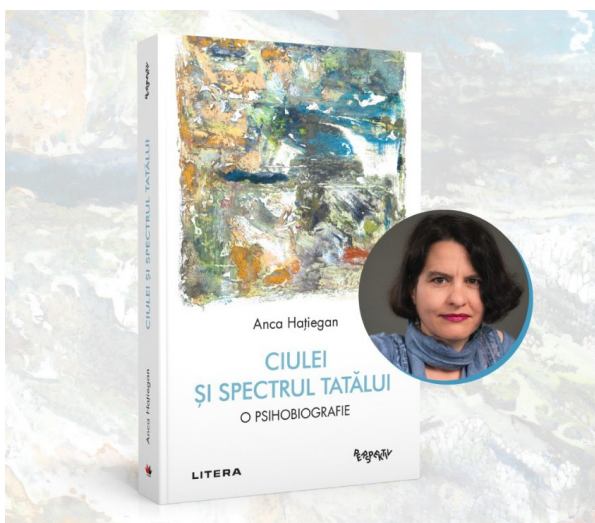


## *The Avatars of Trauma in Art*

### BOOK REVIEW:

**Anca Hațiegan, *Ciulei și spectrul tatălui. O psihobiografie*,  
București, Editura Litera, 2024**



Without a doubt, the volume *Ciulei și spectrul tatălui* (*Ciulei and the Specter of the Father*), subtitled *A Psychobiography* and published in 2024 by Litera Publishing House in the Perspektiv collection, stands out as a landmark editorial release in the field of dramatic arts in Romania. This is not only because it recalibrates the public image of one of the most prolific Romanian theatre figures of recent history, but especially because the author displays a filigree-like meticulousness, capturing the facets and nuances of a Renaissance-like personality in a complex lacework full of revelatory beauty and rough edges.



Anca Hațiegan takes on a courageous epistemic mission by openly embracing and rehabilitating biographism – a method she knows entails the risk of fictionalizing speculation. Yet, the success is all the more remarkable as the final product maintains a flawless balance between scientific rigor and the almost novelistic suspense of the actual reconstruction. Thus, a rare feat for a scholarly book, *The Specter of the Father* becomes a fascinating read both for the researcher or theatre professional used to thorough documentation, and for the more casual reader seeking a literary interlude in daily routine.

Beyond these elements, the book also serves as a valuable theatre studies tool, not only because of the vast and well-founded information it contains, but especially due to the analytical model it proposes. This model hones the reader's observational skills and axiological instincts beyond the narrow domain of aesthetics.

There is, however, a secondary, though not accidental, dimension to this research: the portrayal of an era, with its oppressive atmosphere and the anticipatory effervescence typical of turning points or transitional periods. The specific case of the Ciulley family, though not necessarily representative or typical of interwar or postwar Romanian society, reflects in mirror shards a broader historical context, which can be reconstructed in the background of an otherwise exceptional story. The public uproar around the homicide trial involving the father of the future theatre man – the newspaper reports, the petty satisfaction of the public in trampling through the tabloid press into the intimacy of a family on the brink of dissolution – did not occur in a vacuum. On the contrary, they resulted from a tangible social tension and extended a collective mindset in search of escapist diversions. Similarly, Liviu Ciulei's artistic destiny unfolds against a backdrop of collective trauma and constant ideological pressure. By tracing the persecutions endured by the director-actor-scenographer, Hațiegan's reconstruction naturally leaps from personal biography to a larger historical perspective.

Demonstrating a keen dramatic instinct herself, the researcher organizes the volume into two main sections, playfully titled "Life-Work" and "Work-Life," depending on where the authorial emphasis is placed. The merit of this structure lies in using the investigative suspense of the first part to spark interest in the more technical approach of the second. By organizing her text

into two acts with multiple sub-scenes (to use a dramaturgical metaphor), the author uses gripping narrative to justify the detailed analysis that follows. The initial contextualization is so well executed, and the argument for biographical determination so convincingly formulated, that the reader's interest in understanding the creative mechanisms is far greater than it would have been with a fragmented, zigzagging explanation of causes and effects.

The decisive influence of Liviu Ciulei's father extended well beyond the expected dynamic of a demanding, respected father-son relationship. In fact, the authority the engineer exuded likely made the shock of his indiscretion resonate, in his son's destiny, like the fall of a marble idol from a great height. Using period press materials, testimonies, and complementary memoir fragments – and avoiding delivering a definitive judgment – Anca Hațiegan conducts her own journalistic investigation (often bordering on a gripping detective style) into the death of Mr. Ciulley's mistress and the public spectacle surrounding the engineer's indictment. Tita Cristescu, daughter of communist leader Gheorghe Cristescu, a young and beautiful aspiring actress – thus easily cast in the role of tragic heroine – dies by poisoning on Christmas night, 1935, triggering a collective blame mechanism that Ciulley himself would fall victim to. Initially suspected of the scandalous crime, he was forced to expose his private life in a very public trial. Hațiegan's book not only recreates the insatiable tension in the courtroom but also advances various theories and sketches portraits of the people involved, in a revelatory slideshow sequence. Ciulei's preference for arena-type theatrical spaces thus reveals, both explicitly and implicitly, its origin – the author links it to the haunting image of the courtroom.

The second part of the volume reconstructs the artistic personality of theatre man Liviu Ciulei, with all the roles he claimed through his (at least) fourfold specialization. Thus, we witness the father's specter subtly permeating the architect's, scenographer's, actor's, and director's work. Each facet reveals the depth of the foundational trauma – some examples are more convincing, others seemingly speculative. However, the argument largely benefits from pertinent explanations that clarify correlations which might initially appear far-fetched. There is a slight structural imbalance, as Ciulei-the-architect and Ciulei-the-scenographer (the latter highly prolific) are clearly underrepresented

in favor of a deeper and lengthier analysis of Ciulei-the-actor and Ciulei-the-director. This choice, however, is justified by the relevance of each of these four facets to the book's central thesis.

The author's hypothesis is that Ciulei, perhaps unconsciously, engaged in a kind of psychodrama, attempting to exorcise through theatre the demons born of that defining early experience. This tendency is most visible in the types of roles he chose or the themes favored in his directing; but also, more broadly, in the aesthetic he practiced, regardless of his assumed role.

This book therefore has a clear premise and a concrete stake. The premise can be summarized as the observation that Ciulei's oeuvre reflects the influence of decisive formative events, a claim that becomes increasingly difficult to refute after reading. The stake lies in the fact that theatre professionals are often victims of reductive perceptions, with collective thinking subordinating them to the dramatic author, a mindset Hațiegan deconstructs in order to highlight the unjust indifference toward the biographies behind the art. Consequently, *Ciulei and the Specter of the Father* also aims to correct a clear case of misclassification.

Throughout the volume, the finality of the spectatological analysis intensifies, ultimately penetrating the mysterious laboratory of the theatre creator into the chiaroscuro realm of motivations, contextual references, and, not least, formative environments. Because this latter aspect, even when avoided by "serious" studies, even when it manifests only in subtext, in silences, or in resonant absence, continues to assert its claim over the artist's work, as Anca Hațiegan so compellingly demonstrates.

Of course, not all theatre creators have such exceptional destinies or such unique biographies as to justify this approach. Nevertheless, where a director's style is so clearly defined, and where their artistic trajectory exhibits undeniable coherence, a dedicated researcher cannot ignore the dark side of the moon, even when the subject of the inquiry has spent a lifetime cultivating discretion.

**Emma PEDESTRU** 

*"Lucian Blaga" National Theatre: Cluj-Napoca, Romania,*  
emma.pedestru@teatrulnationalcluj.ro