

*Liviu Ciulei and The Last Ones:  
Between Personal Trauma, Psychodrama, and Collective Drama*

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on an early role in the theatrical career of the actor, director, and scenographer Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011), created on the stage of the theatre gifted to him by his father, the civil engineer Liviu Ciulley, in 1946. The role in question is Pyotr from the play *The Last Ones* by Russian playwright Maxim Gorky, which premiered at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1948. My point is that Liviu Ciulei was drawn to this play by a psychodramatic impulse, finding in it issues related to his father who, like the protagonist in Gorky's play, had embroiled his family in a major scandal when his son was only thirteen years old. The season in which the play premiered was marked by the increasing interference of communist authorities in art, so the intense psychodramatic process through which Liviu Ciulei consciously or unconsciously worked through his early adolescent trauma intertwined with the collective drama represented by the imposition of the Soviet-enforced communist regime in Romania at the end of World War II.

**Keywords:** Liviu Ciulei, *The Last Ones*, Gorky, psychodrama, Moreno, socialist realism, communism, theatre, Romania.

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Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011) was a leading figure in Romanian theatre and filmmaking, acclaimed as an actor, director, scenographer, and theatre manager. He headed the “Lucia Sturdza Bulandra” Theatre in Bucharest from 1963 until 1972 when he was dismissed by the communist authorities following the controversy over the play *The Government Inspector* by N.V. Gogol, directed by Lucian Pintilie, which was banned after just three performances. Between 1979 and 1980, Ciulei was part of the management team at the Vivian Beaumont Theatre at Lincoln Centre in New York. He then took up the role of artistic director at the “Tyrone Guthrie” Theatre in Minneapolis from 1980 to 1986, during which time the theatre was honoured with a Tony Award in 1982. He lectured in theatre directing at Columbia University in New York (1986-1987) and in acting at the Tisch School of the Arts at New York University (1987-2003). Ciulei’s accolades include the Grand Prix at the Karlovy Vary Film Festival (1959), the Cannes Film Festival Directing Award (1964), the Australian Theatre Critics Award (1977), and the Helen Hayes Medal in 1988, among others.

Listing Liviu Ciulei’s accomplishments, however, says little about the profound identity of the artist, which was shaped by a series of personal and collective traumas. In 1936, when Ciulei was only thirteen years old, his father, Liviu Ciulley (senior), a highly respected engineer and owner of a large construction company, was tried for murder, accused of poisoning his mistress, the young actress Tita Cristescu. The engineer Ciulley was eventually acquitted due to lack of evidence, but the immense scandal triggered by the unfortunate incident – which made headlines in Romanian newspapers for over a year – not only affected his reputation but also his family. During the open trial, people literally trampled each other to witness the hearings live in the courtroom. Young Liviu Ciulei’s interest in theatre was awakened precisely during the period when his father was under indictment. The mnemonic traces of this event would later leave their mark on his creations, a fact unnoticed by his commentators.



Fig. 1: The trial of engineer Ciuley in the interwar press: *Realitatea ilustrată* from the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 1936

The second major trauma in Ciulei's life was the death of his sister Ana in 1946 due to malpractice. She died while giving birth to twins who also did not survive. Ana Ciulei had graduated from the acting courses of the Royal Academy of Music and Dramatic Art in Bucharest just a few months earlier, along with her brother, who was only a year younger. Her untimely death overshadowed the inauguration of the Odeon Theatre (now the Nottara Theatre) in 1946, with two halls built by engineer Ciuley in Bucharest for

his two children. He passed away a year after his daughter, from angina pectoris. The theatre built by engineer Ciulley did not have a long life either, as in 1948, with the complete takeover of power by the communist regime (imposed by force by the Soviets after World War II), private theatres were nationalised, and the troupes that animated them were dismantled and dispersed. Most members of the Odeon Theatre Collective ended up swelling the ranks of the Municipal Theatre (a state theatre established in 1948 that would later take the name of its manager, Lucia Sturdza Bulandra).

Even if brief, the apprenticeship at the Odeon Theatre had great significance in Liviu Ciulei's career. He debuted there as a stage director and scenographer on the 5<sup>th</sup> of December 1946 with the premiere of the play *Strange* written by actor George Marcovici. As an actor, Ciulei had debuted on the stage of another private theatre (Teatrul Mic) a year earlier when he was still a student, in the role of Richard in *Animal Kingdom* by Philip Barry (premiere: 1<sup>st</sup> of November 1945). Through the plays in which he later performed on the Odeon Theatre stage, in the choice of which he had a significant say, he was able to bring before the audience, sublimated in artistic forms, the issues related to his father that haunted him all his life.

Liviu Ciulei's art was based on a strong psychodramatic impulse. Psychodrama is a form of group psychotherapy developed by psychiatrist Jacob Levy Moreno (1889-1974).<sup>2</sup> It uses techniques similar to those of theatre. In psychodramatic therapy, the patient's problems are explored through their enactment, in which the patient can participate as a "spectator" or even "actor" and "director" (a secondary one, as the real "leader of the game" is the psychotherapist). Two techniques frequently used in psychodrama are role reversal (in the midst of reconstructing a tense situation, the protagonist is invited to switch roles with their interlocutor, who can represent their father or mother, for example) and role-playing (the protagonist is invited to experience new, more effective ways of manifesting in their real-life roles). Liviu Ciulei practised both throughout his long acting and directing career.

In the following, I will illustrate this contention by referring to a role with a strong psychodramatic charge played by Liviu Ciulei in the second and final

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<sup>2</sup> J.L. Moreno, *Psychodrama*, I, 3rd edition (Beacon: Beacon House, 1946).

season of the Odeon Theatre's existence, marked by financial difficulties and increasing communist authorities' interference in art. It is the role of Pyotr in the play *The Last Ones* by Russian playwright Maxim Gorky, which premiered at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest on the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1948. The intense psychodramatic process through which Liviu Ciulei consciously or unconsciously worked through his early adolescent trauma related to his father intertwined with the great collective drama represented by the imposition of the communist dictatorship.

### Entering the Era of Socialist Realism

After the death of engineer Ciulley in 1946, some of the established actors hired at the theatre's inauguration migrated to other stages in the capital. Due to financial losses recorded in the first season, starting from the second season, the theatre's Great Hall was converted into a cinema. This season debuted at the Studio Hall with the play *I Remember Mama* from 1944 by John van Druten, based on the novel *Mama's Bank Account* by novelist Kathryn Forbes (premiere: 1<sup>st</sup> of October 1947). Ciulei played a secondary composition role (Peter Thorkelson), the lead role being held by his future wife and muse, actress Clody Bertola. She played the same character (a writer) at two ages, one of artistic pursuits and the other of fulfilment, constantly oscillating between the role of a teenager and that of a mature narrator who remembers her mother and her way of facing life's hardships and bringing the family together. Interestingly, for the subject of this paper, van Druten's text implicitly advocates for an art that draws its essence from the creator's biography. The protagonist, Katrin, finds her voice as a writer only when she begins to write from her own experience about her own family. Until then, her purely imaginary stories have an artificial air that does not convince. The play's direction was assumed by Marietta Sadova, who also played the role of the Mother.

A devastating review of the production published by critic Florin Tornea in the 23<sup>rd</sup> of November 1947 issue of the magazine *Rampa* clearly signalled the entry into a new stage, that of harsh ideological criticism, in other words, the entry into the era of socialist realism inspired by Andrey

Zhdanov.<sup>3</sup> (The latter was a high-ranking Soviet official and ideologue who, at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, launched the main tenets of socialist realism.) Art was now supposed to reflect the ideology of the Communist Party, serve the people, and reflect the interests of the working class, with deviations being severely punished.

The imposition of “socialist realism” as a mandatory method of creation had been anticipated by the conference of communist activist Leonte Răutu on “Socialist Realism in Soviet Art and Literature” on the 27<sup>th</sup> of March 1947 at the Dalles Hall in the capital. In the Romanian press, the term had sporadically circulated since around 1935, referring to Soviet art. The term’s localisation and officialisation occurred following the second national congress of the Union of Artists, Writers, and Journalists’ Trade Unions held between the 18<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> of October 1947. Florin Tornea’s review of *I Remember Mama* should be seen as a direct consequence of this congress. Although Tornea acknowledged that he had watched the production “not without aesthetic admiration,” he decreed without hesitation that “the Odeon Theatre’s production, before being an artistic achievement of value, is a great betrayal of the artistic mission.” He labelled Van Druten’s play as “an example of reactionary culture from the extreme west,” accusing the author of becoming “an apologist for petty bourgeois morals.” From this perspective, the play and production appeared to Florin Tornea as acts of diversion – nothing more, nothing less. “Diverting in structure and intentions, the decent story of the Norwegian family emigrated to San Francisco becomes a dangerous diversionist demonstration when performed, whose underlying motives cannot and should not be delayed in being revealed,” noted the stern cultural inspector eager to expose such acts.

Around Christmas, after one of the performances, a discussion about the production was held at the initiative of the *Rampa* magazine editorial team, led by Simion Alterescu, with actors from various theatres invited to participate. It was the third such discussion organised by the magazine’s editorial team since the beginning of December. The magazine had come under the control of cultural inspectors directed from Moscow, like many

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<sup>3</sup> Florin Tornea, “Teatrul Odeon: ‘Îmi amintesc de mama’ 30 de tablouri de John van Drutten (sic!),” *Rampa*, XXXIV, no. 107 (November 23, 1947): 3-4.

other periodicals of the time. The debates were chaired by Marcel Breslașu, president of the Union of Artists, Writers, and Journalists' Trade Unions (or U.S.A.S.Z.), an organisation with a detrimental role in the history of post-war Romanian culture, being later recorded in the magazine's special Christmas issue.<sup>4</sup>

The first to speak was stage director Marietta Sadova, who had been the theatre's artistic manager since the beginning of the season (a position taken over from director Ion Șahighian). She merely expressed her surprise at the criticisms formulated in the press, considering that the Odeon team had made a compromise only in relation to their "theatrical aspirations" when they turned to a minor text compared to those of Shakespeare, Molière, or... Griboyedov. Actors Nicolae Bălțățeanu and Agnia Bogoslava then spoke. The former praised the Odeon troupe but added that "it is not absolutely necessary to perform plays that glorify sadness and resignation; we need optimistic works that give confidence in life." In the same spirit, Agnia Bogoslava expressed her "regret at seeing in the play a mother who distances her children from reality," giving as (positive) counterexamples the mothers from Karel Čapek's dramatization of *Mother* by Gorki and Konstantin Simonov's play *The Russian Question*. Thus, happiness had become mandatory for the inhabitants of the future socialist camp, and the role models to be emulated generally had to come from Soviet Russia. Florin Tornea reiterated his criticisms from *Rampa*, then actor Nicolae Sireteanu said that "we should set aside plays that highlight the unhealthy aspects of life and provide a repertoire useful to the public." Next to speak was Alice Voinescu, founder of the aesthetics and theatre history department at the Royal Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, who had been the teacher of many young members of the Odeon Theatre troupe, including Liviu Ciulei. (She was forcibly retired the following year and sentenced to political imprisonment, a sentence commuted after a year and seven months to house arrest.) In contrast to the other speakers, Alice Voinescu supported van Druten's dramatization, noting that "the play's moral is eternal" and that "even lies aim to create the

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<sup>4</sup> Rep., "Al treilea spectacol pentru actori. Note asupra discuțiilor duse la 'Odeon' în privința piesei 'Îmi amintesc de mama'," *Rampa*, XXXVI, no. 111 (December 25, 1947): 11.

illusion of happiness” in the text in question. She was fervently opposed by Marcel Breslașu and Mihai Novicov from U.S.A.S.Z., the former arguing that “art should not create illusions of happiness but fight alongside the people,” and the latter “drawing a parallel between the plans of imperialist politics across the ocean and the tendencies of author van Drudden (*sic!*) to trivialize the workers’ struggle in his country.” Novicov also argued that the text “does not respond to our current reality and, therefore, today it was not worthy of being performed, not meeting the ideological level.” Young director Mihail Raicu then spoke about the stage director’s role, noting that the director “has the latitude to emphasize or not the ideology of a production,” thus placing the entire responsibility for the production’s “political deficiencies” on Marietta Sadova (with whom he had studied directing). Raicu lamented that despite the play’s lack of ideals, “our still not sufficiently educated audience comes to see it without realizing that such works offer nothing.” After Raicu, actor Mircea Șeptilici expressed hope “that in the future he will see different plays at the Odeon.” Marcel Breslașu concluded the evening.

A completely harmless, tender, and sentimental text and a production much loved by the audience thus became overnight the main indictment against the Odeon Theatre Collective, whose disbandment was being prepared in the shadows. The attack was not unique at the time but part of an orchestrated action to intimidate, demonize, and subjugate potentially regime-opposed cultural figures. Since the autumn of 1944, artists had become targets of “early socialist realism” criticisms, as noted by critic Ion Vartic regarding members of the Literary Circle of Sibiu.<sup>5</sup> This was because, before completely taking power, the communists held the portfolios of the Ministries of Propaganda and Information in all the governments that led Romania between 1944 and 1948. Various writers and artists were drawn under the aegis of these ministries and encouraged to serve the Zhdanovist sub-aesthetic, that of socialist realism, even if it was not yet officially imposed. At the same time, other creators, especially those from a consolidated

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<sup>5</sup> Ion Vartic, in I. Negoïtescu and Radu Stanca, *Un roman epistolar*, integral edition, coordinated, noted, and with a postscript by Ion Vartic, edited by Ioan Cristescu and Ion Vartic (Bucharest: Editura Muzeul Literaturii Române, 2021), 29 (footnote 46).



bourgeoisie, like the members of the Odeon Theatre Collective, were systematically “machine-gunned” by a series of cultural inspectors enlisted in the Communist Party and subjugated to Moscow.

After the New Year, in January 1948, a so-called qualification exam for the director position was initiated by the Ministry of Arts and the Union of Artists, Writers, and Journalists’ Trade Unions. Exempted from the exam were only stage directors with a notable activity of fifteen years, including Marietta Sadova, the only woman granted the director’s certificate. About a hundred people attended the actual exam. Some candidates were rejected outright on the grounds that the exam was “qualification” not “admission” into the profession. Others were rejected for various pretexts due to their “unhealthy” aristocratic or bourgeois origins. Among the latter was Liviu Ciulei, who was reproached for flaunting the examination committee by presenting the required director’s notebook “on too fine paper.”<sup>6</sup> For the next nine years, he could only work as an actor and scenographer.

### Confronting Personal Trauma

The Odeon Theatre troupe was thus advancing in increasingly murky waters. Cautiously, the members’ attention shifted from American dramaturgy to that of the Soviet occupiers, stopping at the work of the influential Russian writer Maxim Gorky (1868-1936), whose 80<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary was being celebrated. The chosen play was *The Last Ones* (1908), a family drama set against the backdrop of social upheavals in the Tsarist Empire that found expression in the 1905 Revolution. Written before World War I, the play has certain literary-dramatic qualities, which probably convinced the Odeon Theatre Collective members to perform it (premiere: the 16<sup>th</sup> of March 1948). The text was translated by Emma Beniuc, and the direction was by Marietta Sadova, this production representing one of the greatest successes of her career as a stage director. The set design was by Mircea Marosin.

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<sup>6</sup> Liviu Ciulei, *Cu gândiri și cu imagini/ With Thoughts and Images*, texts by Liviu Ciulei and Mihail Lupu (Bucharest: Igloo, 2009), 14.

The play's theme, which speaks of a father's detrimental influence on his children's lives, leads me to believe that young Liviu Ciulei had a decisive say in favour of including the play in the Odeon Theatre's repertoire. (Perhaps he would have directed it himself if he had not been arbitrarily stripped of the right to do so.) Gorky's drama revolves around Ivan Kolomiitsev, a debauched, drunken, and gambling aristocrat who becomes a policeman and, in this role, finds himself at the centre of a major scandal following an assassination attempt on his life. The subsequent investigation revealed Ivan's service abuses, resulting in, among other things, the deaths of two young revolutionaries (hence the unleashed hatred against him), leading to his dismissal and the arrest of the presumed assassin. Ivan had made the identification randomly from a group of other young revolutionaries, the true culprit for the shot directed at him remaining unknown. At the curtain's rise, the judicial action is still ongoing, the newspapers are buzzing, and amidst this turmoil, the old tensions within the Kolomiitsev family boil over.

The actual action of the play takes place in the house of Yakov, Ivan's seriously ill brother and host to his family. Ivan and his two older children, the cynical Alexander (26 years old) and the rapacious coquette Nadezhda (23 years old), married to Leshch, a prison doctor equally unscrupulous (whose dubious "treatments" hasten Yakov's death in the play's final scene), take advantage of Yakov's kindness and generosity.

Ivan is married to Sofia, a woman plagued by doubts and remorse regarding her children. She blames their downfall on the fact that she resigned to raising them in a profoundly corrupted environment. Her insistence on Ivan to withdraw the unjust accusation against the presumed assassin ultimately falls on deaf ears, as he fears that a retraction would nullify his chances of being reinstated in the police and promoted. Sofia carries a terrible secret that is revealed over time: her middle daughter, Lyubov (20 years old), is the result of a brief affair with Yakov, Ivan's brother, who continues to love Sofia discreetly. Sofia responds to this devotion with tender affection, regretting not choosing Yakov from the beginning and lacking the courage to leave Ivan.

For Lyubov, the secret of her birth is not much of a secret, as her sure intuition had long whispered to her who her real father was. More disturbing for her is uncovering the cause of her infirmity, as Lyubov is disfigured by a

hump she vainly tries to hide under layers of shawls. Ivan, aware of his wife's affair with Yakov – just as Sofia was aware of his numerous infidelities often consumed under their roof – is responsible for this deformity acquired in early childhood, having dropped or deliberately thrown her from his arms while drunk. Because of the malformation she acquired in infancy, Lyubov is a solitary figure who masks her pain with a severe persona, delivering cold and cutting lines without reservations.

Finally, Pyotr (18 years old) and Vera (16 years old), the youngest children of Ivan and Sofia – or “the last ones,” as the old nanny Fedosia, the play's *raisonneur*, calls them – are caught in the midst of their maturation process, precipitated by their father's irresponsible actions. They emerge with broken souls from their first brutal confrontation with the realities of adult life. From the author's ideological perspective, Pyotr and Vera represent the last irrecoverable offspring condemned by history of the “rotten” old aristocratic regime, while the revolutionary youth driven by socialist ideas (never present on stage) represents the “new world” in the process of hatching.

Sickly and extremely sensitive, Pyotr is deeply affected by the city's talk about his father (“It's terrible to hear people say things about Father”<sup>7</sup>) while simultaneously eager to know the whole truth about him and exasperated that the adults avoid revealing it (unlike Vera, who refuses to see and accept it, or Lyubov, who supports the necessary, vital lie in certain contexts). The secrecy of the adults drives Pyotr mad. He is also deeply impressed by the dignity with which Mrs. Sokolova, the mother of the young revolutionary falsely accused of attempting to assassinate his father, bears her drama. When Ivan refuses to withdraw his complaint against her son, Pyotr suffers a breakdown, crushed by the confirmation of his father's villainy, to whom he ends up reproaching his very birth: “Do you think a bad, sick, dishonest man has the right to father children?”<sup>8</sup> Drawn into the orbit of a group of socialists by a mysterious young man who defended him

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<sup>7</sup> Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, in *Plays: 2*, translated and introduced by Cathy Porter (London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2003), 59. E-BOOK

<sup>8</sup> Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 135.

and his younger sister when they were insulted and attacked on the street by three members of the Black Hundreds<sup>9</sup> (also against their father like the socialists), Pyotr fails to integrate into the noble but very strict society guided by these principles, feeling a great inner void. He finds no support in faith either, denying the existence of God. With a dying soul, he seeks refuge and solace in alcohol, which, given his physical frailty, equates to suicide. If Pyotr chooses a slow, euphoric death, it is because he abhors firearms and the idea of ending his life with a bullet at such a young age – although the thought haunts him.

To avoid a marriage of convenience arranged by her father, Vera convinces sub-commissioner Yakorev to abduct her following a scenario she conceived in the spirit of the sensationalist-romantic literature she was immersed in. Tempted by the girl's dowry, the petty Yakorev plays along, taking advantage of her during their three-day flight from home. Awakened to reality by the bitter experience, Vera returns home voluntarily, dismisses Yakorev, and accepts marriage to the other suitor – older and even more despicable than Yakorev but wealthier. With shattered illusions and a hardened heart, the young woman is determined to return the same evil and cynical face to the world that it showed her at the first serious contact.

Yakov's physical death in the end thus contrapuntally overlaps with the spiritual death of the last innocent offspring of the Kolomiitsev family, sealing its ultimate downfall under the destructive actions of its head.

The father, Ivan Kolomiitsev, was played in the Odeon Theatre production by the great actor Ion Manolescu (who had testified at the murder trial of engineer Ciulley as a former intimate of Tita Cristescu). When he was not on stage, Liviu Ciulei – who played Pyotr, Ivan and Sofia's youngest son – would stand with Clody Bertola at the prompter's box to watch Manolescu, fascinated by his art and perhaps the complex variations he performed on the theme of the vice-ridden father, so unsettling for him:

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<sup>9</sup> A Russian ultranationalist, xenophobic, and antisemitic movement from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century that supported the orthodoxy and absolute monarchy of the Romanovs. Its importance grew after the 1905 Revolution, to which it vehemently opposed.

Whenever we left the stage, we didn't go to our dressing rooms to rest but watched "spied on" together from the wings how Ion Manolescu played; and this for almost a hundred performances. It was one of the most refined acting lessons. His performance, full of meanders justified by the slippery psychology of the character, was never too sentimental, and the character was never simply exposed.<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 2:** Liviu Ciulley and Clody Bertola in *The Last Ones*

Sofia, Ivan Kolomiitsev's unhappy wife, was played by Marietta Sadova herself. Alexander and Nadezhda, the couple's older children, were portrayed by Dan Nasta and Francisca Cristian. Yakov, Ivan's brother and Lyubov's biological father, was played by Nicolae Tomazoglu. The role of Lyubov went to Corina Constantinescu. Vera, the family's youngest daughter,

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<sup>10</sup> Liviu Ciulei, "Sfășierea înceată a unei bucăți de mătase veche," in Ludmila Patlanjoglu, *La vie en rose cu Clody Bertola* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 1997), 78-79.

was played by Clody Bertola. In the other roles of the play were Raura Glăjaru (Mrs. Sokolova), Florin Stroe (Leshch), Dem. Savu (Yakorev), and Marietta Rareș (Fedosia).



Fig. 3: The cast of the show *The Last Ones* as seen by Cik (*Rampa*, the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 1948)

*The Last Ones* contains a series of episodes or situations that seem taken from the “family novel” of Liviu Ciulei, more precisely from the “chapter” with his father’s trial. I am primarily thinking of the scandal that brings to light the sordid aspects of the head of the family’s existence through the press, as well as the scene with the children, Vera and Pyotr, being insulted on the street because of their name (Liviu Ciulei and his sister were shouted at school during the investigations that their father was a murderer) or the

Kolomiitsev family's attempts to hide the truth from the children. (When the scandal around engineer Ciulley was in full swing, his two children were sent to a boarding school in Switzerland, a clear indication that the family tried to hide the whole story from them, just as the adults in the Kolomiitsev clan do in Gorky's play with Pyotr and Vera.) Viewed through the lens of these similarities, the lines of Pyotr, the character played by Liviu Ciulei, gain a particular, disturbing resonance: "Do children exist to bear their fathers' sins? To justify and defend everything their parents do? We want to know – tell us how we're to live with your mistakes"; "Tell us, Father, are you an honest man?"<sup>11</sup> These are concerns I am convinced Liviu Ciulei experienced both during and (much) after his father's trial. His father's premature death, occurring about ten months before the premiere of *The Last Ones* at the Odeon, must have intensified these feelings. Did the two, father and son, manage to have an open discussion about the Tita Cristescu episode? We will never know.

In the artist's memory, a particular line from Pyotr, "Mother, this house is a tragic circus!", which in the English translation appears in Act III of the play as "Mama, can you have a tragic farce?"<sup>12</sup>, must have stuck with him because it strongly resonated with his own life experience. It opens, I believe, a window through which we can contemplate through the youngest child's eyes the atmosphere of the Ciulley family's house during the major crisis caused by the engineer's trial – the atmosphere of a "tragic circus."

From the portrait painted by stage director Andrei Șerban in the volume of recollections *Niciodată singur* [*Never Alone*], it emerges that Liviu Ciulei had something else in common with Pyotr: he was an atheist.<sup>13</sup> However, Pyotr should not be confused with Liviu Ciulei and vice versa. It would be a mistake to think that the actor fully identified with the character created by Gorky. Rather, Ciulei saw in it a possible version of himself – a worse, unsuccessful one. He contemplated in Gorky's character a (potential) aspect he feared all his life: that of a failure, a person who does not succeed.

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<sup>11</sup> Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 135.

<sup>12</sup> Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> Andrei Șerban, *Niciodată singur. Fragmente dintr-o galerie de portrete*, foreword by Toma Pavel (Iași: Polirom, 2021), 47.

For unlike Pyotr, who is crushed by the burden of the family's dirty secrets brought to light due to his father's thoughtless actions and the shadow they cast over his existence, Liviu Ciulei, in the same circumstances, not only did not succumb but was determined to cleanse the family name of shame through a resounding, absolutely impressive oeuvre – an oeuvre born from the obscure need of the thirteen-year-old adolescent to “defend” and “justify” his father's actions and understand him. Without being reduced to this dimension, Ciulei's creation is firmly anchored in it. Ignoring this means overlooking an essential deep component of Liviu Ciulei's work.

### **Impending Disaster**

Before the play's premiere, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of February 1948, the Union of Artists, Writers, and Journalists' Trade Unions organized a so-called “production meeting” at the Odeon Theatre. As a reporter from *Rampa* noted (with reproach), it “enjoyed the participation of too few theatre people because it seems that specialists do not yet realize the importance of these discussions, whose purpose is to clarify for the entire work collective the meaning and interpretation of the play.”<sup>14</sup> In fact, the work of clarification targeted only one aspect of the play and production, namely the ideological one. The meeting was chaired by Mihai Novicov, the zealous cultural inspector, who gave a presentation on Gorky's life and work, emphasizing that he “was an engaged author par excellence” and “the founder of socialist realism.” (Indeed, alongside Andrey Zhdanov, Karl Radek, and Nikolai Bukharin, Maxim Gorky was one of the main speakers at the famous Congress of Soviet Writers in August 1934, where the mandates of socialist realism were launched.) Novicov also provided a brief definition of this movement, claiming that socialist realism is “the artistic movement that transplants the essential elements of critical realism with the optimism of positive romanticism.” Moving on to analyze the play in rehearsal at the Odeon Theatre, he placed it in Gorky's second creative period, namely

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<sup>14</sup> Rep., “Cum va fi montată piesa 'Cei din urmă'. Ședința de producție de la Teatrul Odeon,” *Rampa*, 37, no. 118 (February 15, 1948): 5.



between the two revolutions (of 1905 and 1917), comparing it to *The Lower Depths* and discussing the moral dead end in which the characters of *The Last Ones* find themselves: "In the house of policeman Ivan Kolomiitsev is the cesspool where revolution and outside enthusiasm cannot penetrate." According to Novicov, the stage direction had to "emphasize the contrast between the two worlds," that is, between the decaying Russian bourgeoisie and revolutionary Russia, an idea later reiterated by Simion Alterescu (the editor-in-chief of *Rampa*) to conclude the meeting. Marietta Sadova agreed with Novicov's statements, after which the play was read by the actors in the cast. After the reading, Sadova observed that some characters "can be saved from this cesspool," such as Vera or Liuba – she had not yet decided which of the two. Stage directors Moni Ghelerter and Wolfinger Siegfried, actors Mircea Șeptilici and Irina Nădejde, and scenographer Mircea Marosin also spoke. According to *Rampa's* reporter, the speakers unanimously supported that "Skalova (*sic!*) is the only positive character in the play," being "the representative of revolutionary Russia."

Subsequently, in his review dedicated to the production in *Rampa* magazine, Simion Alterescu had only words of praise for the Odeon Theatre's staging, praising the actors' team's homogeneity and the harmony of their performance unaffected by "star behaviour."<sup>15</sup> Referring further to the actors' constant concern "to correspond to the ensemble and the general idea of the performance," Alterescu noted that this characteristic was "brought almost to perfection by Marietta Rareș, Corina Constantinescu, Liviu Ciulley, Dan Nasta, and Florin Stroe."

In April 1948, through the pen of Sorin Mladoveanu – a critic at *Scânteia*, the Romanian Workers' Party's official newspaper – the cold shower arrived.<sup>16</sup> In an extended section of the first column of his review of *The Last Ones*, Mladoveanu reminded readers in a stern, even threatening tone of the grave error the Odeon Theatre Collective had persisted in by staging John

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<sup>15</sup> Simion Alterescu, "Colectivul Teatrului Odeon prezintă: 'Cei din urmă' de Maxim Gorki," *Rampa*, 37, no. 124 (March 28, 1948): 3.

<sup>16</sup> Sorin Mladoveanu, "Cronica dramatică. Teatrul Odeon: 'Cei din urmă', piesă în patru acte de Maxim Gorki," *Scânteia*, XVII, no. 1088 (April 3, 1948): 2.

van Druuten's *I Remember Mama*. The style of ideologically driven critiques of creators was already fully configured and assimilated, as evidenced by the following lines:

The difficult attempt to stage a play by Gorky comes from a theatre that until recently presented a play entirely in contradiction with the one it is playing today, in contradiction with everything Gorky signifies, with his conception of life and art in general. For several months, despite all criticisms, the Odeon Theatre continued to present a typical example of capitalist diversion, a gross falsification of reality, particularly characteristic of the ideological offensive that imperialism is waging today with the aim of demobilizing the workers' consciousness, imposing resignation as a way of life. The same collective now stages a play by Gorky, and the artistic success it registers with this occasion highlights even more the grave error in which the Odeon collective indulged by playing *I Remember Mama* for months, thus becoming the bearers of the message of that ideology and politics against which our country is fighting today. It is not at all indifferent to us what an actor – especially a talented one – plays; it is not indifferent whether they put their art at the service of lies or truth; whether through their art they contribute to the education or falsification of the masses of spectators. (...) The representation of *The Last Ones* must signify the Odeon artistic collective's commitment to follow from now on THE PATH OF SERVING THE TRUTH IN ART [emphasis in the original]."

It is understood that this "truth in art" so emphasized in the interventions of cultural guides promoted by the new regime was the one indicated by the comrades of the party, namely the Romanian Workers' Party, its sole depository according to its members and sympathizers. What was therefore imposed on the Odeon Theatre Collective (through the imperious formulation "must signify the commitment" reiterated by Mladoveanu with variations in the conclusion of his review) was not the service of truth in art but total subservience to the Communist Party.

To Marietta Sadova, the critic from Scânteia reproached that "she did not view the play from the perspective of the new world" and "left unstressed

the parts of the text that speak of the outside world and the significant passage of Skalova (*sic!*) through the stage" (this character being seen by the critic as "a wonderful reply to van Druten's *Mama*"). Mladoveanu also wrote that the misplacement of accents makes the otherwise valuable performance lack the high ideological significance of the play. He also found Sadova's interpretation in the role of Sofia, Raura Glăjaru's interpretation in the role of Sokolova, and Liviu Ciulei's interpretation defective:

Mr Liviu Ciulley, who was an exceptional mime in the previous Odeon premiere, does not pass the stage well enough this time. He has not deepened the complicated, contradiction-ridden nature, the rich soul process of Pyotr, interpreting it rather externally.

The *Scânteia* critic concluded that despite the noted mistakes, *The Last Ones* "is a valuable performance," reiterating, however, the necessity that this performance "represents for the Odeon artistic collective the beginning of a definitive orientation on the path of an art that reflects reality and serves the truth."

In her monograph dedicated to Marietta Sadova, theatre researcher Vera Molea mentions a "sad" scene that took place at the National Theatre in Bucharest "when at a trade union meeting, actress Maria Voluntaru shouted: 'Go to the Odeon to see how the reactionaries play Gorky!'"<sup>17</sup> Thus, a dangerous idea was being consolidated, namely that the theatre built by the multi-millionaire engineer could only be a "nest of reactionaries" that had to be destroyed. And "the 'fruits' of these gratuitous malices did not take long to appear," as Vera Molea notes further, for "Iosif Chişinevschi and Nicolae Moraru, two satraps of Romanian culture in those sad years, decided to disband the Odeon Theatre. But even if they had not decided this, the theatre's disappearance was imminent." Indeed, as mentioned before, the Odeon Theatre was nationalised in 1948 – another trauma that Liviu Ciulei was to overcome, again with the help of theatre, by managing to coagulate

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<sup>17</sup> Vera Molea, *Marietta Sadova sau Arta de a trăi prin teatru* (Bucharest: Editura Bibliotecii Metropolitane Bucureşti, 2013), 138.

in the 1960s and 70s, as director and director of the “Lucia Sturdza Bulandra” Theatre, a dream team that he could rightly call his own, just as the Odeon Theatre Collective once was.

## Conclusions

Liviu Ciulei’s artistic career and contributions to Romanian theatre were profoundly influenced by his personal traumas, particularly the public scandal involving his father. This event shaped his psychodramatic approach to theatre, as seen in his compelling performances and direction, beginning with his early work at the Odeon Theatre. Ciulei’s choice of plays, such as Maxim Gorky’s *The Last Ones*, mirrored his attempts to process and transcend his personal and familial struggles, reflecting a broader narrative of resistance against the oppressive political climate of the time. Despite the significant hurdles posed by the imposition of socialist realism and the constant surveillance by the communist regime, Ciulei would later manage to infuse his productions with a deep psychological resonance, thereby not only defending his family’s honor but also advancing Romanian theatre. His legacy, marked by his directorship at the “Lucia Sturdza Bulandra” Theatre in Bucharest and his international accolades, underscores the enduring impact of his early experiences on his artistic vision and achievements.

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