

“I Simply Find Joy in Speaking, Writing and Working.”

An interview with Alexa VISARION by Ilaria NICA¹



The prolific activity of Mr. Alexa Visarion may be inspiring and disarming at the same time; his path in the creative world stands as a reminder that barriers of any kind are to be overcome by hard work and by allowing oneself to develop as freely as possible.

As theatre and film director he's known especially for *Ahead of the Silence* (1978), *Luna verde* (2010) and *Năpasta* (1982), but has directed seven films and written a number of scripts. During his life-long career he directed over 100 plays in Romanian theatres and abroad. In 1985, he

directed Stark Young's translation of Anton Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*, at the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Mainstage) in Louisville, Kentucky.

Here follows the brief presentation of a complete artist, whose discourse, as he allows to be shown, is a mix of incisive thought, candor and a certain type of guilelessness, something that is to be borne in mind while reading this interview about his rich international experience.

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Ilaria Nica: Dear Mr. Alexa Visarion, could you tell us something about your international experience before 1989? How difficult was it for you to go abroad?

Alexa Visarion: I left the country for the first time after having staged a show at Târgu-Mureș, *The Prosecutor*, which had quite an echo in Romania. Me and the stage designer, Vittorio Holtier, were sent into a research trip to England in 1972; we stayed in London and Stratford, where we've seen the English theatre and returned home after two weeks. The second time we left after having staged *Uncle Vanya* at Cluj-Napoca. There was a scholarship offered by Italy, the Strehler scholarship, and I was the one proposed for receiving it – I went to Milan, I met Giorgio Strehler, took part to his rehearsals. In the meanwhile, the Giulești Theatre, where I was employed, was on a tour in Italy with two shows by Dinu Cernescu, *Meșterul Manole (Master Manole)* and *Măsură pentru Măsură (Measure for Measure)*, and at this occasion I presented a show as well, *Năpasta (The Curse)*. This happened in 74.

I returned to Romania and then followed a few years of travelling with the show *Năpasta*, from 1976 to 89. We have staged it in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, in Florence, where I was seen and analyzed in an eulogistic article written by the greatest critic of that time, Paolo Emilio Poesio, who said he has seen three exemplary Romanian shows: *Bădăranii (The Hooligans)*, directed by Sică Alexandrescu, *King Lear*, by Radu Penciulescu, and this *Năpasta* I have staged, again with Vittorio Holtier as a stage designer, and the actors Florin Zamfirescu (Ion the Fool), Dorina Lazăr (Anca), Corneliu Dumitraș (Dragomir), and Gelu Nițu (Gheorghe).

Then came a delegation from Russia, there was this festival held between the socialist countries, where each country would stage plays from the other countries. At the Moscow Art Theatre came a director, a creative director so to say, the renowned Oleg Efremov, who said he wouldn't agree with a director sent by the Romanian Government and that he'd prefer to choose one. So they sent to Bucharest the famous critic Anatoli Smelyansky, who saw a number of shows, met with me, saw the way I staged *O Noapte Furtunoasă (A Stormy Night)*, this happened in 79, and he invited me to Moscow, to work at MHAT. By luck, I was the only director invited on this renowned stage. The Romanian state did not allow me to go, they wanted

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Horea Popescu to be sent to Moscow, as he was from the National Theatre, and the pretext was that I was busy. Then a letter was sent from the Russians saying "we will stage the show when he will be available, until then we will stage no Romanian play". In the end, I was allowed to leave for Moscow, staged *O Noapte Furtunoasă*, it was highly appreciated and awarded. I then got invited to the Galeria Theatre in Poland, it happened the same way, my shows were seen and evaluated in Bucharest and *Năpasta* was selected to be staged at their theatre.

I. N.: Regarding your experience in the United States, how did you manage to leave for America and what did you do there?

A. V.: I have been invited to Hungary, at their National Theatre, to stage *Woyzeck* on the stage from Pest and *Năpasta* in Buda, but I could not carry out this agreement, as a lady from America, Edith Markson, the vice-president of the Ford Foundation, came on a tour and saw a number of Romanian performances and chose in the end one Romanian director, as well as 6 other directors from Eastern Europe to meet the American theatre. This was happening in March 1982. I was chosen after Mrs. Markson had seen *Năpasta* and *O Noapte Furtunoasă*; she immediately said that she would like to invite me to America on a study and research program. I stayed in the States for a month, where I met relevant artists. I met Sam Shepard, the dramatist, when his *True West* premiered in San Francisco; I met Lanford Wilson as well. Afterwards, the Americans sent Marshall W. Mason to Romania, who at that point was the director of Circle Repertory Theatre in New York. He came, he saw *O Noapte Furtunoasă*, he said that it is an extraordinary play and he invited me to stage it at his theatre. I was not allowed to do so, as they said that this is a play to which a good translation cannot be granted, which was partly true, and also because the play would miss a part of, how should I put it, the antipatriotic misery structure, as Mrs. Suzana Gâdea said, which should not be brought to America. I carried on with the conversations with Mr. Mason. I was going to do a play by an American dramatist, Bishop, but did not manage to carry it out, as, after a show in Moscow, Robert Corrigan came to Romania. He was the dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of

Texas at Dallas, where there was a famous theatre department. Tadashi Suzuki, Herbert Blau had been working there. And after Mr. Corrigan had seen my two shows, he wrote a laudatory article in *The Synthesis* about my work and offered me a Fulbright scholarship. Even though I could only benefit of this scholarship three years after the last one, such as the one received in 81, the research scholarship, the American Government found a way and I managed to leave for the States after just two years. For the Romanian people the Fulbright scholarship was an agreement between the Romanian state and the U.S. known as a family scholarship. I was not allowed to leave, but through a strategy made by Mr. Corrigan and the Fulbright team, I left for Canada, stayed there for two weeks and then left for America. So I had finally received my scholarship, but not in Romania, because the Romanian state wanted another fellow director to be sent, I do not know his name, I only know that he was refused by the Americans. Then, thanks to the Romanian ambassador at Washington, Mircea Malița, a deal was made and I was allowed to receive my first Fulbright scholarship, for theatre. After three months the Romanian Embassy announced me that I was supposed to return to my country, as the visa was not granted for 10 months, the way it was supposed to be, but for only 3 months. At that point, Mrs. Merrie Blocker from the State Department intervened, this was happening in 1983, and she said that the agreements signed by both parts must be respected, so if the scholarship had been granted, it had to be deemed as valid. This way, I was granted another three months in the States. At that time I was receiving complaints from home because of the fact that I was not going back to Romania. My wife was recovering from thyroid cancer, I had two kids, and my brother-in-law, who was an Associate Professor at the French Department at the University of Bucharest, started to be in trouble because of me not returning home, even though I was legally out of the country, even though my visa had expired. The American Government did an extraordinary thing then. At my request, they split the scholarship in two and I was allowed to go back to Romania with another 6 months of scholarship left and one linking month.

I received a second Fulbright scholarship as well, this one on film, so I would return to America for three months per year from 83 to 88, which was very convenient to me, since I was able to spend time with my family. The

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Americans made a gesture of great nobility, changing the structure of the scholarship, and so I was able to work on *Richard III* with the students from the Theatre Department in Milwaukee, a show that has been seen by Herbert Blau, by Richard Schechner, by great names from the academic theatre world, and at their recommendation, my film was seen too, *Înghițitorul de săbii* (*The Sword Swallower*), made in Romania in 1981, which premiered at Bucharest and also had some problems with its screening, so they offered me this second Fulbright scholarship on film.

I ended my theatre scholarship program in Milwaukee, at the New York University, where I held courses and a workshop, and in Dallas. The film scholarship program was placed at the California Institute of the Arts, where there was a private institute, the last dream of Walt Disney. There I worked as a Professor and I held the course *Sense and Image*. I received a number of invitations to candidate for directing jobs or to become the department manager at some universities, but since I had a visa that was only available for three months, the documents could not be validated, so I could not postulate for the positions. But when I went back home, I would go on tour around Europe with *Năpasta*, which was a favorite because it only needed, in order to be staged, including the crew, a total of 10 people and it had no political implications. We would travel by bus, sometimes sleep in it and only get accommodation in the countries where we were supposed to play.

I. N.: What happened after the fall of the communist regime in Romania?

A. V.: After '89 I received two American programs for continuing my work, done from 1981 to 1988, each one month long, one of which was a program on management, and the other on information regarding the new voice in American drama. I have been invited to Louisville in Kentucky, where I worked *Uncle Vanya* in 84, and *Richard II* ten years after, presented at the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival. So that is about it. I wrote articles and staged plays in Sweden, plays by Chekov, Büchner, Shakespeare, I staged *D-ale Carnavalului* (*The Carnival Scenes*) in Reykjavik. I had the opportunity to meet celebrities, I met Anthony Quinn in New York, we had a talk, he saw my films and sent the actors, Albulescu, George Constantin, Rebengiuc, congratulations

and the program of *Zorba the Greek*, the Broadway show made by Cacoyannis. Afterwards, I have been on tour with my film *Ana* (2014), which had its preview at Thessaloniki and premiered at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York. Some of my films were seen at MoMA as well. I had a meeting with the Film Department Chief, after having seen Scorsese's *The Aviator*, we talked and he wanted to see my films, this happened in 2001-2003.

I. N.: What do you think was most important to your development as an artist?

A. V.: There was a time in my student years when there was a certain type of relaxation, and the great directors of the Romanian theatre from then, Ciulei, Pintilie, Penciulescu, Moisescu, Esrig, managed to set us in a climate where the value did count. During that time, the Romanian theatre was known all around Europe. I can tell you that Liviu Ciulei was invited in the West to talk about theatre management, without him being a party member, but rather coming from a bourgeois background. Despite all of the troubles and the terrible censorship, art, I mean real art, especially theatre, but also the novel and the poetry, had moments of great quality, which counted for my development and for the development of my generation too, meaning Andrei Șerban, Ivan Helmer, Aureliu Manea, then I, Cătălina Buzoianu, Petrică Ionescu, Dan Micu, Iulian Vișa, so there was a massive group of mature artists, who shed light on the paths younger artists would take.

Europe and America were interested in what was happening in Romania, the contacts were very important, I have met great personalities and attended premieres, and all of these, on one side, made it possible for certain values to grow stronger within all of us who had this opportunity, to meet people and become known, and on the other side, it strengthened the dignity and the confidence in art. I have worked in theatre, in film, I have held courses both in and outside Romania, I worked with both students and professionals. What I can say is that the bounds that were built then still exist.

I am now in Iași (Iassy) and I have talked to the students about Bergman, there are 100 years since his birth, and I have told them how important it was that the great screenplays had been translated and we were thus able to study them in a publication of film research. And I mean screenplays by Bergman,

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Buñuel, Zeffirelli, Fellini, Tarkovsky. I had a meeting with Bergman and our talk somehow opened my eyes towards a way that was mine, but it mattered more through him. It was also very important that I studied his work as a theatre director, that I have seen his shows. I can say that God helped me to have the necessary connections for the natural development of an artist, from my youth until now, close to old age. Yet again I must say that everything depends on a happening that is not only happening, it depends on us whether we take ourselves seriously and it also depends on luck, if you make this luck to be part of your work, and artistic work does not mean drudgery, it is rather a type of work which creates a certain type of excitement, of restlessness, and puts you in a rather solitary state.

I have also written a lot, I have written for many Romanian publications, this was really important. I have released a book last year and another one not a long time ago, because this type of work keeps me alert and interested and makes me want to research and to explore. I became visible thanks to Caragiale, Shakespeare and Chekhov. I simply find joy in speaking, writing and working.