



Constantin Chiriac  
Director of the Sibiu International Theatre Festival

Sibiu International Theatre Festival  
<http://www.sibfest.ro/>



## Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

### Striving for regional development, Romania's Sibiu International Theatre Festival gathers participants from 70 countries

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Sibiu, capital of Sibiu Province in the Transylvania region of central Romania, is a city of 170,000 that retains much of its Medieval period architecture. Since 1993 it has hosted the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, which now attracts performing arts from some 70 countries around the world. With performances and events held in numerous venues around the city it has grown larger and larger. This achievement has led to the city's designation as a cultural capital of Europe in 2007 and contributed greatly to the development of the region. The festival was launched as part of efforts to re-establish the theater that was burned during Romania's 1989 revolution. In this interview we speak with Constantin Chiriac, the festival's director and a guiding figure in the rebuilding of Sibiu as a cultural city.

(Interview: Akihiko Senda; Romanian-Japanese Interpretation: Shigehito Shiga)

The Sibiu International Theatre Festival was launched in 1993 and is now said to be the third largest performing arts festival in Europe after Edinburgh and Avignon. I attended it myself in 2007 and was impressed by both its scale and what a unique festival it is. Since you were instrumental in the establishment of this festival, can we begin by asking you how it came to be established?

It is a bit of a long story, but I would like to begin by talking about the stage prior to the festival's launch.

I was primarily an actor, but under the old communist system (Ceausescu regime) we were unable to travel abroad and were not granted passports. Also, our country's television and radio only had very limited broadcast hours and most of that was taken up with publicity and propaganda of the Ceausescu regime, such as reports of official state visits and the like.

At the time Ceausescu hated most people in the arts and culture. What he was trying to promote was a large nationwide culture festival called "The Singing Voice of Romania" and its contents were only things that cultivated his own personality cult. He got this idea after visiting North Korea, with which he had very good relations. This was the main reason that the activities of theater companies were subjected to strict censorship.

As for theater professionals like myself, we were kept in dire financial straits, being given just enough to live on but no support for financing productions. We could only conduct our theater activities within the scope of what we could earn from our own ticket sales. Because of that situation, an actor had to work about 400 stages a year just to get by as a professional actor. That is the equivalent of performing one stage or more every day of the year. It was indeed a difficult era.

On the other hand, the theater was a space where a certain kind of freedom could exist. What I mean by that is if we did Shakespeare's *Richard III* the audience would know that in fact we were referring to Ceausescu. In that way, you could say

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that through the words of the plays we were able to create a second world with its own language of freedom. And in that sense we had a big responsibility to speak out against the dictatorship, for which theater people were highly respected by the citizenry and the general public.

At the same time, it is an irony of the era that the fact we were not able to travel abroad freely gave us plenty of time to study. We read books with fervor and many people studied foreign languages. And it can be said that because of this we were able to help raise the cultural level of our audiences to a great degree. So, although the dictatorship had many negative and detrimental aspects, there were also some positive aspects that developed in spite of it.

As I just said, an actor like myself and other theater professionals had to perform in many stages throughout the year, which meant that we had to strengthen ourselves in body and soul in order to survive in our calling. In other words, it was an era that strengthened the fundamentals of theater in us and strengthened our fundamental skills as actors.

Then in 1989 came the revolution and the theater of Sibiu was burned in the conflict. It was the fourth burning in the history of the theater. The fact that the theater was founded in 1788 and is one of the oldest in the central region and in all of Eastern Europe shows how active theater was in Sibiu from old times. There were balcony seats in the theater decorated with carvings of rose bushes and there was also a theater magazine published in German.

Just after the collapse of the Ceausescu regime, we made an appeal to theater people in Germany for assistance in rebuilding the theater in Sibiu. The response we got was tremendous and I was immediately invited to Berlin. At the theater I was invited to I saw on the wall an enlargement of the letter I had sent that was posted for the theater audiences to see. That is how we began building a network connecting the Sibiu theater to Germany. It was reported on German TV and I was invited to a meeting with the Chancellor at the time, Helmut Kohl. In a sense that was our first step out into the world beyond Romania, and it was also my first step into the world.

In the communist era I concentrated mainly on one-man shows. Personally I had learned to speak English and French, so after the fall of the Ceausescu regime I had opportunities to take my plays on tour, particularly in the Romance language countries. In 1993, I was invited to Antwerp, Belgium, when it was designated as a European Capital of Culture. In the same year war broke out in the former Yugoslavia and we received a call from the Director of the Sarajevo Festival during those celebrations. It informed us that Serbia had begun bombardment of Sarajevo and appealed for help. The people in the arts assembled in Antwerp at that time responded immediately by establishing an initiative committee and had Sarajevo declared a European Capital of Culture, even though it was just for a month. If you visit the EU-Japan Festival office you will see the poster made at that time announcing the designation of Sarajevo as a European Capital of Culture under our initiative. It was at that time that I decided to start our own festival. At the same time I got the idea of making Sibiu a Cultural Capital of Europe also.

It was then in 1993 that we organized our first festival. In that first holding we designated it a "student theater" festival. At the time I had no idea of just how difficult a job it is organizing a festival and began it completely in the dark. All I had then was the passion to do something and nothing else (laughs). The only assets I had at the time was that passion and the friends around me.

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### Were there no theater festivals in Romania up until that time?

There was a theater festival organized by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and one other that was organized jointly by several theaters. However, when I say theaters they were of course all national theaters in the communist era and basically the government was involved in their management. Also the festivals were strictly national festivals, not international ones.

When I started organizing our own festival, the first holding included eight performances by companies from three countries. Our second festival was held in 1994. I knew some Japanese people (such as the translator of this interview, Mr. Shiga) from my college days and from the time I started organizing our festival, I had wanted productions from Japan to participate. For the 1996 festival we got one production to come from Japan, and after that the number grew to two and three.

Participation in our festival grew exponentially with each holding. The program for our second festival had 28 productions from 12 countries and the third had 35 productions from 15 countries. By the fourth holding we expanded the program to include a special category for works of the famous theater companies and directors, the existing category for theater school student productions and another category for dance theater.

The first three holdings of our festival were scheduled at the end of March to coincide with World's International Theater Day, March 27. By the fourth holding, however, we had 80 productions from 25 countries and we naturally needed a longer festival run, and that is when we shifted to a period from late May into early June. At the same time, we added an open space category for what you could call street performance. We also began adopting themes for each festival and decided to become active as a member of the European theater festival network.

At the time in Europe festivals were beginning to get a bad reputation in some cases, due to the fact that when countries had a change of administration the political persuasions of the new administrations would greatly influence the characters of the respective festivals. In order to ensure that our festival wouldn't be influenced by anyone in that way, I thought of getting something like a copyright for the festival. So I went to the Patent Bureau and registered a patent under the name "Sibiu International Theater Festival, Chiriac." At the same time we created a foundation to support the festival financially. The name of the foundation is the "Democracy through Culture Foundation." The combination of these measures keeps our festival free from political pressure.

It was also decided in 1997 to create a Theater Department in Sibiu University. And we are proud to say that the graduates of this department continue to have a 100% employment rate. This says a lot about the quality of the school and the high level of education going on there. It means that if a person can graduate from this school they will become a theater professional.

Our festival has continued to expand in terms of performance spaces as well, and we are now using a variety of spaces around the city of Sibiu. In particular, we made efforts to enable us to use the city's famous historical ruins and sites. Also, in 1998 we held the first theater arts market ever in Central and Eastern Europe during the run of our Sibiu festival.

In 2000, Romania's only Theater Management Department was established in Sibiu Univ. Furthermore, we began an Initiative Committee to begin action to make Sibiu a European Capital of Culture by 2007. From 2001, we began inviting famous directors to create works for the Sibiu festival. We invited Andry Zholdak and Silviu Purcarete. That was a period when we were building both the quality and scale of our festival. By this time the Sibiu festival had become fairly well known and a

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growing number of companies and artists were hoping to participate.

In 2002, the Radu Stanca Theater where I am director had its first performance in Japan with a production of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* directed by Andry Zholdak. In 2004, our achievements at the Radu Stanca Theater were recognized by government and we were designated a national theater. Then I was invited to an EU Committee meeting where I was able to announce our case for making Sibiu a European Capital of Culture in 2007. It was a very difficult announcement to make because the European Capital of Culture designation was restricted to EU member nations until then and Romania was not yet an EU member at that time. As you know, Romania finally became an official EU member on January 1, 2007. But the contents of our Capital of Culture application were good and since the quality of our festival had become well known by this time, the EU Committee received our petition favorably and in 2007 Sibiu was named a European Capital of Culture.

### During this time were you still active as an actor?

As I was organizing the Sibiu festival during those years I was also continuing my activities as an actor with the Radu Stanca Theater company. In 2000, the top posts for the Radu Stanca administration were opened on an application basis and I was chosen as Director. Since then I have continued working both as an actor and a director. Also, since 2005 I have served as a professor of the Theater Dept. at Sibiu Univ. and I teach at other universities as well.

### I attended the Sibiu festival in 2007, the year the city was designated a European Capital of Culture. Can you tell us about the program of that year's festival?

One of the defining aspects of the 2007 European Capital of Culture designation year festival program makeup was our relationship with Japan. In 2006 we launched our European Capital of Culture Preparation Committee and also began a relationship with the EU-Japan Fest. We then secured a promise to promote this program jointly.

At the 2007 festival nine companies participated from Japan, including Leni Basso, Co. YAMADA UN, Theater Company Chiten, Shinjuku Ryozanpaku theater company, Yoshiko Chuma, Yorozu Kyogen, Mime Thetaer, Joji Hirota, and for the second year in a row the music group ZIPANG. As another very unique program we organized a European Capital of Culture Volunteers group. A total of some 400 volunteers gathered, 65 of whom were from Japan. The volunteers worked with members of our theater's company to mount a production of Kafka's *Vor dem Gesetzentand* a dance production. The response to the volunteers' performances was so good that we kept the volunteer program as a part of our subsequent festivals.

For our 2008 Sibiu International Theater Festival, four years of negotiations finally bore fruit in the form of a performance by Kanzaburo Nakamura's Heisei Nakamura-za. It took us a lot of time and effort to get him to come to Sibiu, and in the end it was our mutual commitment to the arts and culture that sealed the agreement. When Kazuyoshi Kushida and Kanzaburo made a prior visit to Sibiu we had them see our production of *Faust* at an abandoned factory facility. It was a performance with a cast of 150. The abandoned factory building used was large, measuring 87 meters long by 40 meters wide. In the rafters there were cranes left intact that we used as stage equipment. After seeing this performance, they said they would come to our festival if they could use that building. I agreed on the spot, but it turned out that a decision was made to tear down the factory. I rushed to find a substitute and managed to find another deserted factory a month and a half later and adapt it for use.

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For the first performance of the Heisei Nakamura-za, the 550 seats were sold out and there was a standing audience of another 100. Lined up outside were another 200 people who were unable to enter. For the following performances the number of people hopeful audience who were unable to get inside grew each day. Afterwards, Kanzaburo-san and Kushida-san said they would continue to work with us in the future.

Please tell us about this year's Sibiu festival program. Will you be appearing as an actor this year?

Unfortunately, I will not be performing on stage this time (laughs).

We will have participants from 70 countries performing at 62 sites around Sibiu. This year's festival theme is innovation. However, we write it in a way that shows two components of innovation and ovation. Under this two-part theme we hope to make this a festival that emphasizes both creation and innovation.

Participants from Japan on this year's program include a production of Shakespeare's *Titus Andronicus* by Yamanote Jijosha and a production of Brecht's *Der Bettler oder Der tote Hund* by the Tokyo Acting Troupe KAZE. In addition we have planned two joint production projects on the program this year. One is a joint production of *ZAHAK* directed by Izumi Ashizawa using actors from Japan, the US, Iran and Romania. The second is a project I am particularly interested in that brings together comedians from three countries, Japan's Kyogen artist Shigeyama Sennojo, Alessandro Margetti of Italy's Commedia Dell'Arte and the Swiss clown Dimitri. These will premiere at the Sibiu festival and then tour around Europe. This is the Year of Danube and the tour will visit cities along the Danube, the castle of Mircea Dinescu and sites in Bulgaria, Serbia and Hungary. The finale will be at Linz, another European Capital of Culture. We will also continue the volunteer program, including 18 volunteers from Japan.

Will there be performances of *Faust*?

There will. Our *Faust* has been officially invited to the Edinburgh festival as well. It will be one of the main works at our festival this year with five performances. It will be at a space called Expo Pavilion and we are told that they will renovate it especially to our requirements for this production.

Will you tell us now about the Radu Stanca Theater? How is it related to your festival?

Radu Stanca is a co-organizer of the Sibiu festival. For example, on this year's program Radu Stanca has prepared 11 productions. The theater's repertoire consists of 58 varied works, ranging from Greek tragedy and Shakespeare to highly experimental works. This year the theater will present 14 new works. These constitute a total of 30 performances which will be held over the course of a month not only at Radu Stanca, but five or six other venues in the city.

As for the organization, the Radu Stanca Theater employs a total of 140 people. The breakdown is 60 actors, the administrative departments (including the Foundation) employs 20, 14 are employed in marketing and international relations and the remainder are technical staff. This enables to run performances of two or three productions at the same time. The only full-time director we employ is Radu Alexandru Nica. He is a young and very capable director. In addition, we invite many guest directors, both from Romania and famous international directors, to create productions. For example, this year Silviu Purcarete will be directing two productions and Andry Zholdak will direct one. We have plans to invite directors

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productions and Andry Zholdak will direct one. We have plans to invite directors from France, Luxemburg, Croatia, Russia and well-known directors from Romania. Although the details are not finalized yet, we plan to invite Kushida-san to direct a work in 2011.

**A festival as large as Sibiu requires a very large budget. How large is the budget actually and how do you raise the necessary funds?**

In terms of audience and number of stages, Sibiu has become the third largest theater festivals in Europe. However, in terms of budget we only rank 87th among the world's festivals (laughs), so we don't really have that much money [the actual figure was about \$10 million in 2008].

As one of the largest international cultural events in Romania, we receive support from the President, and there is also direct support from the government. So we receive funding from variety of institutions, including the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, the Foreign Ministry, the state government and the city of Sibiu. These account for about 35% of our budget.

Another 30% of our support comes from international projects from Europe and around the world. Ticket sales account for about 10% of the budget. The rest comes from sponsors. We also receive a lot of support from the media, including Romania's national television and radio, five commercial networks and nine other well-known media.

**I have before me right now the program from the 2007 festival and the number of sponsors from the private sector is impressive. Among these the support from Coca Cola appears especially prominent.**

Yes. It is one of our main sponsors. There are a large number of outdoor venues in the festival and performances at the old city square alone attract audiences of 30,000 to 40,000. The amount of Coca Cola sold at these venues is considerable. Due to the conditions of the contract, I cannot reveal the actual amount, but we do receive a very large amount of support from them.

**Do you do the negotiations for contracts like this?**

Our team makes the appointments but I always do the actual negotiations personally. Regarding our program contents, I have a team that supplies me with a lot of information and opinions, not only on the Romanian scene but also internationally, but I am the one who makes the final decisions. The preparations for each festival begin approximately two years in advance. For example in the case of Japan, by the end of March we have decided or list of candidates for invitations to perform at the next year's festival. For these negotiations I travel overseas often, and until now this has included visits to 101 countries around the world. I have been to Japan eight times and my visits to France, for example, have now topped 100.

**You are also active as an actor, so you naturally need time for your own rehearsals. What's more, you serve as Director of Radu Stanca. How do you manage to schedule in all that work?**

I also teach at the university level (laughs). First of all I have to stress what a highly capable team I have working with me and how important their role is in supporting my activities. This is a team that I have gathered and they have become highly proficient and capable in their jobs while working with me. Each of them is given a lot of decision-making voice and they work with a high level of responsibility. My

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activities are spread over a wide range of fields, from the theater company and the festival to teaching activities in the university drama faculty and the theater management faculty, and in each of these areas I have highly qualified people in charge assisting me and making the work flow smoothly. It is a unique system that I don't think you will find many precedents for anywhere in the world.

I believe that Sibiu today serves as a model case of a smaller regional city achieving very significant development in a number of aspects through the arts and culture. With the Sibiu International Theater Festival as a core program, the city has achieved high levels of development in areas ranging from the city's economy and tourism to education and democracy. I think it is a rare case, even when look at from a global perspective.

We have maintained a record of continuing sell-outs for the tickets to the theater productions staged by our company at Radu Stanca. Also, our younger actors and drama students actively maintain a pipeline of communication with the citizens of the city at venues where people gather, like bars and discos. This is part of our system of encouraging understanding of the appeal of theater. In this way, we connect closely to the populace, not only at the theater but outside the theater as well. Of course, I also participate in these activities, particularly at a restaurant in Sibiu called Max.

Romania has other major cities including the capital Bucharest and Craiova. What is the position of the Sibiu theater world in Romania as a whole?

With Sibiu's designation as a European Capital of Culture, its theater scene is the most active in Romania. What's more, Sibiu also has things like the impressive outdoor museum and the Brukenthal National Museum. In this sense you can say that Sibiu holds the position of a cultural leader in Romania. In the field of theater, I believe that Sibiu also serves as a leader for the surrounding countries.

For example, our Radu Stanca Theater will be conducting 28 international tours of its productions this year alone. There are 12 large theaters in Bucharest, but all of them combined don't equal this number of international tours. This is clear evidence of how active Radu Stanca is.

Craiova has an international Shakespeare festival. What is your relationship with this festival?

This is a biennial festival, and as a Shakespeare festival it has achieved a high level of excellence. It generally features 10 to 15 invited productions from Romania and abroad. Although the number of productions staged is not large, each time they chose quite important productions to invite to the festival. Besides this, there is also a domestic theater festival held in Bucharest. This festival invites the best productions from around the country each year. In addition to these there are also smaller festivals held in almost all the major cities of Romania, some of which specialize in contemporary theater and others in Romanian plays.

I saw a number of different Romanian theater productions at the Sibiu and personally I was impressed by the great talent of the actors and the strength of their physical presence and also by the highly experimental nature of many of the plays. What are your thoughts on Romanian theater?

Because of Romania's situation as a geographical crossroads in Europe, we have been influenced by Russian theater deriving from Stanislavsky and by German Expressionism. As for today's influences, Heiner Müller is an important one. Also, since Romanians are a Latin people ethnically, we are also influenced by the

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strong physicality of Italian Commedia Dell'Arte. It can be said that the influences from these various directions have created a very rich theatrical environment in Romania.

Wasn't experimental type theater prohibited during the Ceausescu era? In most socialist countries at that time social realist theater was the prominent form of theater, I believe. Was it different in Romania?

In Poland there was quite experimental theater like Tadeusz Kantor during the communist era. In Romania as well, there was a branch of theater influenced by the developments in Poland. There were also experimental movements imitating the styles of important international directors. During the Ceausescu era we had a sort of lab that experimented with different types of theater. But, at the time, the Secret Police was very watchful regarding such movements and it was a bit dangerous. Especially when the contents of the plays dealt with ideology, the directors were usually forced to go into exile abroad. As a result, several dozens or perhaps even more than a hundred directors and actors eventually fled to foreign countries. For example, Andrei Serban is one who was involved in various experimental works that made him the object of suspicion and forced him flee the country.

Is the current international economic crisis having an effect on your festival?

I believe that the current international economic crisis is based in a lack of mutual trust and understanding. The inability to believe your partner or a lack of understanding between the different countries' agencies or governments can be causes. In that sense I believe that not having a firm relationship of trust with your partner is even more serious a problem than the financial crisis. With the right effort, a financial crisis can always be solved. A lack of trust in international relationships is a more dangerous matter.

Of course, the economic crisis has had a big effect on our festival. But it is a very interesting and ironic fact that an organization or individual with true vision, or a group with strong partners can actually at times achieve greater things during a time of crisis than in normal conditions. That is why I am always thinking positively about what can be done in the conditions we are faced with, even when they are negative. When there is a lack of money, complaining and lamenting are the easiest things to do, but they don't do any good. It is in times of difficulty that you have to grab the initiative and act positively.

There is also a crisis for the Romanian government, of course, and they are struggling to make the best possible use of their budget. Because of this situation, the programs with solid proposals will get solid budget support, while proposals that are not backed by experience and solid contents will probably be refused. If it is a project that has plenty foreign partner support and cooperation, they may get budget increases, as our festival has. Conversely, festivals that are lacking in achievements and have no particularly outstanding features will receive smaller budgets or may even be terminated in times like these.

I would like to add that we are now proceeding with a project to build a new theater facility with funding from the EU. It is a large comprehensive facility with three halls, one with 500 seats, another with 300 and a third with 150 seats as well as a rehearsal space of the same scale for each of the three. It is designed so the seating can be moved around freely to different arrangements, and the facility can also be converted into a 1500-seat conference hall. We also plan to have two elegant restaurants and a small hotel with accommodations for 70, so that

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companies that come here to perform can lodge there. Facilities like these should make international co-production projects even easier and enable us to bring in new audience.

Lastly, I would like to ask you this. I get the impression from what you have said that you believe that theater can make a contribution to the development of democracy. Is this true?

I spoke earlier about how a community can use culture and the arts to achieve development in numerous areas. During the 3-year period when we were preparing for European Capital of Culture certification, there was probably as much money invested in the development of Sibiu in an intensive period of less than three years than had been invested in the previous 25 years. Also, during that period we did things like inviting important companies from around the world in areas like street performance, presenting high-quality popular plays and holding outdoor performances of street performance and plays in an attempt to attract as many citizens as possible to our audience. We also held many free performances. The result was a synergistic effect in which reaching a scale where we were able to attract a total audience of 60,000 people a day at our festival encouraged more active support from sponsors while also enabling to lower the price of tickets. Also, doing things like organizing cultural events at various venues around the city such as our historical sites succeeded in attracting audience that had never set foot inside our theaters.

These efforts helped more people experience the “miracle of the arts” and gave more citizens reason to feel pride in the city of Sibiu. Thinking back 15 years ago, when we first invited a troupe of street performers who performed on stilts, old women and children were so shocked by the “strange people invading the streets” that they cowered on the street and crossed themselves in terror (laughs), but now such sights are commonplace attractions to them. And sometimes today when I take a taxi in the city of Sibiu, the driver won't accept a fare from me, saying how indebted they are to me for the business they get during the festival (laughs). I think these are wonderful things that show how the city has changed [thanks to the festival] and examples of how the foundations of democracy have been strengthened.

Thank you for your very stimulating interview.