emotional and social responses, especially when performed or reimagined on stage.

The affective and memorial dimension of the archive is also articulated in Annelis Kuhlmann’s (2019) research, which analyzes Memoria, a performance by Odin Teatret, as a performative archive of collective trauma. The production uses the actor’s body as a medium for transmitting a form of memory that cannot be conveyed textually, but must instead be lived and felt. In this context, the archive becomes a fragile and living presence, operating through corporeality, silences, and a direct relational encounter with the audience.
In conclusion, the scholarly literature describes the archive as an unstable yet highly fertile territory where presence and absence, document and body, history and fiction are continuously

negotiated. Performance art, through its capacity to activate, intervene in, and transform the archive, becomes not merely a space of representation, but a critical medium for reconfiguring cultural and social memory.

3.3 Interpreting the Securitate Archive in Post-Communist Romanian Theatre

In recent years, the Securitate archives have become a significant source material in post-communist Romanian theatre, serving as a point of departure for questioning collective memory, historical accountability, and both individual and societal trauma. The reinterpretation of these archives goes beyond the documentation of repressive history – it functions as a deconstruction of institutional mechanisms of surveillance, censorship, and control.

Theatrical projects such as Gianina Cărbunariu's "Tipografic Majuscul" (Uppercase Print) (which explores the Securitate file of a minor who wrote slogans on walls and billboards denouncing the flagrant violation of civil rights and liberties), or Catinca Drăgănescu's "Operațiunea Petarda" (Operation Firecracker) (which recounts an incident in which an unidentified man set fire to the plywood arch in front of the National Exhibition, inscribed with the slogan "Ceaușescu's Era – Romania's Golden Age"), as well as works by other artists engaged in documentary theatre, use Securitate files as performative sources that activate the past through embodiment, voice, and onstage reenactment.

In this context, the archive becomes an unstable space of tension between truth and fiction, testimony and manipulation, and the stage emerges as a critical forum where audiences are invited not merely to observe but to adopt an ethical and historical stance toward the recent past.

This perspective is reinforced by several scholars. Alexandra Felseghi (2021) observes that documentary theatre responds to post-communist trauma through archival materials, arguing that the transition period has become a crucial resource for understanding the present through engagement with the past. Cristina Modreanu (2021) highlights that institutional access to archives in Romania remains limited and precarious, making independent projects vital to processes of historical reconstruction. Caterina Preda (2021) introduces the concept of "aesthetic surveillance" to describe how the Securitate operated not only as a censoring body but also as a de facto cultural agent that indirectly shaped performative practices.

Ioana Marinescu (2023) adopts a poetic and participatory methodology, activating the urban archive of the demolished Uranus neighborhood in Bucharest through site-specific installations and corporeal presence in public space. In a broader East European context, Iulia Popovici and Miruna Runcan (2016) argue that the post-communist archive has become "a stage of contestation between memory and forgetting." Simona Mitroiu and Andreea Mironescu (2024), analyzing "Tipografic Majuscul" (Uppercase Print), emphasizes how CNSAS documents are transformed into performance, exposing the emotional manipulation and aesthetic control imposed by the state. Similarly, Oltița Cîntec (2017) interprets Cărbunariu's documentary theatre as a form of poetic justice, transforming official surveillance into civic testimony. Felseghi (2021) also notes that recent documentary performances such as "Fabrici și plante" (Factories and Plants) or "Miracolul Clujului" (The Miracle of Cluj) rely on meticulous archival research and oral history to reveal structural inequalities and historical continuities.

When approached simultaneously, these three critical perspectives – the digital transformation of theatre, the reimagining of the archive as a performative space, and the specific challenges of engaging with the Romanian Securitate's documentary archive – converge in the artistic research and technological experimentation developed within the theatre performance "Nostalgia Up&Down", as analyzed in the following chapters.

4. Methodology: Artistic Research and Archival Activation

The starting point for this research was the documentation and artistic development process of the theatre performance ”Nostalgia up&Down”. The adopted methodology follows a practice-based research model, where archival investigation, interviews, and performative reconstruction operate as tools for generating knowledge. The project integrates documentary analysis (primarily of CNSAS archives), semi-structured interviews with artists and cultural workers active in the 1980s, and ethical reflection on the representation of memory and truth in a post-communist historical context.

The performance ”Nostalgia Up&Down” was developed by examining hundreds of documents from the “State of Mind of the Population” series, produced by the Securitate. These were analyzed not only as historical sources but as performative materials marked by the ambiguity between subjective testimony and institutionalized truth or as we might called it today: fake news. The research focused on recurring themes from the period: censorship in the performing arts, the policies of self-financing and institutional mergers in the 1980s, forms of artistic protest, illegal migration, and labor abroad. As such, it seeks to articulate a comparative perspective between past and present, highlighting the continuities in socio-political pressures on the cultural sector.

The methodological approach included:

- **Archival Research**: Systematic analysis of CNSAS files, particularly those documenting public sentiment and potentially subversive acts. These were not merely mined for factual content but approached as latent dramaturgies – handwritten notes, bureaucratic redundancies, and emotionally charged phrasing became raw material for scenic interpretation.
- **Qualitative Interviews**: One-on-one interviews with direct witnesses (artists, technicians, cultural administrators) provided oral narratives that complemented and contrasted the official documents. These dialogues generated alternative histories and revealed subtle or symbolic forms of resistance.
- **Performative Reconstruction**: The performance did not simply illustrate archival materials but activated them through dramaturgy, *mise-en-scène*, and public engagement. This performative activation functioned as a co-participation in history, where documents were destabilized and reinterpreted through body, voice, and presence.
- **Ethical Reflection**: At the heart of this methodology lies the question of memory representation: what does it mean to “perform” a document? What responsibilities are involved in using real testimonies? What does it mean to propose a “living archive” in a context where memory is often filtered through nostalgia or mistrust?

The performance ”Nostalgia Up&Down” is conceived as a “simulacrum of public consultation” hosted by three impartial experts, benefiting from an equally impartial expertise, in their capacity as trainers of trainers – who train other trainers, who will in turn train further trainers, all specializing in the training of cultural managers in the field of cultural management. The decision to place three “experts” on stage is a bitter irony – a response to the contemporary obsession with expertise and experts. It appears that nowadays professionalism is no longer sufficient; we require excellence, expertise, and ideally, the appearance of both.

However, this tendency is not exclusively contemporary. Back in the 1980s, the activists of the Romanian Communist Party operated in a manner strikingly similar to today’s so-called experts. At the time, a popular saying captured – remarkably accurately – the hypocrisy, imposture, and artificiality that now sustain the cult of the expert: “On a construction site, five with folders, two with shovels.”

In our performance, the “experts” are individuals with no actual qualifications – other than the fact that they are... *experts*. They are wholly incapable of building anything tangible;

they are mere producers of projections and plans, entirely disconnected from on-the-ground reality and the actual labor of practice.

In his review of Nostalgia Up&Down, Mihai Brezeanu draws a parallel with Eugen Ionesco's Rhinocéros (1959), describing a new-wave "rhinocerization".

"In communism, we used to listen in on and inform on each other, and at worst, ended up in prison. In capitalism, we no longer eavesdrop face-to-face, but instead pour into each other's heads words, phrases, and concepts hollower than soap bubbles. It is not the virtual reality created by bits and electrons that we should fear or protect ourselves from, but rather the well-dressed, zealous assault of those who bring their imposture and opportunism to the service of implementing flashy, bureaucratic decrees" (Brezeanu, 2024).

The contemporary obsession with streamlining every process, with applying business plans to every sector – including the arts – and transforming creativity, culture, and art into sustainable, resilient, and efficient formats, echoes eerily the bureaucratic logic of 1980s communism. The drive to "optimize" cultural institutions, then as now, conceals a form of political and economic censorship – a desperate attempt by politicians to curb the freedom of artists and art itself. The vocabulary has changed, but the goal remains the same: political control over art and culture. In Romania, the 1980s are perceived in the collective memory as the most brutal years, comparable to the first decade after the Second World War. Any skillful politician distances themselves from the 1980s and publicly condemns them. However, contemporary reality reveals that a number of concepts and ideas implemented during that decade still persist in today's public and political discourse. What is the connection between the self-financing policy of the culture of the 80s and today's merger attempts, with an emphasis on the obsession of financial profit and efficiency?

Today we face enormous challenges of "fake news", while AI can be used to shape memories, facts, events and transform reality into a huge range of possibilities, some of the key concepts of Jean Baudrillard (2016), such as "simulation" and "hyperreal" seem to have become old-fashioned and naive-romantic perspectives. Yet we are still searching for the truth, for its roots. Digging into the physical forms of the archives as they were prior to digitization era, can be seen as a pillar, a cornerstone in our search for the real, for the truth. Physical form stands for the truth; physical forms can overpass fake.

We started consulting the Securitate Archives searching for subversive acts of the common people, trying to identify if the assumption that the entire Romanian population "have acted like poor sheep during the severe regime of Ceaușescu dictatorship" is true or not. We sought ways to confront a criminal system. In doing so, we discovered, within the CNSAS Archives, a series of documents that capture various forms of anti-system expression – individual and collective gestures of dissent against the political absurdities of the 1980s.

Using AI, photo-collage techniques, and the verbatim reproduction of archival texts, we reactivated for today's audiences aspects of 1980s reality that find clear echoes – equivalents – in contemporary life.

Two examples of subversive, anti-system actions from the 1980s, both marked by a strong performative and theatrical character, drew our attention and became the starting point of our research:

(1). At the last congress of the Romanian Communist Party, Ceaușescu said that "Romania will return to capitalism, when the poplar will make the poplar pear and poplar apples". The night after the congress, it is known that the students from the Regie campus hung apples and pears in the poplars.

(2). In 1987, in Brașov, at the Steagu Roșu Factory (heavy machinery), a workers' revolt broke out that lasted several days. In Bucharest, there was a statuary complex, dedicated to a peasant uprising in 1907. During the Brasov uprising, in November 1987, someone turned the

"0" from 1907 into an "8", so that the entire statuary complex, desecrated, became for a few hours a symbol of the workers' revolt of 1987.

In today's collective consciousness, the performative and theatrical nature of these two events closely resembles the anti-corruption protests of 2018 or the environmental protests against gold mining at Roșia Montană. Contemporary audiences are well-acquainted with the theatricality and performativity of protest. In the past, however, although protest actions also had performative elements, the strict prohibition of public gatherings meant that their expression took on more of a scenographic, installation-like quality... people were simply not allowed to take to the streets.

One striking parallel between the 1980s and the present – revealed through documents in the CNSAS Archives – concerns labor migration. Today, official statistics indicate that around six million Romanians work abroad (M.A.E., 2021). Before Romania's accession to the EU, most had emigrated and worked illegally. In the 1980s, no one was allowed to leave the country without the approval of the Romanian Communist Party. Even so, thousands of Romanians were sent abroad by the state – especially to work in the Middle East. In the letters sent home by these workers – intercepted and documented by the Securitate – an overwhelming majority complain about inhumane working conditions, delayed payments, salaries far below what was promised before departure, and precarious housing and food conditions.

There are numerous similarities with the present, particularly with the pre-accession period before Romania joined the EU. However, in the public memory, the most vivid and recent episode of Romanian workers being humiliated – with the complicity of the Romanian state – occurred in April 2020 (Crăciun, 2020). At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown, the Romanian and German governments agreed to temporarily lift travel bans and reopen airspace to allow thousands of Romanian workers to travel to Germany… to harvest asparagus.

Similar continuities can also be observed in the cultural sphere, particularly in how public cultural institutions are managed. The structural mechanisms, the political pressures, and the bureaucratic logic driving institutional life in the 1980s still resonate – uncomfortably – with the present. Today, there is a strong emphasis on economic efficiency, on the monetisation of all cultural activities and cultural production, and on the notion that cultural institutions – particularly theatres – should generate profit.

In the 1980s, in an effort to become self-sustaining and contribute to the national GDP (Gross domestic product), theatres in Romania were required to turn a profit. One of the most surreal, sinister, and frankly unimaginable activities that emerged from this policy was the repurposing of theatre carpentry workshops – not to build stage sets, as intended, but to manufacture and sell furniture... and coffins, which they sold and in this way they had an extra penny" (Bardan, 2024).

Another absurd facet of 1980s cultural life was the transformation of theatre halls into video parlors. With only two hours of daily programming on the state-run National Television, and with foreign films banned, private VHS players virtually unaffordable – and more importantly, ownership of VHS tapes punishable by prison – public access to global cinema was nearly impossible. As a result, even the National Theatre in Bucharest became a venue where 5–6 films were screened per day. On one of the theatre's stages, two color televisions and VHS players were installed. People would buy tickets to watch dubbed foreign films, often with crude Romanian voiceovers, on screen... in a theatre. This phenomenon is thoroughly documented in the book "It Was Just Like in the Movies: The Securitate's Biggest Business", co-authored by filmmaker Liviu Tofan and historian Stejărel Olaru. The book reveals how Securitate officers were the very people responsible for importing VHS tapes from abroad, duplicating them within the secret police's own facilities, and distributing them to theatres and

public venues (Tofan & Olaru, 2024). Although it was technically illegal to watch foreign films, the Romanian state made hundreds of thousands of dollars annually from this shadow industry.

During our artistic research, we interviewed both Liviu Tofan and Doru Creatoru, a former Romanian government employee involved in organizing the videotheques and discotheques inside theatres across Bucharest and the rest of the country. Theatres were expected to turn a profit and maximize the use of all available spaces and equipment. To use a contemporary framing: "Inhumane, criminal... yet brilliantly entrepreneurial."

In the theatre production "Nostalgia Up&Down", three impartial experts – each benefiting from equally impartial expertise as "trainers of trainers," who in turn train other trainers that will eventually train future trainers for cultural managers specialized in cultural management – present these historical examples to the audience as part of a simulated public consultation. Together, they attempt to offer answers to questions such as: Who owns the artist? Should Art generate profit? Can the impact of Art be measured?

These "three experts" outline the neoliberal frameworks through which art and culture are currently approached – consistently emphasizing the efficiency of the artistic process and of artistic production itself. In a clever act of rhetorical inversion, they revive ideological constructs from the 1980s – concepts they ostensibly condemn – only to repackage them in the language of today: entrepreneurial community engagement, per capita funding, culture as business…

Through this performance, our intention was to create a space for reflection, critical thinking, and public analysis regarding the implications and consequences of implementing such public policies. The performative reactivation of archival materials, their verbatim delivery, the use of AI-generated photo-collages based on original documents, and the staged simulation of "EEG-style sensors" monitoring the emotional responses of the audience – all these elements combine to create a performative environment designed to interrogate the role of Art and the Artist in society.

This artistic research aligns with current international practices where theatre operates not only as a space of critical inquiry into archives, but also as a symbolic reparative act. As Ioana Marinescu (2023)underlines in her study on the destruction of Bucharest's Uranus Hill, the archive is not merely a site of preservation, but one of presence and intergenerational dialogue, activated through image, text, and body

The European project "TabThePAST" (2022–2024), developed by National University of Theatre and Film "I.L. Caragiale" Bucharest, in partnership with Replika and Citizen.KANE.Kollectiv (a collective of artists from Germany), in which the show was conceived, illustrates a methodological approach that transcends conventional archival research by proposing performative interventions in public and stage spaces. These function simultaneously as artistic forms and historical retrieval practices. Within this framework, the need became clear to move beyond institutional censorship and towards documenting the subversive gestures of ordinary people.

5. Technological Mediation and the Ethics of Performing the Archive

The integration of digital technologies in the creative process of the performance "Nostalgia Up&Down" functions both as a means of generating a powerful and novel artistic experience, and as a catalyst for prompting audiences to think differently or discover something new. Conceived as an immersive performative environment, the project incorporates real-time multimedia tools that not only support narrative construction but critically reflect on the mediation and transformation of archival truth. IT specialist and media designer Dragoș Silion was responsible for developing the digital mask system used for live streaming, a technological layer that complements and expands the actors' presence on stage.

The facial expressions of the three live performers are captured using three waist-mounted GoPro cameras. These video feeds are transmitted to a central laptop, composited into a single stream, and then fed into a custom face-tracking application developed with Unity Engine. The application processes the data through Google's MediaPipe to detect and map facial landmarks, overlaying a 3D mesh onto the actors' faces in real time. This layered representation creates a double of the actor – both live and virtual – inviting the audience into a fluid temporality that merges memory, embodiment, and mediation.

The face-tracking system enables nuanced control over each digital mask's opacity, position, rotation, and mouth articulation. Additionally, visual effects such as mouth-covering, halo projection, digital confetti, and monetary overlays extend the performative space into a symbolic and political commentary zone. These interventions destabilize the notion of documentary fixity and introduce the possibility of manipulating layers of representation – echoing the editorial interventions observed in the Securitate archives.

The most significant technical challenges include ensuring reliable video streams from the GoPro devices, maintaining optimal facial positioning for MediaPipe accuracy without obstructing the live performance, and managing the computational load of facial recognition algorithms in real-time without compromising the performance's frame rate.

In parallel with the digital design, the ethical treatment of archival materials is a central pillar of the performance. The live actors read directly from CNSAS files on stage, preserving the texture of the original documents and grounding the performance in documentary materiality. However, a crucial ethical dilemma emerged during development: should the real identities of ordinary individuals surveilled by the secret police be disclosed? Our decision was to redact all personal identifiers unless the documents concerned public figures – artists, educators, cultural managers – whose actions were already historically visible. This selective disclosure seeks to honour both the integrity of the source material and the privacy of individuals who never consented to public exposure.

The multimedia components – animations, scanned excerpts, typographic renderings – are also designed to foreground a structural insight encountered during archival research. Every documented event, from personal anecdotes to collective actions, was initially recorded by a local Securitate officer. These accounts were then successively altered, as they passed through layers of bureaucratic and ideological filtration – from district, to municipal, to central offices. Manuscript annotations frequently transformed the semantic impact of a report. For instance, a document describing "revolts" was corrected by hand to read "some revolts" – a subtle yet powerful minimization. This top-down modulation of narrative became a dramaturgical reference for our multimedia strategy, which explicitly stages the distortion, delay, and contamination of historical memory.

This process of stratifying and distorting a document from an archive reflects Boscacci's observation that "the uncertain authority and authenticity of an archive is both critiqued and celebrated" in contemporary art practices that work with fragments, forgeries, or fictional recoveries (Boscacci, 2015). In this way, within a theatre performance, archival documents are no longer merely carriers of truth – or of a singular truth – but are instead assembled within an ambiguous space, functioning as an interface for various affective reconstructions, and even for critical interrogations of institutional memory.

Theatre performance, through the integration of these layers of visual and textual mediation within its inherent "here and now," offers an ideal framework for the present audience – then and there – to reflect on the conditions under which historical truth is accessed, interpreted, and revised. How can archival material be rendered performatively without collapsing its evidentiary value? How might performativity itself serve as a method of interrogating the archive?

Moreover, a deeper philosophical question emerges: Can we, in retrospect, exonerate the political elites of the 1980s on the grounds that they may have received falsified or filtered information? If the truth was systematically attenuated – both by bureaucratic process and political interest – can ignorance function as a legitimate defense? This question does not seek to assign blame, but rather to encourage a more nuanced understanding of complicity, erasure, and historical responsibility.

In this context, the performative reactivation of archives through technology does not merely illustrate past events but proposes a new mode of historical engagement. It posits the archive not as a static repository of fact but as a performative apparatus – a living, contested space in which memory, power, and representation intersect. Through this lens, ”Nostalgia Up&Down” becomes both an artwork and an inquiry: a search for historical presence within the absence of certainty.

This set of aesthetic and ethical strategies leads to the general conclusions of the research concerning the civic potential of an archive treated performatively, through the creation of a creative space for debate and the processing of "difficult memories" (Marinescu, 2023).

6. Conclusion: Theatre as Civic Testimony and Archival Intervention

Performing Archives demonstrates that theatre is not merely a means of representation but a tool for reactivating memory, generating civic awareness, and questioning historical narratives. By combining archival fidelity, ethical reflection, and immersive media, ”Nostalgia Up&Down” makes a powerful case for performance as both a form of testimony and resistance. Theatre is the living shared with the living.

The proximity of the living body, within a safe environment that fosters critical and analytical thinking, ensures that the theatrical space remains – despite the advance of technology – the only place for true co-creative experimentation.

It is a space where artists and *spect-actors* (Jackson & Boal, 2013) question, discover, and rediscover humanism: the capacity to be creative, to be inventive, to cherish life in all its forms of existence – and, above all, we hope, the capacity to no longer repeat the mistakes of the past.

Pictures from the theatre performance Nostalgia Up & Down
Images of Digital masks during the rehearsal (copywright Replika)







Pictures from the show (copywright Oana Monica Nae):













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