

Play That DADA

**Book review: *Dada se dă-n spectacol* (Dada Shows Off),
by Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Ion Pop,
Școala Ardeleană Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2023**



The volume *Dada se dă-n spectacol*¹ (Dada Shows Off) is structured in two parts. It is a book that accompanies a show, but at the same time, it provides a useful perspective on Dadaism and the way it is mirrored today. A historical event – the celebration of 100 years of Dadaism has been the starting point of a common reflection. Three researchers have joint views and have revisited the fascinating phenomenon called *Dadaism*. The perspectives Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Ion Pop have taken into account in building their frame involve: an artistic layer – a play was written, and a show was put on, but also a solid anchoring in working with the reweigh of Dadaism into today's pages. Professor and artistic director of the National Theatre in Cluj, Ștefana Pop-Curșeu explores her triple role: researcher, initiator of the project that resulted in the above-mentioned performance and this book but also as an actor, while she understands the process from within and observes its constant conversions.

What draws immediate attention is the artistic products that the creative team had in mind – creating the play (after having been through successive stages of research and also of documenting the whole process), staging the play and working with a variety of directions (literature, visual arts, choreography), having in mind not to mimic the pre-existing material, but to offer an original perspective on the movement. The team aimed at including elements they considered as part of the Dadaist movement identity: the Dada evenings in Cabaret Voltaire, the Dadaist manifests, Hugo Ball's costume, the usage of masks, the Dada dances, phonetic and simultaneous poems.

The volume benefits from a great visual support – photographs by Nicu Cherciu, renowned Romanian theatre photographer. There is an obvious pleasure in examining the details, in the appetite for the ludic action – visible in the playful insertions, the collages, posters and objects that have been chosen in the pages of *Dada se dă-n spectacol*. *Every Tzara has his Dada*², the play, is

¹ Ștefana Pop-Curșeu, Ioan Pop-Curșeu and Ion Pop, *Dada se dă-n spectacol* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Școala Ardeleană, 2023).

² *Every Tzara has his Dada* is a show produced by The National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca within the project Dada > 100. Viață/ Artă/ Muzeu [Dada > 100 Life/ Art/ Museum], a coproduction with the Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeș-Bolyai University and Persona Association.

offered as part of the book (in multilingual translations) and it is accompanied by images. As if on an effective timeline, we are exposed to photos, from the process that anticipated the show, from the rehearsals, from the show but also during the touring that followed the opening. The idea has a double aim – first, the reader is offered a privileged glimpse on stage – to admire postures, costumes and identify the scenes of the play. The second is to invite the reader to a journey in which they become familiar to the process, therefore also, backstage by means of the pictorial itinerary.

Part II constitutes the scientific section and includes studies of the authors. Professor Ion Pop, expert in the analysis of avant-garde movements focuses on a short history of artistic manifests, zooms in the Dada manifests, and explores the elements that create what he calls (legit) theatrical potential. Amongst them: the construction of the discourse, the “rhetorical excess”, the comical and caricatural exaggeration, “the militant exaltation”, half serious and half parodical, the image of the “farceur clown” *who mocks his own pain in order to make the gallery laugh*, being seen on stage, buffoonery, spontaneity, irony and self-irony, changing the status of the *author* and of the *actor*, adding existential and theatrical substance but also the derision in order to emphasise the radical attitude towards the cultural values of the past – to name but a few.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu underlines the “constant presence of verve and paradox both in speech and the artistic behaviour”, the despair and poetic vein which, in the author’s opinion links Tristan Tzara to Hamlet “the poet, the mad and the buffoon” and also to Eugène Ionesco in terms of self-staging. What is more, she adds the feature of the Dadaist, a histrionic character, a character in his own story. In view of the fact that Tzara’s stated goal was to shock his audience, the spontaneity that was implicit part of the artistic acts in Cabaret Voltaire entitles the researcher to talk about the way the triad *author-actor-performer* is staged and how the Dadaist shows were “parades of images, of words, of movements”, of freedom, a “verbal and visual violence imposed to the characters and to the audience”, the latter, both accomplice, participative and “victims”. A second study signed by the same author questions the role of the masks in Dadaist poetry/shows/manifests. The unusual masks (to say the least) that were used come, as Ștefana Pop-Curșeu shows, from the “ritualic

sphere”, but also targeting sensitivity and an area of searching for origins. Another category is “the primitive mask” which performs an “exorcism of European art and culture”. A third category is identified: “the archaic Romanian mask”. As all of the above-mentioned types, they are modernized and refined in the Dadaist universe. Pictures of the real masks and of the ones recreated for *Every Tzara has his Dada* offer not only illustrations but serve also as historical anchors to the Dadaist reality.

Professor Ioan Pop-Curșeu enlarges in his two studies included in this book the relationship of the Dadaism and cinema. He talks about the *Dada movies and the cinepoems* and defines them as *avant-gardist trouvaille*. Movies have the advantage of being easily decoded, reminds us I. Pop-Curșeu. Dada movies are detached from the narration and realism, they operate with optical experiments and subtle games, sometimes altering clarity (by means of filters, close-ups, and sudden cuts, for instance). One important aspect is the question of language. An important aesthetic mark is given by interlacing poetry and pictures. The author discusses the appeal to silent movies and analyses Benjamin Fondane’s *cinepoems*.

The volume is a multi-facet approach to one of the most captivating artistic movements. Working with different lenses (dramaturgical, theatrical, history of art, with a focus on the tools deriving from literature, photography, and cinema), the authors reveal a passionate instrument, meticulously prepared which takes the reader / viewer on a journey that revisits Dadaism, its main lines of force and the characters / figures that have become part of last century’s cultural heritage and create strong inspiration even today.

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