

Ciulei. A Director's Point of View

Book review: Eugen Gyemant, *Universul regizoral Liviu Ciulei/ Liviu Ciulei's Stage-directing Universe* (București, Editura LiterNet, 2020)



Considering the small number of Romanian books written about theater directors, I think Eugen Gyemant's volume about Liviu Ciulei's work as a director but also as a stage designer is one of the most important and surprising books published last year. It has the quality of using a smart structure in which the innovations in the field of directing and stage design of Liviu Ciulei are being followed and analyzed in a way that, as the author

states in the introduction of the book, tries to capture more than a documentary and theoretical approach of his work, and more than a research from the director's point of view. The author, who is also a theater director, is using reviews, essays and other theoretical studies about Ciulei's work, and with all this material he is recreating the journey back to the performances: he analyses the solutions that Ciulei found and the decisions that he took as a director, making him one of iconic theater artists from the XXth Century.

Born in 1923 and considered to be the founder of modern directing in Romanian theater, but also one of the first modern stage-designers, Liviu Ciulei worked for more than 50 years in this field, mainly in Romania, but also in the United States. Probably the hardest thing about writing a book about such a vast personality is figuring out a way to manage and develop all the material related to this subject in such an unprecedented way and finding a new perspective that was never used before. I think the main purpose of this book is to answer the question: how relevant are the performances made by Liviu Ciulei for theater directing today? Reading it, you gain access to a very careful study about the intimate decisions that the director takes while staging a classical play written by Shakespeare, Brecht or Caragiale. As the author states in the opening chapter, this might be a very useful tool for the future theater makers who are considering staging these plays themselves, and might want to find out more about them and the way they were staged in the past.

The book is divided into eight chapters, each one centered mainly around the staging of a play and the way these performances challenged the tradition at that time. Considering the fact that many of the plays (especially those written by Shakespeare) directed by Ciulei were staged more than once, another theme of the book is the comparison of the different approaches the director had on the same text, sometimes even more than 40 years apart.

The first four chapters are using four of Shakespeare's plays that were staged by Ciulei between 1951 and 2000: *As you like it*, staged five times in Bucharest, Göttingen, Minneapolis, New York, *The twelfth night*, staged at Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis, *Hamlet*, staged three times in

Washington, New York, Bucharest, and *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, staged four times in Minneapolis, Washington, Bucharest and Tel Aviv. Reading about each one of these productions, you can easily find the two aspects that all of them have in common, no matter the year and the place they were produced. The first chapter is talking about the idea of reinterpreting the relationships between characters and finding common ground that unites these relationships in Ciulei's view. No matter the aesthetic of the performances, the director uses the word *realism* concerning the way in which the role is created by the actor, based on the text analysis and his imagination, who should be stimulated with the right questions from the director. More importantly, the second chapter has to do with the vision about the space, the way the Elizabethan stage was reinterpreted in many of these performances, and the effect this decision made on the audience: also, on the actors and the way these performances were received in contrast with the ones using the Italian type of stage.

Following this idea, the next chapter focuses more on the work of Liviu Ciulei as a stage designer, and uses the term "archi-mechanism"¹ (influenced by Jan Kott's book, *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*) to describe the famous structures that he used to create monumental constructions on stage: the purpose was to multiply the possibilities of staging solutions in making the performances, as described in this chapter, more intense and dynamic. It is interesting to discover how Ciulei, from the position of stage designer, managed to influence the fellow directors who worked with him. Two famous examples in this book are the production of *D'ale carnavalului*, directed by Lucian Pintilie, and *Iulius Cezar* directed by Andrei Șerban. The last three chapters describe the dynamic between Liviu Ciulei and the directorial interpretations of the works by Brecht, Caragiale, or Shakespeare's *Tempest*.

Besides the encounters between Liviu Ciulei and Shakespeare's plays, Gyemant shows that the ones he had with the theater of Brecht and Caragiale are at least as interesting and the results, as analyzed and described in these chapters, could still be used today as a guide on how to

1. Eugen Gyemant, *Universul regizoral Liviu Ciulei* (București, Editura Liternet, 2020), p. 75.

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look at these authors from a director's perspective. One of the many advantages of this book is that the author's decision about analyzing just a small part of the work of Liviu Ciulei helps the reader to form a coherent view of his entire career, and to uncurtain facts that one realizes are still very influential to this day.

CRISTIAN BAN

PhD Candidate, Faculty of Theatre and Film,
Babeş-Bolyai University
cristian.ban@ubbcluj.ro