

David Schwartz_mixdown

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SPEAKERS

David Schwartz, Michael LaBelle



Michael LaBelle 00:00

The theater of energy activism interview with David Schwartz, Episode 74. David Schwartz is a theatre director, lecturer and activist. He holds a PhD wrote and produced plays focused on the impact of energy prices, and the shuttering of coal mines in Romania. Welcome to the My energy 2050 Podcast, where we speak to the people building a clean energy system by 2050. I'm your host, Michael LaBelle. This week, we have a special guest, at least from my perspective with David Schwartz. Because here we examine the theater in relation to the energy sector. So how does the theater fit within the energy transition, as policymakers are discovering society does matter. And unfortunately, this is more true in some countries than others. David's focus on Romania deals with the economic transition that the people have experienced. His productions highlight the plight of people unable to afford the bare essentials to exist in a modern society. And then really, the transition from Communism to capitalism has really brought out this disparity between the different types of systems and the impact of pee on people. From my experience, when I think about the policymaking and promises that come from national politicians, and even at the EU level, I often think about what is the real impact on the ground for people on the economic margins, David has created plays reflecting these personal and local struggles. On one hand, David comes across as a radical instigator of performative art. But as you'll hear, in part of our conversation, he takes the real experiences of people who present it through theatrical performances, and what is more true than the real experiences of people or even fictional representations drawn from real experiences. I think as an academic, I often get caught up in policy or technology aspects of the energy transition. And I don't know I don't see those that suffer in energy poverty. When we hear about big policies and money to assist vulnerable groups like that, in the EU social climate fund, it's planned to be 87 billion euros, and there's all these big plans for it. Well, I have my serious doubts about how this money will be distributed. For my conversation with David, you'll also get an impression he likewise holds limited faith in governments and how it properly assists citizens. I think the theater plays an important role in bringing out the need for greater assistance and a focus on I would say humanity, and the role that the energy system plays in people's lives. When I say you'll hear part of our conversation, I have to admit, I had a bit of a technical difficulty with part of the interview. So I didn't get like essentially the middle part of our conversation. So I apologize, both David and you for this failure. But I can certainly attest to David's in depth knowledge and research skills that collecting and understanding how people experience and

suffer from energy bills, that the fact that he brings this to the stage demonstrates his skills in capturing social phenomena that we often only read about and is hard to experience. So my profound respects goes out to David and those working with him to raise this issue in a more engaging format that is usually emotionally detached from reality. And before we begin, I want to thank Roxana bukata for putting me in touch with David and all her work in organizing the other interviews I've done in Romania or I did in Romania in November 2022. A final note, this interview was done for my 2022 role as an open society University Network Senior Fellow at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Funding was generously provided to produce the podcast for the episodes recorded in 2020 and 22. So I still have a few more in my back pocket, and I'm releasing those now. And now for this week's episode. I'm here today with David Schwartz, theatre director here in Bucharest, and David, we'll just get right into it. We've had a great conversation walking around working to find the cafe. My first question to you is, how did you? I mean, I don't know how to say this because usually I interview people work in academia and policy. But what you do and what you write about in the arts area, I think is really relevant for the podcast and this is why I wanted to talk to you today. So how did you begin in the field of arts maybe I'll frame it like that.

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David Schwartz 04:46

I I have studied theater directing with the university here in Bucharest and from what it all started, I guess because Both me and some colleagues of mine were really unhappy with the theater we were seeing in, in in the CTR in Romania, because and so this was more than 15 years ago. And we were we fail to, and we thought that the theatre that was made back then, was really so much art for art's sake, and was really not not really connected with the contemporary realities and with the social and political aspects of the society we live in. And I guess, from this, from this feeling of unhappiness, and even if revolt, I would say, towards this huge amounts of money that were spent state money that was spent on Theater, which was not really relevant, or it was not really relevant, in our opinion, for, for many categories of people started the idea to do it differently, to do a different kind of theater to do a different kind of art and art that is more politically engaged in art that is, that aims to discuss the structure of the society, the causes of the problems, or the struggles in the society that aims to represent perspectives that are, let's say, counter cotton that are not so that are that oppose the mainstream perspective. And so that's how we actually started, we started quite radical for that time for Romania, by going in the neighborhood, in Jesus, rather working class neighborhood in Bucharest, to do theater industry today with the people there. So really get to as far away as possible from the institutionalized bourgeois center.

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Michael LaBelle 07:07

So like, you just set up the theater in the street,

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David Schwartz 07:10

we that was the beginning, we just thought we, we just, we came with a bunch of younger actors and actresses, and with a very simple props, and setup. And we did it with you in the park, or in a square. So I guess that was our and we did it, it was quite socially engaged as well, it was about evictions that are taking place in the neighborhood. And we it was, We involved

the people in the neighborhood, people who are going to be evicted to be part of the of the performance, and we had debates as well and protests as well. So it was quite an activist, an activist theater that we have proposed. Of course, now, after 15 years, this has become quite mainstream in Romania as well. So it's not something that only I am doing, or only me and a couple of other people are doing now. Now, it's almost how 15 years later, is even in the mainstream at the National Theatre. It's quite normal to see and political attitude in a performance. But it was quite different. It was quite different. When we when we have started. So yeah, that's that's that's the beginning. So

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Michael LaBelle 08:30

no, I'm amazed by that you're able and now even this political theater is going on I'll just mentioning Hungary because, yeah, it's not allowed anymore. But but that's not the topic of our podcast. But my the focus, though, for the podcast is on energy. And so then how did you come to understand that energy? And I just say energy, right? And I know, we can talk about coal, and we can talk about households, but maybe how did you come to see energy as an important political, economic subject that you can bring to the theater? Well,

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David Schwartz 09:05

I guess it developed I mean, it was not something that I had in mind from the beginning, it just went from one topic to another. For example, if we talk about coal, you may know that we did a performance about the situation of the coal mines and the coal mines area in Gu valley, in in Romania. And we did this 10 years ago. So at the beginning, at that time, I haven't started from the from the idea that energy is something really meaningful from the development of society, but sort of the other way around, looking at the people and how do the changes in the energy in the energy system affected the lives of the people and the lives of a whole community. So that was our our first hour this hour performance that we did in 2002. It was called underground. It was about the lives and experiences of people who live in these mining areas that have been basically abandoned by the by the state. So that was the my, let's say the first project that I have worked on that involve the relation to energy, but it was not directly about energy, but the consequences. But then, and now maybe coming 10 years, 10 years later, that present day. The idea to do a performance about energy and which, which is also the performance that we have done. It's called the Energy Vittala vital energy. Is not I would I want to say that it's not about energy, but it's rather about the crisis of the energy prices. Okay, excellent. So that's why they're actually interested interested in me, because I actually pumped two years ago, I started to on to see and to read and to see that there is this huge growing in the energy prices that's going on all over Europe, but to Romania, more than in other countries. And I was actually, it came from a very personal curiosity, I was very eager to understand what the hell is going on. Okay.

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Michael LaBelle 11:26

Did you feel it yourself in your own bills? Or how did you? Well,

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David Schwartz 11:30

of course, so I, of course, did in our own deals. But it was not only that it affected me. But rather than us that came, for example, that we had in Romania, we had several cases of people who killed themselves because they couldn't afford to pay the bill. It was actually we had two cases of people who wrote that goodbye message on the bill. Really? Yes. So it was. So it's really it was really, those, those news were quite shocking. And then we had this other situation in the last winter when some schools closed, and they kept doing the online education because they couldn't afford to pay the bills. Yes. And then there was a situation with a hospital that couldn't afford to pay to pay. And now it's of course, generalizing the situation, probably this winter, there will be many, many schools that will not be able to do that we will need to go to online

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Michael LaBelle 12:32

in Hungary as well. Absolutely. It's the same way. Yeah.

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David Schwartz 12:36

Probably in many countries in Europe is the same, the same situation. And in Germany, for example, even talk about stopping the theaters in winter. Yes, yeah. So probably they will not, they will not have performances during the during the winter. Because, as you may know that theaters are big consumers of energy because of the lighting systems. Yes.

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Michael LaBelle 12:58

Can we stop there for a sec? Can I just say, maybe, to back up a bit like the closing of schools, the closing of theaters in the winter time? So my question to you, I have my own ideas on this. But But why is that so bad? Especially like the theater, we can live without the theater? Can't We?

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David Schwartz 13:17

We can live without anything? It depends how we, if we see do we see culture as a vital part of our society or we do not in I, I do believe that there are I do believe that there is a public goods and our public goods. And I do believe that there are very, that there are some basic necessities, which are important for the physical and mental and spiritual development of a human being. I am a theatre artist, I believe that the attorney is one of those. I've heard many people can can debate this. And but we have seen this, we've had almost two years without the HR already on only with online theater because of the pandemic crisis. And I would say that the consequences were not that good, I would say and also I would say that the atom is of all arts is probably the only art which is totally dependable, have a meeting face to face, and eventually be in the same space between the artists and the audience and the among audiences among the audience, the people themselves. And I would say that, in this time, in this time of going more and more online and more and more isolated as well. It becomes even more crucial than it was 20 or 50 years ago, but of course it's my subjective perspective.

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Michael LaBelle 14:54

I just point to our meeting here, right. I was able to come here to Bucharest physically and meet with Do you? I mean, yeah, during COVID, we would do an online interview or something. But now I appreciate and I feel like I'm getting so much more out of meeting with people physically. And just by being together physically, rather than doing things online, it's completely different experience, it's,

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David Schwartz 15:16

it would be a very big part of the communication between people is not what we say. But it's the language and the suggestions and the emotions. And these things. Some of them can be perceived online, some of them obviously cannot. So we I'm sure that we lose a lot by not meeting, like, in person. And so coming back to why is the attorney? This is my, this is my answer, you know, okay.

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Michael LaBelle 15:46

And so could you. Maybe tell us give us a bit of a background about the first performance? It was underground, I believe. And then the second the energy Vittala? About what what were the storylines? Or what were they about?

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David Schwartz 16:01

The first day underground? So it was based on interviews. So it's, basically it's a structure of monologues that were verbatim actually. So word by word, based on the interviews with several people in in the jewel Valley area. And we tried to, we tried to do a search of anthropological theatre work in which to see if, Through these testimonies, we can get a broader perspective of how does the society look like? How does the situation look like in a city where all the mines are closing in a city in a town or several towns? Sorry, no city in several towns that were dependent on the mining on the mining activity? And in which the state didn't have a plan? B? Yeah,

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Michael LaBelle 17:04

there was no plan. There's nothing Yeah,

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David Schwartz 17:06

there was nothing. So basically, what happened was that the mines were closing, and the people had now actually had no way to find new jobs. So it was basically a destructuring of the community and of the respective society. And we try to see in how do people struggle with it? How do they see it? Is it how do they perceive the mining activity? What were the strong points? And what were the really bad points of the mining? Yes. And

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Michael LaBelle 17:41

this was in the 1990s Wasn't

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David Schwartz 17:44

between 19 Basically, it happened between 1997 and the 2000s. Okay, so the phrase, because what her mother, it was at the in 1996, the regime changed, came around more right wing or liberal, more, your Western Europe oriented the regime, political regime, and they engaged to close their minds. Okay. In the end in 1997, there was this first, the first big How is it called LearnEnglish. This big

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Michael LaBelle 18:21

privatization,

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David Schwartz 18:22

it was not the privatization, but they fired a lot of people. Okay, so they gave these ads, these political ads, through which they fired the basically, around 50 to 80%, of the of the miners between 1997 and 2010, I think. Okay. So when we, when we did the research there in 2011, most of the mines were closed or closing and the ones that were functioning, were functioning at very low capacity. Okay. And we were interested to see how do the people take this, what's going on? And how does this affect the families because there were very bad situations are very, very complicated. For example, in many and many of the workers as it happened in the West, I think when they closed the mines, many were not able to really adapt. Many went to big depressions that were treated with alcohol. And this became a bigger problems. The women started to start to sort of take control of their families, which was very interested and good part, but most of them went to work abroad because they couldn't find work in Romania. And then, of course, the family split, and you have new problems coming from there. Many of them are workers went back. Many of the workers were actually they came from the from the countryside, they came from the villages to work in the mines. So then they came, they went back to their village, but in that village village, the relatives told them, what are you doing here? You have no land, we cannot give you the land. Oh, I see. Yes. So there were big problems fighting around the around the land between the peasants that stands, stand there. And the miners who are going back to agriculture are trying trying to get back to agriculture. So you have you had all these very, very complicated and I think very interesting, but in the same time, really terrible. Yes. Social Conflict. Okay, following following the closing of the mind. So that was the that was what this was. That is what the show was about.

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Michael LaBelle 20:47

Okay. And so yeah, you conducted interviews, and then made them into monologues for actors to perform. And then what was your the reaction or the, I won't say acceptance, but what what did people think of the play at the time? Well, I

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David Schwartz 21:02

had a quite big success, even though by now we still we still perform it. Oh, really performing standing hours after we actually on Sunday, we've had performance with me, but I still, I still eager to see. So that'd be bad for the people in Bucharest, it was something obviously different. It was quite a shock. It's also that there is this thing that we should talk about to understand the whole context. In 1990, in Bucharest, there was this huge there was a huge student riots, and the states called the miners in to make order. Yes. And there were huge fight things between students and miners in 1990, in Bucharest, so the image of the miners here in Bucharest was very much connected, maybe fillies, but 10 years ago, even more. So it's very much connected with this image of the brute of this miner who has no brain and is beating GABA the emancipated students. And this minor is as as reminiscences of communism and of the old regime, and so on and so forth. Of course, this is there is a huge lie around this, because not even 10% of the miners came to UK right? Yes, yes. Obviously, and up and up the ones that came not all of them beat people up and yes, me. But the image is like this, and it was very much perpetrated by the right wing intellectual elite. Okay, so you have this very important intellectual figures who talk about the miner as a brutal or the miners as barbarians, and so on and so forth. There is even a very, there is a film by this very appreciated Romania, Freedom director with champion Talia it has it's from 1994 Which picture is the minor is this brutes and crazy, and murderers and so on. So the image was really was this,

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Michael LaBelle 23:17

right. But it was the example of the regime at the time setting one part of society against another party.

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David Schwartz 23:22

So as I said, Yes, it was. It was, it was this. It was this huge diversion by the, by the political regime at the time, and but it's very complicated. factions in the regime that are fighting among each other, it's okay,

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Michael LaBelle 23:42

very complicated, but bringing that to Bucharest, then

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David Schwartz 23:46

four months, so many people. For many people, I guess it was a revelation. Okay, so this is after? Yeah, right. Consequences. Okay. So these people are people as well. Lives, they have their own children, their own parents, their own families, their own struggles. So I would say it was quite, it was quite strong. But maybe even more interesting or as interesting was when we performed the shows in zoo Valley area. So when we did it for for the audience's that that are part of our research, let's say and it was very grand that wouldn't it was quite quite quite amazing that we had the people whose stories were transmitted in the show who came to see

the performance okay. And they were really intervening during the portfolio. Oh, really, at some point, they were arguing with the jurors at some point they were singing songs together with the with the actual because there are also songs in the performance. Okay. So it was quite an reaching and amazing experience for us as theatre artists. Yes. And we felt that we found that we tried that the people sort of felt that we did justice. So they were quite. I mean, we didn't we haven't found one one person who would say that he was not pleased with what he saw. So people recognize themselves recognize their stories and felt that they sort of regained that dignity when they have seen that this professional theatre artists could perform about their lives and about their struggles.

M Michael LaBelle 25:32

Excellent. And then and then the more recent play the energy Vitek Italia,

D David Schwartz 25:38

Romanian energy Vittala

M Michael LaBelle 25:42

English, let's see, this is what's great about Romania is that I can understand things much better than than other countries. In the background. Yeah, the Latin background. It's great.

D David Schwartz 25:52

So, okay, so here we are. Okay, so I had this, I had the feeling that the crisis will get worse. Okay, excellent, because we started the because I started the research about it more than one year ago, so it was before the war. It was a force that prices were already rising, we just something we tend to forget today. Yes. But they were already on the rise. And so I started and I thought that I, I read a lot. I did a lot of research, I collaborated with a professor of economics and of energy and energy studies. So he's an engineer, but an economist as well. And who has a quiet would say, an informed view towards the system. And I also did interviews with adda and both engineers and economists Okay, okay. Because many times the perspectives were not the same homecourt?

M Michael LaBelle 27:09

Yes, of course.

D David Schwartz 27:10

And also, and also I collaborated with Nina Marina, who is also a he's who's a researcher herself, and she did the research on the online research of discussions in the online about the prices, and who is capitalizing on it? Okay. Right, who is and who is defending which

perspective, okay, which was also very, very interesting. I will talk about what we have found out later, but that was the research process process. And then I realized that I don't want to that if I would do if I would, we would write the text myself, it will be quiet. Maybe I will talk too much only about economics. And I wanted to get also more, maybe a more humane perspective and a more emotional perspective. And so I talked to other three playwrights, at least Monica Marinescu Bogdan Georgescu, and Nicoleta se Namco Nicoleta is based in Kitchener. So in the Republic of Moldova, okay, I did two are based in Bucharest, and I asked, I gave them the research material, and I asked them to write themselves their own perspectives. So basically, the show is built on and I wrote a text myself. Okay. Yeah, so the show is based on four different texts written by four different playwrights, each with their own approach. And it's interesting that the texts are very different. And the two of them are very documentary based. Okay. And they are really so they are really based on facts, let's say and trying to understand the whole developed the whole problem with the rise in energy prices, and but the other two are quite sci fi they are dystopias. So they are dystopia is about. One is the dystopia about living in a society without electricity or where access to electricity is cars, and how and it's about a date. And how is it how is a date between a younger man and a young woman going on without without electricity or has cars electricity? And then the other one is sort of, you know, far the future, let's say in a future where? Well both the electric energy but also the vital energy are rationalized by a system of robots that are trying that are controlling the quantity of energy that you spend.

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Michael LaBelle 29:52

Oh really social, your personal energy, your physical energy, positive

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David Schwartz 29:57

energy There are these two dystopic perspectives. And then

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Michael LaBelle 30:03

so yeah, we've talked about your plays, we talked about the market, the role that the EU plays. And I guess my big question for you is, what is the way out from this? And we talked about state intervention, but socially, and I would say, maybe through art as well, why? Why is art important? And in this crisis, this energy crisis, and why is important that there's a theater, and a play, for example, replays that engage with the topic of energy and society.

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David Schwartz 30:40

Well, regarding why is it important in the domain of energy? Well, in my opinion, art is a means of, as battle, Brett said, is a means of educating and entertaining at the same time, and all the studies in the last year is to show that people learn best when they have fun. So when they enjoy what they are seeing or doing, so that's what we try to do. So I would say that the energy domain is very, a pack. And it's very, that people find it quite technical and don't think a lot about it. And through art or through theatre, we can make it more understand that I can make people understand it and also give a message. And our message was quite clear that we need

public control of the energy system, the energy system is something we all need, from the toilets to the internet, nothing worse without the energy without energy in the present day. Society. So we all need it. So then we should own it in some way in one way or another. So maybe it's not maybe state control is not the best solution, but is the least bad solution that we have so far.

M Michael LaBelle 32:05

And then maybe a follow up question, since things are still working is, is what about renewables in, for example, energy communities? Do you think there's a place for that? Or what's your view on that?

D David Schwartz 32:18

I have to admit that I'm quite skeptical. So of course, at the small level, they are great, and they work fine. And small communities that do it and become self sufficient are great. But I am quite skeptical that with the technology we have today, we can run the whole system of eight billion people through small communities of energy producers. And so what we would need is a huge investment in technology so that we can find renewable or sort of different renewable solutions on Planet level. But this can also be done only through state intervention only through state, real straight state funding of research.

M Michael LaBelle 33:11

Okay. And also maybe a philosophical change on the state that consumers, the people can choose their own technology and engage Exactly.

D David Schwartz 33:19

But this is also a this is this sort of, yeah, it's a philosophical shift, let's, let's say, but I would say that the philosophical shift to will come after the technological shift. First, we need the technology to do it. And then the idea is we'll follow in some way, the technology but what we like so far is the resources to finance, the research the research in the in the tidy in this technological domain, or domain.

M Michael LaBelle 33:51

Okay, excellent. Excellent. All right. David, thank you so much for your time and your patients today. And I think we've recorded a really good episode. So thank you.

D David Schwartz 33:58

Thank you. Thank you as well.

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Michael LaBelle 33:59

Thank you. Thank you for joining us. For this episode, we produced the my energy 2050 podcast to learn about cutting edge research and the people building our clean energy system. If you enjoy this episode, or any episode, please share it. And remember, each episode is equivalent to consuming 10 journal articles one book and 500 charts and how to implement the energy transition. And you get it all in less usually than 60 minutes for each podcast guarantee. I can actually say no other podcast makes this guarantee. The more we spread our message of the ease of an energy transition, the faster we can make that transition. You can follow us on LinkedIn where we are most active on the My energy 2050 page or on Twitter and Facebook. I'm your host Michael LaBelle. Thank you for listening to this week's episode.