A Dialogue on the Romanian Contribution to the Project of Total Theatre: Ion Sava and The Round Theatre *(1944)*

Cristian RUSU and Ștefana POP-CURȘEU[1]

Lecturer PhD Cristian Rusu (1972) is a stage designer at the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre and a visual artist. He teaches art history and stage design at the Faculty of Theatre and Film at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. He holds a PhD from Babeș-Bolyai University with a thesis on *The Project of Total Theatre 1919-1970* (2015). As a stage designer, he is the co-author of several highly acclaimed, award-winning theatre productions in national and international theater festivals. As a visual artist, he is represented by Galeria Plan B Berlin.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Cristian, your current artistic interests and the scenography you develop for the performances you work on betray the strong influence that the historical avant-garde movements have had on you. In your 2015 doctoral thesis, you also focused on the fascinating utopic European theatre projects of Modernism. What made you pursue this subject so passionately and what is the role of the avant-gardes in your creative process, whether theatrical or not?*

---

[1] *Faculty of Theatre and Film, UBB Cluj; pop_curseu@yahoo.com*

Cristian Rusu: I think that my fascination for Modernism is rooted in my conviction that it's still very much relevant, no matter what Post-Modernist theoreticians postulate. I believe that it's a great medium for efficient exploration, not just something to gloss over, as critics would have it. Modernism has programmatically tried to make its utopias a reality through social, political and artistic projects. These became phenomenon that invented their own language to redefine the world and its representations. From here on out, there was only a small step towards the utopic theatre projects I chose to research, which belong, in fact, to Total Theatre. The many languages of Modernism are my main source of inspiration in my work as a visual artist; they help me think about visual domains which interest me. My main focus as a visual artist is *space* (this is implicit in scenography as well). The Modernist thinking pattern is easily detectable in most of my artistic projects. Even if I'm researching the idea of space, these influences translate more timidly into theatre; I can't always bring the cultural landmarks that are essential to me as a visual artist on stage. On the other hand, this doesn't mean I didn't (successfully) attempt to insert them in my productions in bigger or smaller doses along the years.

Ș. P-C.: *Even before the avant-garde, the history of theatre, from the ancient Greeks to the richness of medieval theatre, is a testimony of the many scenic forms which prioritized different aspects of performance: the acting space and the actor's freedom of movement, the acoustic quality of space, the possibility of architectural representation or even immediate utility and the facility of assembly and disassembly. The spectators' experience changes and shifts according to the propositions of the stage, but no matter the form employed, the actor-spectator relationship remains essential. Certain exemplary theatre practitioners with a revolutionary theorization capability envisioned and wished for a Total Theatre which would have allowed a complete acting and viewing experience. What can you tell us about these quasi-utopic projects and the way in which they influenced European scenic conceptualization?*

C.R: The aspiration towards a Total Theatre is, in fact, the aspiration towards creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* (a total work of art). The genealogy of this obsession is quite famous. To recreate a suggestive timeline about the

development of this project, I'd like to mention Richard Wagner, who theorized the unification between performance and performance space in pre-modern terms. Around the early 1900s, the idea that it was necessary to abandon theatre halls to play in circus tents emerged (Lugné-Poë, Firmin Gemiér, Max Reinhardt); later on, the reformation of the idea of stage also came into play (Adolphe Appia, Gordon Craig, Jaques Copeau, Louis Jouvet). The people coming up with these innovations were all working in theatre, not architects. In the 1920's, because of technological development, there was a near-scientific necessity to elaborate total theatre projects (the help of radical, avant-garde architects was crucial at this point); it all began with Walter Gropius' notorious 1927 project for Erwin Piscator. From there onwards, several projects emerged, in both Europe and the United States of America, where Norman Bel Geddes[2]'s projects conveyed the ideas of Modernism. The common characteristics of these projects are defining features of a utopic modernist project: the abolishment of Italian style frontality to create a unique performance space, the idea of circularity so as to make the spectator's position more "democratic" (during the epoch, the division of the viewing space in ground floor seats and loges was seen as a way of ordering the public according to social class), not to mention the techno-central aspect of the "theatrical machine"[3], which had to take into account an overwhelmingly mobile scenic technique that included cinematographic projections or other sophisticated visual auxiliaries. No wonder these buildings were never built.

Ș.P-C.: *What is the Romanian contribution to these visionary projects? Were such attempts to revolutionize the stage also present in Romania?*

C. R: Avant-garde Romanian theatrical culture contributes to the gallery of unexecuted projects through the *Round Theatre* project, by director and scenographer Ion Sava. According to his observations though, the avant-garde culture came in late and diluted in Romania. Ion Sava (1900-1947) was

---

[2] Norman Bel Geddes was a scenographer and architect and close collaborator of Max Reinhardt in the United States of America for his productions. He designed a series of "total theatres" between 1914 and 1931.

[3] Terms in which Gropius describes his total theatrical project in 1927.

an astounding theatrical artist and flaunted an impressive knowledge concerning both theatre and the visual arts- he only worked for 16 years, but his career was extremely fruitful. He staged 120 performances, created stage sets, made sketches, had exhibitions, published many insightful pieces on theatre, took part in conferences and directed a movie (*Escadrila albă / The White Squadron*, 1943). His texts were collected and published in 1981 in a book titled *Teatralizarea Teatrului / The Theatralisation of the Theatre.*[4]

Ș.P-C.: *Can you go into detail about how Ion Sava became immersed in this project? What was his artistic journey?*

C.R.: Ion Sava began his career as a director in 1930 at the Iași National Theatre after graduating Law and working in the justice sector for a short while. In 1938, he began working at the Bucharest National Theatre and staging performances in the studio hall. He returned to Iași in 1939 and then went to Italy for the first time. In 1940, he became the chief executive of the Iași National Theatre, but did not maintain this function for long. In 1941, he returned to Bucharest and pleaded with the rectory of the University of Bucharest for the creation of a "theater section" within the institution; his sustained efforts lasted until 1944, but were in vain. In 1942, he traveled to Italy once again for three months, a journey which motivated him to reform Romanian theatre and its choice of dramatic texts, theatrical architecture and stage technique. During this time, he met Anton Giulio Bragaglia[5] and Mariano Fortuny[6]. Exchanging ideas with the two (and many others he interacted with) clarified the notion of *Round Theatre* as shape and concept for Sava. Additionally, he made preparations to shoot a movie and visited various studios so as to bring to life a joint Romanian and Italian production. He returned to theatre in 1944 after having finished shooting *Escadrila albă /*

---

[4] Sava I., *Teatralitatea teatrului*, Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981.

[5] Futurist artist also involved in theatre, with a radical vision on theatre reform during the early 20th c. Bragaglia even proposed a theatre project with simultaneous scenes in 1923. This was completely utopic and impossible to stage at the time.

[6] Mariano Fortuny (1871-1949) was a renowned fashion designer, visual artist, scenographer and a master of lighting techniques, domain in which he innovated and theorized.

The White Squadron, a war propaganda movie only talked about in Romania in the late 90's. He then dedicated himself to staging performances until 1947, the year in which he passed away. Sava wrote about scenography, stage technique and theatrical architecture in critical terms; his wish was to bring profound change to the institutionalized Romanian theatre system. The references he used in the articles he presented during conferences show that Sava was familiar with the most recent information on these topics. He was also familiar with novelties pertaining to avant-garde theatrical architecture and scenography, stage technique and lighting, the visual arts avant-garde, as well as an excellent connoisseur of the history of these domains. His most important critical texts, which also offer a series of potential innovations, are *Teatrul Rotund* (1944), *Scenotehnica / The Stagecraft* (1946) and *Scenotehnica în România / The Stagecraft in Romania* (1946).

Ş. P-C.: *Did the idea for the Round Theatre appear in a special context, in response to certain needs, or was it more of a by-product of theater philosophy, an ideal projection of Ion Sava's, taking into account the aesthetic and architectural tendencies launched by the European avant-garde?*

C. R.: The text on the Round Theatre appeared in a November 1944 issue of *Democraţia* and it openly discussed the necessary reconstruction of the Bucharest National Theatre, weakened in 1940 by an earthquake and completely destroyed in September 1944 by a German bombing. Ion Sava merely described and sketched out his project; two artistic sketches and one technical drawing were published alongside it. He would have liked to have his proposition analyzed by architects, but nothing came to fruition. Sava's call to the "reconstruction" of the National Theatre was not a sterile call to action for the physical reconstruction of a building, but rather a signaling of the necessity for the total regeneration of this art. The first step would have been to build a new type of theater. Two decades late to the cause, Sava aligned himself with the theatre projects of the interwar avant-garde. He expressed his public revolt (as a pioneering Romanian man of theatre) against the design of Italian theatre, also perpetuated in Romania, about which he wrote that "the mid-19th century Romanians suddenly awoke to

find ready-built theatres made after the scale-models and samples of the workhouses around the «Viennese Burgtheater», shrunken to meet Oriental standards."[7]

Sava's revolt, mirrored in the emergent criticism on eclectic theatre architecture, targeted the prevalence of Naturalistic theatre on the Romanian stage. He also consistently expressed his discontent with Italian theatre. Being very well informed, he brought into discussion the strongest example of theatrical architecture failure from the mid-war period, the Pigalle theatre in Paris, a "theatrical machine" much too heavy in its perfection:

> "Theatres have been built with the same preoccupation for luxury in the halls, but mere superficial modifications have been made to the stage: they've installed a revolving stage, a stage that fans out, a train stage and a stage with multiple floors. The Parisian Pigalle was supposed to be a benchmark of innovation, but failed miserably. Why didn't these mechanisms fulfill the needs of modern stage techniques? Because they did not modify the rectangle and its insertion between the ramp, the wings and the curtains. The main problem is changing this arrangement, it has persisted for centuries."[8]

After having showcased the necessity of changing the performance space, the building and the "box of sweets"[9] design of the hall (as he describes it), Sava proposed changes regarding the capacity of a theatre fit for a city like Bucharest in the 1940's. He lucidly observed the intimate relationship between the type of drama and the way in which it can be staged in the available space, coming to the conclusion that in Bucharest

---

[7] Sava I., *Scenotehnica în România*, p. 335. The allusion made here refers to Romanian and Transylvanian theatre architecture; at the beginning of the 19th century, theatres were built by Viennese architecture companies (București, Iași, Cernăuți, Cluj, Oradea). All buildings remain unchanged at the date of this article's writing (the only exception is the theatre of Timișoara, which has been rebuilt many times due to fires).

[8] Sava I., *Teatrul Rotund /The Round Theatre*, p. 355.

[9] Sava I., p. 355. A clear irony to the eclectic style of the 1900; the Viennese style of the architecture company Helmer & Fellner.

> "there is no use in building a big theatre yet. Such a theatre requires great effort- a repertoire, actors and stage technique- which we cannot deliver. […] Taking into account its repertoire and the people it's meant to serve, the Bucharest National Theatre should have no more than one thousand places." [10]

For the insurance of the economic well-being of the theatre, Sava proposed two 600 seat studios in addition to the main performance hall so that the potential maximum number of spectators present at three parallel evening performances would have been 2200.
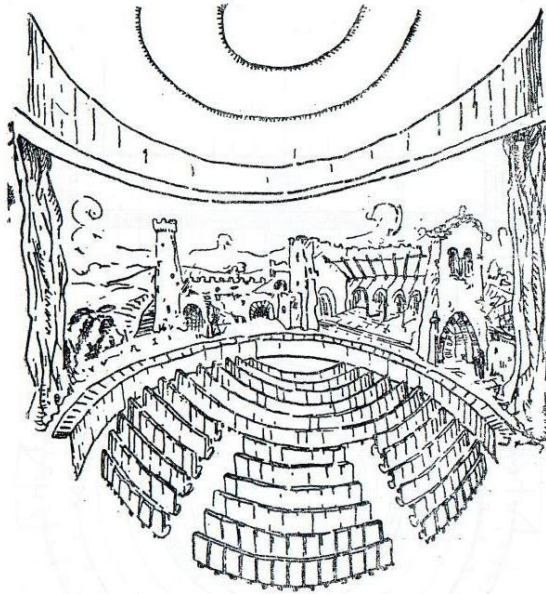

Fig. 1: Ion Sava, Teatrul Rotund/ The Round Theatre, impression drawing (1944)

In a literary crescendo worthy of a director, Sava dedicated the last part of his text on the Round Theatre to problematizing theatrical forms. He presents his innovative spatial concept for the new (Romanian) theatre, a

---

[10] Sava I., p. 357.

section which probably came as a shock to his less cultured contemporaries. His proposition was the creation of a circular/round theatre, with a ring stage. The revelation of this circular theatrical form was enveloped in poetical and mystical elements; Sava evoked a nocturnal visit to the Roman Coliseum as a source of inspiration. A more realistic analysis of his idea points towards his passion for avant-garde European theatre projects corroborated with the company he kept in Italy. There, he had surrounded himself with the last representatives of the futuristic avant-garde, the likes of Giulio Bragaglia, who already imagined a radical stage device in 1923.

> "What is the round theatre? A circular plateau, like a revolving arena, which honors the public. Spectators no longer have to be surrounded by walls (…) or look through rectangular windows; they will be surrounded instead by a circular stage. A declivitous stage with stairs makes possible the installment of 20-30 types of stege sets, be they fixated, isolated or a single grandiose décor which allows the entrance of horseback riders, vehicles etc." [11]

Ș. P-C.: *We're dealing with a revolutionary idea of the period in Romania. It's also good to keep in mind that the scenic form of "round theatre" existed in the Middle Ages as a prerequisite for the staging of mysteries, and additionally, certain forms of Romanian folkloric theatre (e.g. Irozii) are played in a circular form, with the spectators gathered around the actors. Ion Sava was a connoisseur of this type of theatre and its masks. Do you think this might have influenced his idea? How do we compare this project to the ideas circulating in the other European countries at the time?*

C. R.: Circular theatre forms are archetypal. Architects and theatre experts the likes of Jean-Guy Lecat and Richard Southern define them as spontaneous theatre architectures.[12] Sava himself noted that "the circle is the geometrical form of socialization"[13]. The invention of the *Theatre-in-the-Rotund* in Anglo-

---

[11] Sava I., p. 362.

[12] See Lecat, J.- G., / Todd A., *The Open Circle*, Palgrave MacMillian, New York, 2003; Southern R., in Joseph S., (edit.) *Actor and Architect*, University of Toronto Press, 1964, p. 48.

[13] Sava I., p. 359. In French in original: "*la figure géometrique de la sociabilité*".

Saxon culture[14] and *Théâtre en rond* (André Villiers)[15] in the French theatrical tradition were true landmarks. Despite this, we must be careful about the way in which we scrutinize Sava's proposed virtual performance, not letting it be minimized by the universal and archetypal idea of circularity in the performing arts: in the case of a "round theatre", the theatrical apparatus moves around the public instead of making viewers move around it. The Round Theatre presupposes the circularity of the performance with the spectator as its immovable center. The first use of the ring stage was in a scenographic installation made by Jacques Polieri in 1960's Paris during the third Avant-garde Art Festival, which he himself organized. The mechanism was very small in scale compared to what would actually be needed within a theater. Naturally, the idea was not new, but hardly anyone in 1940 Romania knew about the projects of Austrian Oskar Strnad (*Rundtheater*, The Circular Theatre, 1921-1924, based on architect Alfred Bernau's 1914 patent), Polish partners Andrzej Pronaszko and Szymon Syrkus (*Simultaneous Theatre*, 1927-1929)[16], Belgian Renaat Braem (1934) or any other radical theatre architecture endeavors which focused on the circular mobility of the stage or audience. All of these projects (and many more yet unmentioned) had circularity and techno-centrism in common. Sava argued that his project was valuable because he had received approval from Bragaglia and architect Valenti:

> They both agreed that the *Round Theatre* is the grand formula of the future of Performance and that the project was meant to motivate authors of dramatic texts to widen the frames of their fantasy- they wouldn't have to be terrorized by the tight schedule in which intermezzos necessary for changes of stage sets would ruin the unity of their show."[17]

---

[14] See Joseph S., (edit.), *Actor and Architect.*

[15] See Villiers A., *Le Théâtre en rond*, Libraire théâtrale, Paris, 1958.

[16] See *Avant-garde Theatre Projects in Poland: 1923 – 1939. Andrzej Pronaszko and Szymon Syrkus*, Studia Dramatica UBB, 1/2012, p. 127-145. This project, alongside that of Strnad, was showcased in several universal theatre exposition during the inter-war period and thus became renowned in avant-garde circles.
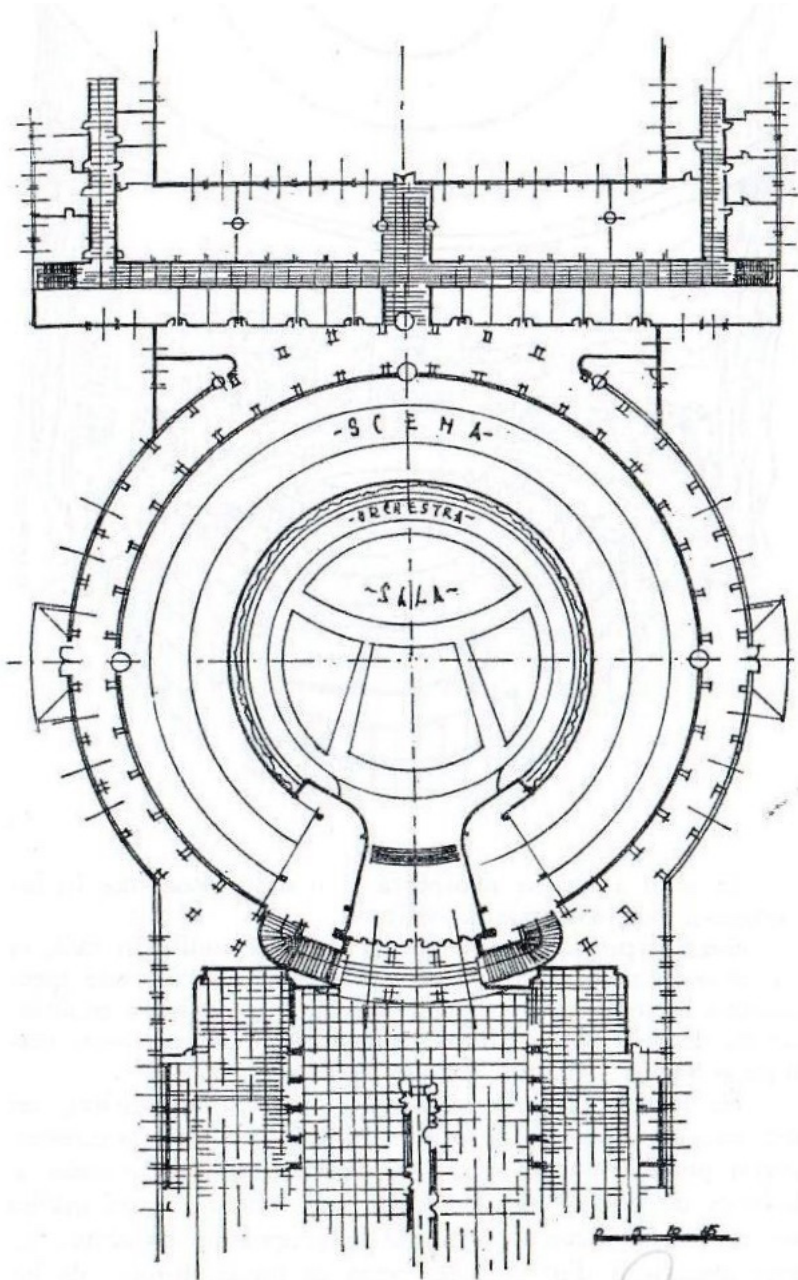
[17] Sava I., p. 360.

Fig. 2: Ion Sava, Teatrul Rotund/ The Round Theatre, plan (1944)

As is the case for all other ring-shaped stage projects, no concrete description is available for the separation of performance spaces in the visual field. We imagine that it could have only been done by way of an intelligent and sophisticated lighting maneuver. When speaking in terms of 20 to 30 decors, it's obviously a scenic presupposition, just like Sava's prediction of a single, grandiose circular stage set. Curiously, Sava keeps describing other imagined types of stage interventions within this ultra-modern theatrical project: "With a couple of steps and some columns, the most spectacular antique décor will be easily assembled and extravaganzas will have an adequate domain for the entrances and exits of Charming Princes and seductive villains…"[18]

It's difficult to understand the image of morphological ring-stage theatre (on top of which Sava's Greek-naturalist and candid-provincial images of stories and extravaganzas with fantastic characters and horseback riders overlap) in conjunction to the iconoclastic abstract-constructivist image of scenic space in Polish *Simultaneous Theatre*. Conceived in "total" parameters, the inconsistency of the modern vision (with regards to visual representation and the nature of performance in theatre halls) speaks for the true level of tolerance towards the radical vocabulary of the avant-garde in the 1940s Romania.

Like many of the Romanian artists he criticized for their temporal incongruity with the avant-garde, Ion Sava remained the prisoner of a marginal (and highly nationalistic) avant-garde current, demonstrating, as a matter of fact, the limitation of the universal conceptions of the Romanian avant-garde.

Ș. P-C.: *Do you think that today we have the possibility to recover this visionary idea of Ion Sava's? Scenography has evolved at an astounding pace in Europe. Where does Romanian theatre and Romanian scenography stand in the 21st century?*

C. R.: In my opinion, today's spatial configurations of scenography (without taking into account the particular representational situations of every scenic concept) are merely ingeniously recycled forms, reinterpreted from the

---

[18] Sava I., p. 362.

inventory of Modernism or history of theatre. The spaces in which we are forced to work limit our creativity to a certain extent. The recycling of representational modes is infinite; we can always find a pattern to help us stage, connect or comment on our scenic creations. We must admit that, whether we like it or not, frontality has already triumphed in theatre and I don't ever envision it being dethroned, at least not in the near future. Let's not forget that the concept of frontality has contributed to the invention of the cinema, the TV and ultimately, the computer and its extension, the internet.[19] Nowadays we make theater in whatever theaters we have and whatever alternative spaces we can use! In April 1936, Meyerhold wrote a critical text titled *Elemente pentru compoziția unui spectacol / Elements for the composition of a stage performance*.[20] The text synthetizes a lot of shortcomings when it comes to "traditional", frontal theatre[21], while also showcasing the values of avant-garde theatre, which deconstruct (theoretically, at least) frontality through innovative techniques (visual-mechanics, staging techniques). Meyerhold's punctual critical text is a compressed version of decades of research done by avant-garde thinkers in the field of theatre reform and offers practical conclusions. I think that it was a combination of Ion Sava's curiosity, authenticity and love for innovation that motivated him to seek to modernize and revolutionize Romanian theatre, starting with the building's architecture and the potential scenic technique and culminating in the art of scenography and directing. All these projects I've researched have had, in every case, one common enemy: the purely technical inability of theatrical architecture to build spaces that would accommodate the theories of the theatrical avant-gardes of the 20th century.

Ș. P-C.: *Thank you, Cristian, for this journey into the history of stage space and set design.*

---

[19] Even the illusion of 3D is a by-product of this need to go beyond conventional frontality.

[20] *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Mihai Eminescu National Theatre, Timișoara, 2012., p. 130-134.

[21] At that time, Meyerhold called it *naturalistic* theatre because the revolt of the Russian, and ultimately Soviet, avant-garde that he adhered to was against the conceptualization of theatre in a naturalistic fashion.