

## *The Beginnings of Stage Directing in the Romanian Theatre. A Historical View<sup>1</sup>*

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**Abstract:** Lacking a consolidated tradition in the art of stage acting and directing, the Romanian national theatres, which had only existed for a few decades, faced a series of legislative, administrative and aesthetic reforms at the beginning of the 20th century. These reforms aimed to acclimatize the most important novelties of modern performance, just emerging on Western stages. Such changes strongly impacted the conservative world of declamation and rhetoric, still indebted to the Romanticist school of theatrical interpretation. This paper aims to provide a cultural-historical perspective on the generational and artistic conflict that led to the modernization of the Romanian *mise-en-scène* and to the consolidation of the director's status, in the "century of directing", focusing on Alexandru Davila's contribution to the process.

**Keywords:** Romanian theatre, directing, scenography, performing, realism, modernism.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper summarizes, translates, and adapts some parts of the introductory study to the anthology *Al. Davila, Scrisori către actorul X [Al. Davila, Letters to Actor X]* (Bucharest: Bucharest University Press, 2022).

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## Introduction

In Romania, the first stage productions wearing a director's signature, with the modern connotation of the term, are paradoxically linked to the name of an old-fashioned playwright, with the 19th century patina of national Romanticism. Alexandru Davila was the son of a famous doctor of Italian origin, Carol Davila, close to the royal family and founder of the Romanian medical system. Although local cultural histories usually mention him only as the author of the historical drama *Vlaicu Vodă* (1902), A. Davila should be remembered, above all, as the first director concerned with the modern aspects of producing a show, of harmonizing the acting performances in a coherent whole, and of implementing the Realist setting *à la* Émile Zola.

The reforms that he introduced in the theatrical production at the beginning of the century, imposing the supremacy of the director and of Verism, as a post-Romanticist stage concept, recommend him as a bold trailblazer striving to move forward an inertial and amateurish cultural environment, still entrenched in the 19th century's habitudes.

## Historical Context

At the beginning of 1905, when A. Davila became the manager of the National Theatre of Bucharest, the "moderator" of the troupe was traditionally considered the most esteemed actor, "the poster star", often the veteran of the cast. Sometimes, the discreet duty of supervising the movements on the stage rested on the script adapter, Paul Gusty. At other times, the actor C. I. Nottara, a protagonist in most productions of the National Theatre of Bucharest, was the "stage director". This status, although not clearly delimited from that of the actor, recognized only informally as an authority among his colleagues, still brought him an important financial advantage, being remunerated with 300-400 lei per month.

However, in the winter of 1905, at the premiere of the play *Manasse*, the direction was signed by both the new theatre manager, A. Davila, and the actor C. I. Nottara. This strong, resentful drama, authored by the Jewish-Romanian playwright Ronetti-Roman, sparked fierce controversies on

nationalist themes<sup>3</sup>, in the press and in the theatre. Right from the start, the text became the pretext for a heated “confrontation” between the main voices of the Romanian theatre school, leading shortly to an irreconcilable split between the revered actor C. I. Nottara, honorary company member of the National Theatre, and the “pro-French” manager, A. Davila.

This moment symbolically marks the beginning of the Romanian directing, as well as the abrupt transition from the Romanticist to the Realist approach to the stage production, influenced by Zola’s aesthetics. It is the first large-scale generational confrontation in the history of Romanian theatre.

### Old vs. New School

Although C. I. Nottara played masterfully the leading role of his most memorable play, *Vlaicu Vodă*, A. Davila did not concede when it came to theatrical issues. As forementioned, the conflict between the two was sparked by the drama *Manasse*, rehearsed when Davila took office. The manager intervened decisively in the production, changing many details regarding the scenes and lines, previously established by Nottara, in his status as rehearsal director and lead performer. The play’s theme, the ideological rift between the old and the new generation, ultimately between tradition and modernity, symbolically echoes the stake of the off-stage dispute: the cultural mutations taking place in the early 20th century Romanian theatre.

The theatre historian I. Massoff recounts how, during a rehearsal, Davila, preoccupied with obtaining new effects on stage, gave acting directions to the great Nottara: “at one point, he even grabbed, with great delicacy, the arm of the stage manager himself, to show him a move that he considered more appropriate”<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> At its first staging, the play was met with protests from both the public and the specialised press, which contested its inclusion in the Romanian repertoire, given that it was authored by a Jewish playwright. See *Epoca*, Year XI, No. 45, 93, 1905; *Sămănătorul*, Year IV, No. 12, 13, 1905, among others.

<sup>4</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV [Romanian Theatre IV]*, edition prefaced and annotated by Mihai Vasiliu, (Bucharest: Minerva, 1972), 133.

Another critical moment in the collaboration of the two was the staging of V. Alecsandri's play *Fântâna Blanduziei* [*Blandusia's Fountain*], a pretext for Davila to once again advance some of his ideas on interpretation, "in the new style, rejecting declamation and bombast." Taking on the role of mentor to the young actors he brought to the National Theatre, he personally coordinated rehearsals, insisting on the performances of Marioara Voiculescu (in the role of Getta) and Tony Bulandra (in the role of Gallus), debutants whom he wanted "to shield from the mistakes of the past"<sup>5</sup>. Seemingly harmless, this euphemism could not fail to touch the illustrious professor Nottara, who saw his ex-disciples redirected to another stage approach.

At the age of full artistic maturity, C. I. Nottara was the most important representative of the Romanticist school of theatre from the late century. A student of Ștefan Vellescu, he perfected his training during a six-month internship in Paris, taking after two models of interpretation acclaimed on the stage of *La Comédie Française*: Louis Arsène Delaunay and Edmond Got, masters of declamation, both professors of dramatic art at the Paris Conservatory.

As noted in his writings, for Nottara, the fundamental conditions for a good performance were "a pleasant voice, rich in sonority" and "a more or less fiery temperament"<sup>6</sup>. As an actor and drama teacher, his focus was on the art of declamation. In the same register, but at a somewhat more abstract level, Nottara also noted for his disciples a few details of corporeality, particularly useful for acting in tragedies: "each soulful movement in the role being studied must equate to the attitude of a statue. Moreover, gestures, like the movement of the feet or the swaying of the whole body, must give an exact harmony and a rhythmic action suited to the tragic situation in the role."<sup>7</sup>

### Davila's Influence

On the other hand, Davila – who also discovered theatre in Paris, noting in the letters to his father his thrill to watch the shows from *La Comédie*

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<sup>5</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [*Romanian Theatre IV*], 115.

<sup>6</sup> C. Nottara, *Amintiri* [*Memories*], (Bucharest: State Publishing House for Literature and Art, 1960), 75.

<sup>7</sup> C. Nottara, *Amintiri* [*Memories*], 92.

*Française* and the performances of such actors like Edmond Got – was aware of the new trends on the Western stage, especially of the Realist-Naturalist movement, gaining more and more momentum in France, with the absorption of its main promoter, André Antoine, into the mainstream. Many of the artists or critics who evoke Davila's personality speak of his formative years near the modernist reformer A. Antoine and the Realist acting school of the *Libre Théâtre*, a private company born as a reaction to the thematic censorship practiced by official stages in France at that time. However, biographies show that Davila returned to Romania after graduating from *Lycée "St. Louis"*, in 1881, that is, a few years before Antoine's company was founded. No reference to this French scene reformer can be gleaned from the correspondence of his Parisian period. Only a note about Zola's "fad" and the success of his "highly amoral" novel *Assommoir*, "which I have heard is nothing but filth from beginning to end"<sup>8</sup>, betrays the rather classical tastes of the teenager.

Thus, Davila's concern for perfecting scenic illusion in line with Verism and authenticity should rather be attributed to an artistic intuition, a *Zeitgeist*, which he felt and manifested with the aplomb of great reformers.



**Fig. 1:** Alexandru Davila, in the performance *Le chant du cygne*, by Georges Duval and Xavier Roux, March 1910.

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<sup>8</sup> A. Davila, *Corespondența inedită [Unpublished Correspondence]*, edited by Marin Manu Bădescu, (Cluj: Dacia, 1973), 91.

## Aesthetic Interventions

The first aesthetic aspects upon which Davila energetically intervened as director of the National Theatre were the suitability of the sets prepared for the new premieres and the homogeneity of the troupe, conceived as an ensemble with no poster stars and no weak links. Massoff records how, taking over the rehearsals for *Manasse*, “he went to the workshops to check the sets, costumes, props”<sup>9</sup>. During his tenure the director apparently followed the same ritual for each new production in the repertoire. Davila brought on the Romanian stage the scenography revolution of Realism: each play must have its setting, contextualized and realized as truthfully as possible<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, for the first time in the history of the local theatre, significant amounts of money were allocated for the purchase of furniture and set design.

For *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a comedy of manners whose premiere took place in the autumn of 1905, the props and costumes were made after prints from England<sup>11</sup>. On this occasion, Davila acquired half of a Louis XV set, together with another, modern, furniture set, mahogany imitation, a Louis XV solid walnut table and a pedestal table; the cutlery used to serve the meal on stage was made of genuine alpaca. For the military play *The Blackout* by Franz Beyerlein, whose action takes place in an Alsatian garrison, the costumes were ordered from the Baruch House in Berlin<sup>12</sup>. Davila personally visited the workshops to ensure the quality of the decor and the accuracy of its creation. The leading role was played by an actor from the old generation, Petre Sturdza:

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<sup>9</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV [Romanian Theatre IV]*, 108.

<sup>10</sup> Petre Sturza recalls how, prior to Davila assuming leadership of the theatre, “we relied on the same set for bourgeois interiors, consisting of seven large frames, separated by columns and panels of various colours, which, according to what action happened on stage, varied their arrangement from play to play and from act to act.”, Petre Sturza, *Amintiri. 40 de ani de teatru [Memories. 40 Years of Theatre]* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1966), 212.

<sup>11</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV [Romanian Theatre IV]*, 130/133 footnotes.

<sup>12</sup> I. Massoff, *Viața lui Tony Bulandra [The Life of Tony Bulandra]* (Bucharest: Socec & Co Publishing House, 1948), 61-62.

“We rehearsed for nearly a month in trooper uniforms, with boots, spurs, helmets and swords on, all genuine and real, brought directly from Germany through the respective embassy. It was a real torture until we got used to moving and spinning in those impossibly long cavalry boots, with spurs as big as chariot-wheels, headgears, helmets, and broad, long, heavy cavalry swords.”<sup>13</sup>

This approach applies the main tenets of the Naturalist manifesto on stage, as formulated by Émile Zola in 1880. The two-dimensional background of painted canvas is now replaced by objects taken from everyday spaces. The décor, “a consequence of the need for reality”, with armchairs, tables, fully furnished lounges playing their own role, alongside the performers, the living décor “whose life is lived on stage”<sup>14</sup>, brings with it a profound rethinking of the idea of theatre and performance, triggering a fundamental change in the concept of set production. The actress Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, perhaps the most important “outcome” of Davila’s “acting method”, remembers how this scenography also involved a new technique of interpretation and a new rhythm of play, “more expressive, more in line with reality”<sup>15</sup>.

Often, the premiere poster would read alongside the cast: “The play is performed with new sets and furniture”<sup>16</sup>. The public was drawn to this transformation of the stage. Interest in the National Theatre’s productions now gained an unprecedented momentum. A relevant testimony regarding Davila’s role in revolutionizing the set design role in the show production comes from actor Vasile Brezeanu:

“He introduced for the first time in our country the enclosed salon (interior) with doors and windows. Before him, the theatre audience had not seen what perspective meant. Theatre was reduced to some scenery representing trees or walls. [...] When, under Davila – if I’m not

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<sup>13</sup> Petre Sturza, *Amintiri. 40 de ani de teatru* [Memories. 40 Years of Theatre], 213.

<sup>14</sup> Émile Zola, *Naturalismul în teatru* [Naturalism in the Theatre], apud *Arta teatrului* (Bucharest: Nemira, 2004), 224.

<sup>15</sup> Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, *Amintiri... amintiri* [Memories... Memories...] (Bucharest: State Publishing House for Literature and Art, 1960), 25.

<sup>16</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV*, 133.

mistaken, in 1906 – *Old Heidelberg* was staged, and the curtain rose in the second act, everyone in the audience wowed. You had the illusion of seeing a river flowing, a city across the river, and on stage, a garden in the middle of which stood a huge tree, things previously unseen in that era for the Bucharest audience.”<sup>17</sup>

Many other testimonies about the demands of Verism on stage, which Davila vigilantly defended, are contained in the numerous memoirs of actors from his time, some humorous, like a scene of the passionate kiss, insistently rehearsed until the sensation of reality was achieved<sup>18</sup>, others gravely serious, true lessons in theatre. In her first major role, Lucia Sturdza Bulandra confided her fears to the director:

“I had read in the text a scene where my character was overcome with horror, and I wasn’t sure how much I could express this feeling of terror. [...] Davila listened to me, tugging at his nose. It was a habit of his. And suddenly, out of nowhere, without contradicting me, he stood up right in front of me with his arms raised, fists clenched menacingly. I let out a cry of fear. Then Davila, putting a mirror in front of me, added: «Now look if your face can express horror.»”<sup>19</sup>

Among the director’s notes preserved in the National Theatre’s Library (Bucharest Archive) are several plans to reform the acting corps. To achieve a homogeneous ensemble, each actor was to play all categories of roles, following the example of the famous Novelli or Antoine, who made “extraordinary creations in fourth and fifth-hand roles”<sup>20</sup>. Thus, Davila took an important step towards the democratization of the stage and the symbolic dethronement of the “poster star.”

An illustrative situation for how Davila understood creating a seamless cast also became the reason for the definitive break between the director and the

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<sup>17</sup> Vasile Brezeanu, *Treizeci de ani în teatru* [*Thirty Years in Theatre*] (Bucharest: "Cartea Românească" Printing Press, 1941), 38-39.

<sup>18</sup> I. Massoff, *Viața lui Tony Bulandra* [*The Life of Tony Bulandra*], 63.

<sup>19</sup> Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, *Amintiri... amintiri* [*Memories... Memories...*], 26-27.

<sup>20</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [*Romanian Theatre IV*], 131.



same C. I. Nottara. For Plautus' play *The Pot*, prepared for the 1905 season opening, Davila cast the great actor in the role of the god Lar, a character who only appears in the prologue. Offended, Nottara refused the role, too small for his performance skills and record; an act of indiscipline, concluded the director, who did not hesitate to sanction him with a warning he (as he confesses in a private letter) never applied. And in *aparté*, Davila justified his choice by the tradition of ancient theatre, where this role was always played by the troupe director, and "the famous Roscius did not feel humiliated when he came to tell the Roman plebeians the plot of a comedy by Plautus or Terence"<sup>21</sup>.

During this conflict, which spanned the entire year, both the National Theatre employees and the media covering the backstage dramas split into camps: "Nottarists" vs. "Davilists". Supporters of the renowned actor, fighting the "satrap of the National Theatre", filled the publications of the time with the most furious articles. Interest in the fate of the country's first stage seemed, at least from the perspective of this scandal, very high. In solidarity with Nottara, on September 1, 1905, the troupe members launched a general strike, promptly suppressed by the director. The event polarized the public opinion around the "theatre skirmish". It was a time when the National Theatre stage became the reason for prolonged public and political debates on ethical and aesthetic themes. Issues such as the repertoire, the social role of national theatres, and the shaping of public good taste were now questioned. The theatre stepped out of the elite's exclusive zone and finally occupied broader social interests.

In pursuit of the same objective, during his tenure at the helm of the National Theatre, Davila undertook a series of social initiatives aimed at attracting a diverse audience to the theatre. At the close of the first season, he petitioned the Minister of Education for an increase in the theatre's subsidy, in order to provide free tickets to schools for matinee performances, which he envisioned as "an illustration of the dramatic literature courses taught in high school"<sup>22</sup>. In this spirit, he inaugurated a series of matinee performances in the autumn of 1905 with two mirror comedies – Plautus's *Aulularia* and Molière's *The Miser* – lecture-performances designed to reflect comparatively the model and its replica, in a dialogue spanning centuries. Furthermore, he opened

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<sup>21</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [Romanian Theatre IV], 126.

<sup>22</sup> I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [Romanian Theatre IV], 114.

workshops where sets and costumes were crafted, allowing students from the School of Fine Arts to gain practical experience, thus laying the groundwork for the Romanian scenic design school. He also requested the Tramway Society to establish special routes between 11:30 PM and 12:30 AM to accommodate the late hours at which theatre performances concluded.

### **Davila and the French Realism School**

Immediately after his removal from the National Theatre leadership (in March 1908), Davila visited Paris again. There is no preserved correspondence from this period, nor other testimonies from him or his close ones, but judging by the repertoire and stylistic preferences of his future theatre company, it is obvious that he frequented certain Parisian stages.

It was in this period that his ideas about show production and staging were more firmly shaped. Antoine's influence on Alexandru Davila's theatrical vision is probably indirect, primarily manifesting as a pan-European trend of reforming the stage towards verisimilitude. The school of scenic realism was founded around the same time by Konstantin Stanislavski in Russia and Otto Brams in Germany. However, the year spent in Paris brought Davila, a *voyeur* of famous theatres, particularly close to Antoine's method. At that time André Antoine, the founder of *Théâtre Libre* in Montmartre, the rebel who had dismantled the thematic censorship practiced in the name of morality at the end of the century in France, was now absorbed into the mainstream and started to gain popularity among the traditional audience of Parisian grand stages. Promoted by Émile Zola, for whom he staged several texts, while known in wide artistic circles as a representative of eclectic modernism, Antoine initially aimed (at *Théâtre Libre*) to put an end to the superficial rhetoric of boulevard theatres, that had spread across the Haussmannian metropolis – through his naturalistic productions, with bleeding chunks of meat hanging above the ramp, with their display of immorality, cruelty, and “unadorned” poverty. He thus revealed another Paris – one of dishonour and crime – teeming in the darkness of poor neighbourhoods<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>23</sup> Sally Debra Charnow, *Theatre, Politics, and Markets in Fin-de Siècle Paris* (Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 151-205.

However, in 1906, when he accepted to manage a theatre of great tradition like *Odéon*, located in the very heart of conservatism and convention, Antoine had other goals to achieve. Creating a broad audience for his de-tabooed theatre and, especially, extracting the theatrical performance from the area of easy entertainment, required an effort to adapt to the expectations of a sophisticated public, hard to move from the comfort of plush seats and lavishly decorated boxes<sup>24</sup>.

Thus, in 1908, the year of Davila's return to Paris, Antoine had already moved forward from his naturalistic staging phase, and was at a moment of exploring the great repertoire, aiming to educate his large audience's taste for the art of performance. Avoiding extreme experimentation programmatically, the director now proposed productions based on fidelity to the text and the period's atmosphere, adopting rather a historical-archaeological realism, as he liked to call it. One such show that Davila undoubtedly saw at *Odéon* was Corneille's *Le Cid*, staged by Antoine in 1907. The classic performance, focusing on interpretation and contextualization, in which Antoine aimed to recreate the exact atmosphere of its first performance in 1636, left a deep and everlasting mark on Davila. Two years later, he would bring Corneille's text to the Bucharest stage in its absolute premiere, and ten years later, he would write his most important theatrical feuilleton, *Scrisori către actorul X (Letters to Actor X)*, by developing ideas from this show, to which he would return obsessively and loyally throughout his life.

Another production attended by Davila during his Paris visit must have been *A Stone among Stones* by Hermann Sudermann, a contemporary play with naturalistic accents that captured the harsh life of the workforce of poor origins employed at construction sites. Antoine staged it at *Odéon* in 1908.

Davila opened the first season of his private theatre company a year later with this same text, directed by himself. The great success of the production, with nuanced interpretation in the key of Verism, void of declamatory clamour, transformed it into an emblem of the new theatre, a sample of what would come to be admirably known as "like at Davila," often heard in the Bucharest foyers after 1909.

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<sup>24</sup> Jean Chothia, *André Antoine* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 134-161.

Thus, his exposure to stagings from the maturity phase of André Antoine's activity contributed to enforce several principles about theatrical performance that Davila had already exercised during his directorship. The first is the importance of the set as a factor of contextualization and authentication of the production. The huge investments in stage furniture, coupled with changes in the lineup of set designers, created a style, a true trend, taking the Romanian stage out of the era of bidimensional presentation and non-functional props.

Another is the necessity of forming a homogeneous ensemble without leading actors and prima donnas, which led to the definitive break from Nottara and the old school. For Antoine, as for Davila, there were no small roles, just as there were no great actors. The idea of a poster star, a star around whom the entire production gravitated, the more monumental, the more opportune for the great soloist, deeply repelled both. As it emerges from *Scrisori* [*Letters*] and the way he led the theatres he was hired to manage, Davila believed that a theatre troupe is a living, flexible, adaptable organism.

### **Towards a New Law for Theatres**

Davila's crusade for amending the Theatre Law passed in 1877, which was adapted from the Napoleonic decree legislating the *Comédie Française*, began with his appointment as head of the National Theatre. He now advocated for an idea inspired by Maiorescu: the theatre should be a medium for educating the masses, should address a varied audience, and tackle socially representative themes. His vision of stage production included several extra-aesthetic aspects, aimed at making the theatre shows more accessible to the general public and ensuring a well-defined social status for actors. In the winter of 1907, under his mandate and at his proposal, one of the most significant administrative reforms was implemented – the permanent remuneration of actors contracted by the national theatres, including during the summer period.

The reform initiative was resumed with greater vigour in the autumn of 1911, with the publication of the feuilleton *Pentru viitor* [*For the Future*] in the inaugural issues of the magazine *Rampa*<sup>25</sup>. In a series of nine extensive

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<sup>25</sup> *Rampa*, Year I, no 3-20, 1911.

articles, replete with arguments and ironies reminiscent of Maiorescu's "forms without substance", Davila systematically exposes the inadequacy of the "French" law in relation to Romanian reality: from the status of the Dramatic Society with its eighteen members chosen by the "country ruler", who were to play a pivotal role in the governance of the National Theatre, to the criteria for the composition of the repertoire, from the rights and obligations of actors to the discretionary power of the director – all constitute the framework of a "refined and inquisitorial hypocrisy" and elevate to the status of law "a masterpiece of parasitism"<sup>26</sup>.

"France spread over distant Romania the beneficent light of its intellectual hearth which for four hundred years had been pouring its rays upon the world. It was natural, therefore, that blinded by the splendor of Paris, we should see only Paris and imagine that by doing everything as in Paris, we would achieve perfection from the outset. (...) We suddenly found ourselves with a central Dramatic Society, but one that could not even find at least the eighteen members required by its organic law, and which, having no roots in the country, vegetated pitifully for twenty years, without yielding any fruit or sprouts."<sup>27</sup>

However, he had to fight an endurance battle with the inflexible system, including government ministers, theatre directors, actors from the old guard, who had with effort acquired the status of members in the Dramatic Society, a guarantee of a stable income and the right to a pension.

In the winter of 1913, A. Davila presented his new theatre law project in Parliament. Through a procedural strategy, he avoided the approval of the Theatre Committees and the Ministry of Education and Cults, conservative structures hostile to initiatives in this area. Among the changes proposed by Davila's project were: the appointment of the theatre general director for a fixed term, independent of political changes occurring in the meantime, following the model of *La Comédie Française*; the composition of the repertoire based on local dramaturgy; the increase by two levels in the hierarchy among the Dramatic

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<sup>26</sup> *Rampa*, Year I, no 20, 1911.

<sup>27</sup> *Rampa*, Year I, no 3, 1911.

Society members, aimed at motivating actors' activity in the long run and reducing the salary differences between young actors and those from the old guard who had acquired coveted salary rights over time.

The project stirred discontent and anxiety among the actors. The National Theatre ensemble was once again sitting on a powder keg, and, as on other occasions, the moment was politically exploited by Davila's numerous enemies. While the Romanian Writers' Society publicly criticized him for allegedly not promoting Romanian playwrights, thus diverting the National Theatre from its fundamental role, in the 1913 season Davila announced four Romanian premieres, *Paianjănul* [*The Spider*], performed alongside *Când ochii plâng* [*When Eyes Cry*] by A. de Herz, *Cocoșul negru* [*The Black Rooster*] by Victor Eftimiu, *Poezia depărtării* [*The Poetry of Distance*] alongside *O amică* [*A Friend*] by Duiliu Zamfirescu, and *Chemarea codrului* [*The Call of the Forest*] by George Diamandy. However, far from extinguishing a conflict that had been smouldering for several years and increasing sympathy among a public sensitive to national themes, the director faced a widespread protest against the amendment of the theatre law, signed by important personalities of the theatre elites. Among the signatories were all sixteen members of the Dramatic Society, including former members of the "Davila Company," such as Tony and Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, as well as the director Paul Gusty, one of his closest collaborators. They were joined by actors from Iași and Craiova. Davila's bill is considered discretionary, intended "to trample on rank and material rights, and striking the past and the reputation of prominent artists"<sup>28</sup>.

Against the backdrop of these administrative tensions, public interest in the National Theatre once again noticeably declined, leading to the premature conclusion of the season due to lack of audience attendance.

### **An Architectural Utopia – The Theatre**

The circumstances of A. Davila's life, including an assassination attempt with uncertain causes, which he falls victim to in the spring of 1915, forced him to retire prematurely from public life. From his wheelchair, through his writing

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<sup>28</sup> *Adevărul* [*The Truth*], Year XXVII, no. 8714, December 14, 1913.

he continued to contribute innovative ideas to the process of modernizing the stage art. Throughout the years 1918-1919, in the last months of the war but especially during the period of the identity and cultural reconstruction of Greater Romania, Davila published, in the magazines *Scena* and *Rampa*, his most important feuilleton – *Scrisori către actorul X* [*Letters to Actor X*]. In these thirty-three imaginary dialogues with the ideal actor, he developed the first study of dramatic art suitable for the Romanian stage.

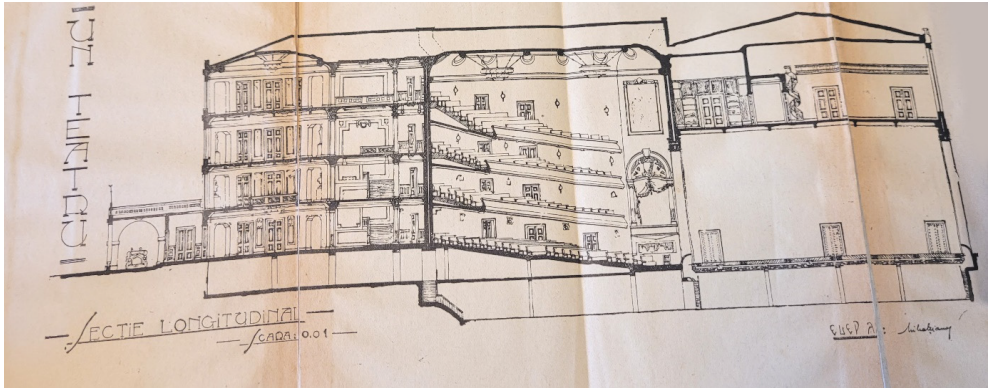
In the same project he also elaborated on the plans for an architectural utopia – the modern theatre edifice, adapted to the new scenic reality of the 20th century<sup>29</sup>. The idea of building a new theatre, matching the movement towards liberating the stage from the conventions of the past century, had troubled Davila for almost twenty years, ever since his first directorship at the National Theatre, when he invested significant sums in the modernization and equipping of the building, to the dismay of the conservative wing of the Dramatic Society.

When, a few months after the end of the World War, Davila resumed the series of letters with a text about how the building of a modern theatre should look like, the subject had become ardent. The National Theatre had been practically plundered by the German occupation, the city was barely recovering from the state of siege, during which the most important buildings in Bucharest had been requisitioned by the military command. The reconstruction of cultural institutions, the import of technology into the artistic space, and ensuring the widest possible access to cultural life were hot topics throughout Europe.

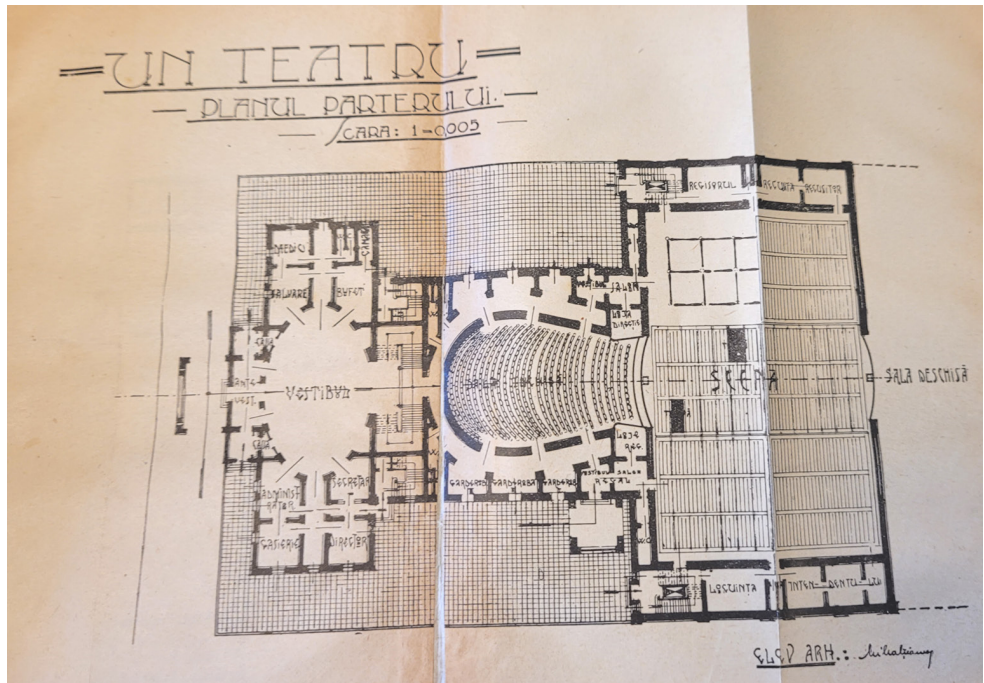
Several years later, along with revisiting the text on how a modern theatre building should look like, Davila added some architectural plans. Thus, an eclectic construction emerges, with elegant and luxurious details in the area reserved for the audience, but extremely practical in the hidden part, that of handling scenery, managing stage lighting and special effects, etc.

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<sup>29</sup> *A 21-a scrisoare către un actor* [*The 21st Letter to an Actor*], *Rampa*, Year VIII, no 2451, December 25, 1925 / *Din torsul zilelor II* [*From the Twisting of Days II*] (Bucharest: Oltenia Publishing House, 1928), 121-129.



**Fig. 2:** The sketch of the envisioned theatre plan, created in 1925 by a young architecture student under Davila's supervision



**Fig. 3:** Ground floor plan



In Davila's vision, the new theatre building had a "dual-faced stage", one enclosed for winter, and the other open towards a cool garden for summer performances. To allow for rapid and silent changes of scenery, it was to be modular, consisting of several electrically activated mobile segments. Even if Davila's envisioned theatre would have remained a privilege of the elite (the auditorium continues to reflect social hierarchy through the valuation of seating, marked by different colours, among other elements), the technical aspects of its construction were revolutionary and merited pioneering recognition in the Romanian space.

Soon, such bold projects would appear throughout Europe, marking the beginning of the avant-garde movement in performing arts. The most well-known would be the plans for the "total theatre", imagined by Erwin Piscator and Walter Gropius in 1920s in Berlin, or the vivid descriptions, not devoid of a certain technical background, through which Antonin Artaud depicts the ideal hall for the theatre of cruelty.

## Conclusions

Looking at the beginnings of Romanian directing, in the 1900-1910s, the first notable productions displaying a unitary directorial style were accompanied by more or less discreet revolts in the backstage. The stages of national theatres were not prepared to represent, beyond the text, the realities of their era, including the taboos of intimate lives and the traumas of the public sphere induced by the ongoing social-political changes.

In Romania, the real reform regarding the stage director's status took place at the level of private, non-subsidized companies, where, under the shelter of self-financing, Davila and, in his footsteps, a whole generation of stage artists, created the first shows with a recognizable director's signature. Dismissed from his position as head of the National Theatre in Bucharest, because of *Manasse* and his conflict with the old generation represented by the famous actor Nottara, Davila established himself as a stage director in his private company founded in 1909, authoring shows in tone with the latest Parisian "recipe". His career, as a man of the theatre, is undermined by two paradoxes. On the one hand, remaining a playwright attracted by Romanticist nationalism, he laid the

foundations for the new, Realist productions. On the other hand, displaying rather conservative tastes and inclinations, he pioneered the institutional and aesthetic modernization of the Romanian theatre.

In the interwar years, the modern theatrical production will be represented, in the mainstream, by directors such as Vasile Enescu, Soare Z. Soare, and, in the avant-garde, by I. A. Maican, Ion Sava, Ion Şahighian, and others. Following Davila's ground-breaking, though naive essays, a rich array of studies will be written, on topics related to the art of directing and acting, by Camil Petrescu, Mihail Sebastian, Haig Acterian, V. I. Popa, and others. In other words, Davila contributed decisively to the building of the Romanian theatre as a cultural system, modern enough to participate in the European innovations and experiments, before aligning to the main principles of the Stanislavskian school, once Romania entered the sphere of Soviet influence, in 1947.

However, we should keep in mind that this acclaimed (second) moment of (Stanislavskian) Realism comes after the first aesthetic revolution of Realism, conducted by Davila, at the beginning of the century, in order to open the door to modernity.

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