

# DRAMATICA

STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI

2/2018



**Romanian Theatre Seen from Outside the Borders:  
Artistic and Critical Perspectives  
*Celebrating the Centenary of Modern Romania  
(1918-2018)***

**STUDIA  
UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI  
DRAMATICA**

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# STUDIA UNIVERSITATIS BABEȘ-BOLYAI DRAMATICA

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## Special Thematic Issue

### *Romanian Theatre Seen from Outside the Borders: Artistic and Critical Perspectives Celebrating the Centenary of Modern Romania (1918-2018)*

Issue Editor: Ștefana Pop-Curșeu

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## **STUDIES AND ARTICLES**



## *Agatha Bârsescu – A World Class Tragedian*

MIRCEA POPA<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract**<sup>2</sup>: Following closely the lifetime theatrical vocation of the Romanian actress Agatha Bârsescu, the present article sheds light upon her love for theatre and her international carrier. After spending her childhood in Bucharest and after studying at the Conservatory of Dramatic Art, Agatha was encouraged to try her chance abroad, which she did when, at the age of twenty-two, she passed her admission exam at the Vienna Conservatory School of Drama.

Years of brilliant roles and extraordinary meetings followed with an enthusiastic audience in Austria, Germany, and later on, in the United States of America. She was loved, highly appreciated, as an artist and as a teacher, when she came back to Romania, at the Conservatory of Iassy where she instructed young actresses. A model of elegance and professionalism, she left behind a volume of beautiful *Memoirs*, an important correspondence (at the Vienna Museum of Art) and a large number of precious photographs and articles that critics consecrated to her work and life



**Key-Words:** Agatha Bârsescu, Burgtheater in Vienna, Romanian Theatre.

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<sup>2</sup> This paper has been translated by Diana Dupu

In the long line of great actors from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Romania, Agatha Bârsescu stands out as a point of reference. She was the first Romanian actress to transcend the boundaries of national art, becoming a universal figure through her performances. Due to her extraordinary innate qualities combined with her vast culture, prodigious memory, high class stage performance, velvety, wide-ranged voice and fluency in German, Agatha Bârsescu raised the bar for stage performance to an all-time high and made Romanian theatre famous, even in far-away countries such as the United States. She was not merely an excellent performer or enlightened creator of most diverse roles, but also a very soulful being, ready to empathize with fellow man's pain and suffering by initiating various charity operas and showing great interest in the formative and educational mission of art. Romanian theatre education is for ever in her debt for the time she spent teaching at the Iassy Conservatory, where she instructed Romanian youth on performance art for over a decade, advising students and guiding them on their career paths. She proved to be an excellent educator with immense talent.



Destiny saw that she would not remain hidden away in the same theatre or the same town, but that she would be a gift to the entire world, bringing glory and honour to her homeland. In the cultural ambiance of Austria, the country where she finished her artistic formation, she was destined to become one of the eternal stars of the Viennese stage, attracting countless crowds to the Burgtheater, the annals of which have her name written in gold.

Agatha Bârseșcu saw the light of day on the 28th of August 1859, in Bucharest. She was the daughter of Lieutenant Constantin Bârseșcu and Maria Bârseșcu, closely related to Generals Cernat and Budișteanu. Her brother became a general himself, and her sister Zoe married Colonel D. Paleologu. It thus comes as no surprise that there was a strong fire arms tradition within her family. Young Agatha was initially sent to a boarding school in Sibiu, then to the Central School of Bucharest and to Ursulinen Kloster in Vienna. She enrolled at the Dramatic Conservatory of Bucharest in the autumn of 1876 after being invited to do so by Ion Ghica, then director of Bucharest National Theatre. She landed her first roles and began experiencing being on-stage. Her performances fared well with the press of the time. Motivated by the discovery of a new passion and encouraged by her family and good press reviews, she decided to go study in Paris in May 1880. During a stop in Vienna, she chooses to stay and begins taking canto lessons with Joseph Gansbacher at the end of May. On the 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1880, she became a student of the Conservatory in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, specializing in canto and declamation. Because of creative differences between her and her academic coordinator, she gave up canto for theatre. Professor Altmann recommended her to his colleague, Joseph von Weiler, and on the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1881, she passed her admission exam at the Vienna Conservatory School of Drama, where she took classes on literature, aesthetics, choreography, duel, costume and foreign languages. At the end of freshman year, she comes in first and receives a gold medal. Her success was so undeniable that the director of the Berlin Theatre offered her a six year contract with a progressive honorary and five thousand marks pay from the first year. She debuted on the Viennese stage on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1883 as Hero from Grillparzer's *Hero and Leander*. Her astounding performance was widely written about in both German and Romanian newspapers such as "Binele public", "Curierul Capitalei", "La Gazette



de Roumanie”, “Națiunea”, “Resboiul” and “România liberă”. The actress was called “A young Wolter” in “Gazeta Transilvaniei” from Brașov and the Oradea based “Familia” dedicated entire sections full of praise to her<sup>3</sup>.



In the autumn of 1883, she joined the Berlin Theatre to fulfil her contract and here she was cast and played countless parts. Despite her newly achieved stability, her heart remained in Vienna and once Adolph Wilbrand, the director of the Burgtheater, came to see one of her shows, she used her mother’s precarious health as a reason to dissolve her contract with the Berlin Theatre and return to Vienna. Preparations for her return were made with the complicity of the director. When she debuted once more on the stage of the Burgtheater on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November 1883, she called it “the most important

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<sup>3</sup> See the number of Journal issues which talk about her and make interviews with her in the list of References, at the end of the present study.

day of my life". She played Hera in Grillparzer's play with such astounding talent that the next day Spiedel from the newspaper "Neue Freie Presse" wrote about her as follows: "A young girl that just left the School of Drama walked out on stage for the first time in her life. It wasn't just any stage from Graz or Linz, but the hot floor of the Burgtheater. It wasn't just to recite a couple of words, but to play a big part, which can make or break a play. It wasn't in her mother tongue, learned at home with her parents, but in a language she acquired over time! This young lady leaves such a striking impression that, at the last curtain fall, everyone must admit: here is a powerful and real talent that must be well-kept, because it is a tremendously lucky addition to our charismatically impoverished Burgtheater. Miss Bârescu belongs to the Burgtheater. It's an honour for her and a lucky break for the theatre. The entrance of such significant talent in an institution where series of plays are kept under wraps can only be called luck, for through her those plays might yet be revived. Burgtheater has found its fortune! May it last."



For Agatha Bârsescu, this stellar debut was the beginning of a long theatrical career filled with incredible moments. The roles she played successfully showcased her talent and her ability to charm the public. On stage at the Burgtheater, she acted memorable parts that tied her name to the names of characters from dramas around the world. She played Deborah, Iulia of Shakespeare and Gretchen from Goethe's *Faust*, Judith and Mary Magdalene from Hebbel's tragedies, *Hamlet's* Ophelia, *Othello's* Desdemona, Parthenia from Halm's *Son of the Woods*, Amalia from Schiller's *Thieves*, Isabella from Calderon's *The Judge of Zalameea*, Judith from Acosta's *Uriel*, Myriam from Grillparzer's *The Dream is Life*, Sardou's Denise etc. To her, every role was an instance of creation, the discovery of a new way of embodiment. Theatre held no more secrets. She proved her prowess in roles such as Delphine from Guido Conrad's *Miss de Lary*, Octavia in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Ghita from Paul Heisse's *Don Juan's End*, Clara from *Egmont*, Mirza from *Der Traum ein Leben*, Maria from Otto Ludwig's *Der Erbforscher*, the lady in mourning from *Minna von Branhelm* etc. She acted alongside famous counterparts, such as Adolf Sonnenthal, Fritz Krastel, Ludwig Gabillon, Halenstein, Emerich Robert, Karl Wagner, Joseph Lewinsky, Ernst Harmann, Stela Hohenfels, who were also beloved by the Viennese public in their own right. After a short while, Agatha became a public favourite and was enjoying the favour of the Imperial Court and the undivided attention of prominent journalists, politicians and official representatives of Imperial Vienna. Whenever she would appear in the balcony of her house on Schindgasse no.3 or go out with the carriage in Prater, "All of Schindgasse was on its feet, saying hello", she writes in her *Memoirs (Memorii)*<sup>4</sup>. When she went to shows alongside students, they organized and acted out scenes in her honour, singing martial hymns and celebrating her as a queen. They also dedicated many poems to her, such as the one by Heinrich Glücksmann, which begins as follows:

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<sup>4</sup> Agatha Bârsescu. *Memorii din Germania, Austria, Ungaria, America și România* (București: Ed. Adevărul, 1934)

Du stehst mit Fug am heiligen  
Altare  
Der Gotter weihen wurd'ge  
Priesterin  
Und dienen wilst du ihr mit  
kuschen Sinn  
Zum letzten Atemzug, bis an  
die Bahre.



When she returned to Romania to act in a few shows, she was showered in love, invited to the Royal Court and decorated with a 1<sup>st</sup> class distinction for her work and “Bene-merenti”, decorations that came in addition to several others received abroad. Emperor Franz Joseph granted her a hearing and she was surrounded by the attention of princes, barons and declared an artist of the Court. She was hired for life in the Viennese Hofburgtheater, one of the world’s most astonishing theatres. She received a bonus for every performance, free costumes and carriage rides for all shows. For seven years, the fact that she was a multilateral actress, who starred in tragedies, dramas and comedies, truly shone through.

After spending seven years in this artistically charged atmosphere, touring Austria from one end to the other and performing shows in nearly every city, Agatha Bârescu felt like she needed a change. She gave up on her life-long contract with the Viennese theatre to go work at the Hamburg theatre instead. Her last performance took place on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1890, after which director Max Burkhardt signed her resignation. Her



severance from Vienna was painful, but the public expressed their undying admiration even more ardently during the final show: "It rained with flowers after every act and the actress' dressing room couldn't hold any more bouquets from co-stars, members of the Grillparzer Society, strangers or admirers who saw her now for the last time... miss Bârsescu came out for standing ovations over 12 times looking profoundly moved and barely managing to hold back her tears", wrote the "Fremden Blatt" newspaper from the 14<sup>th</sup> of November 1890. As she had chosen, she was now embarking on a new stage of her life, even if just a little while ago (the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1888) the new building of the Burgtheater had been inaugurated in Vienna and she had been declared a permanent actress of the Imperial and Royal Theatre of Vienna, which guaranteed her a successful, life-long career. She had also taken part in the opening show for the inauguration of a new theater called Karltheater (which later became Volksopera), but there were several critical moments in her personal life that left a lasting mark on her. Her sister Zoe had died, and not long after, her mother followed. She had broken her engagement to the Ghica-Comănești Prince and was now responsible for the two children of her late sister.





AGATHA BÂRSESCU – A WORLD CLASS TRAGEDIAN



She wanted to start anew in a different city and a different world. Her move to Hamburg brought on the much sought after changes. Prior to this, in a moment of desperation, she had tried to drown herself in the Danube. She concentrated on her work and soon became famous in Hamburg as well, later touring Germany. She stayed there for three years, after which she was forced to move again to be freed from the unwanted attention she had been receiving from an over-zealous admirer, as she confesses in her Memoirs.

It appeared that Agatha's transformative being was very well suited for pilgrimage. In April 1883, she began a long cross-country tour in Romania, starring in Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* and Sudermann's *Nation*. She returned to Vienna that autumn to participate in the opening of the Raimund Theater, after which she continued to tour Romania. Writer Adam Müller Gutenbrün, director of the Raimund Theater (born in Romania himself, in the Banat region) solicited her for numerous collaborations and Agatha honored his invitations every time. She then worked at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. During these years, she became an actress of the German world, a pan-

European actress even, if we take into account her tours in London and Paris. In the latter city, she became close friends with actor Coquelin Aine, who tried to convince her to stay in Paris to no avail.

She began to kindle a dedicated collaboration with Romania, initially acting in a series of German shows and then also taking on plays in Romanian alongside artists from the Iași and Bucharest National Theatres. She performed in Berlin again, was extremely popular in Budapest (in her *Memoirs* she speaks of many Hungarian actors close to her heart such as the tragedian Maria Jasyay, Louise Blaha, Sari Fedák and the actor Uiházy; she also mentions her part in Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, performed in Germany), then continued her theatrical pilgrimage in Cernăuți, Graz, Brunn, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Meran, Trieste, Lipsca and many other cities. It comes as no surprise that the immensely successful actress would decide to cross the Atlantic to go to the United States of America, a country that was in the middle of full-blown cultural expansion at the time. In 1905, she took a boat to New York. Her passage was no easy feat: a storm left her quite shaken and sick. She was nursed back to health by Lotte Sommer, the daughter of an American tycoon. Their friendship helped Agatha adjust to life in the new world. In New York, she was a part of 20 shows at the Irving Palace Theater, playing parts she loved, such as Hero, Sappho, Magda, Maria Stuart, Deborah, etc. In her *Memoirs*, she says the plays were "indescribably successful". She was offered a long term contract, but had to return to Europe to honor previous commitments. Agatha then performed in Hamburg, Berlin and Bucharest. Her marriage to actor C. Radovici in 1907 in Craiova re-naturalized her as a Romanian. The two lived together for four years in an "undisrupted bliss", according to her memoir. She tried to help her husband attain success at a European level. They moved to Berlin together in 1909, where they lived on Friefau Hauptstrasse no. 86, but in the 1911/1912 performance season, he returned to Bucharest, leaving Agatha behind. Subsequently, famous director Max Reinhardt asked her to play the part of Mother Superior in Karl Vollmoeller's movie, *The Miracle*. After this, Agatha decided to return to America. She starred in a series of immensely successful shows, but as she was preparing to return to Europe, World War I began.

She never limited her acting range, but instead performed in English and Romanian as well. Immigrant Romanian Jews would invite her to take part in shows and she maintained a great professional relationship with the

community (the New York Jewish Theatre hosted several of her performances in Romanian). She cherished the Jewish community's attitude towards her, writing in her *Memoirs*: "On the night of my last performance, hundreds of Romanian Jews came to me, most of them from Iași, Botoșani, Dorohoi, and several other cities of the Moldova region. They kissed my hand with tear-filled eyes, torn by longing for our homeland... Young girls hugged me. Some of them, overrun by nostalgia, asked me to send their best wishes back home, back to Romania- a country they hadn't forgotten and missed dearly... even if they were now better off living here. I was then convinced, and I repeat it now, that the Jews are a peaceful and grateful people who love their homeland. I had to admit that, at least while in America, my most devoted and affectionate friends had all been Jewish. They demonstrated great sensitivity to all that was beautiful, great, noble and sublime – they understood what true art was."



In her *Memoirs*, Agatha Bârsescu writes in detail about the 10 years she spent in America during World War I and about the instances in which fellow Romanians (be they embassy officials or Em. Lucaciu and others) helped her overcome the difficulties she faced. Alongside singer Runny Keyl, she organized an American tour in which her partner sang Romanian songs and she recited Romanian poetry. Furthermore, through a series of readings in which she familiarized the public with German or Romanian texts, she was a messenger of the Romanian cause in the United States. In an interview with "New York Times" reporter Alisa Franck, Agatha states: "The stage is by far the most splendid teacher. It taught me self-control, how to recognize beauty in life, how to work hard and be altruistic instead of just self-absorbed." This confession explains Agatha Bârsescu's career as a recitation and scenic arts professor, which she embraced after her return to Romania in 1923. She accepted minister Ion Petrovici's invitation to become a professor at the Iași Dramatic Conservatory, educating several generations of talented actors. Working as a professor brought her fulfillment during the final years of her life. The tours she went on throughout the country (including the Ardeal region) between 1923 and 1939 have not yet been studied adequately. The press of the time offers bountiful material regarding the roles she played and there are also many confessions which she made during interviews. It is the duty of our literary and theatrical researchers to write papers that will shed light on the lesser known moments of her life and career by 2009 (when 150 years since her birth will be celebrated). Her correspondence, kept in the Vienna Museum of Art, should be published, and commemorative plaques added to the sides of the Viennese houses in which she lived. The places that are irrevocably tied to her personal mythology are the Ursulinen Kloster, where she spent a few of her childhood years, aspiring to remain there as a servant of God; the house on Unter St.Veit Hauptstrasse no.254, which belonged to the countess Terlago and in which she lived whilst studying in Vienna; the house on Schwindgrasse no.3, in which she lived while working at the Hofburgtheater; the house on Doblhofgasse no.3, where she resided during her final years, as well as the Baden villa on Franzengasse which she had purchased. Our compatriot, the great Viennese actress, died in Iassy on the 21<sup>st</sup> of November 1939 at the ripe age of 70, leaving behind a rich theatrical inheritance.

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*Génica Athanasiou.*  
*Une comédienne roumaine dans l'avant-garde parisienne de*  
*l'entre-deux-guerres*

LAURENCE MEIFFRET<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Génica Athanasiou. A Romanian Actress in the Parisian Avant-Garde during the Interwar Period.* After the armistice in 1919, a young girl of Bucharest, a student of Nicolae Soreanu at the Conservatory of Music and Declamation, decided to leave to study in Paris despite the opposition of her parents. So began the career of Génica Athanasiou (1897-1966), dedicated to the so-called "Theater of Art". On the Parisian stage, which was in full renewal, her choice of training goes towards a high standard, as she takes part at the foundation of l'Atelier, with Charles Dullin (former collaborator of Jacques Copeau). Afterwards, her career demonstrated the same rigor: her work was supervised by directors such as Georges Pitoëff, Antonin Artaud or Jean Cocteau on stage; Germaine Dulac, Jean Grémillon or Georg Wilhelm Pabst behind the camera. A thorough investigation shows that she takes part in all battles of the theatrical avant-garde, interpreting the first creations of Antonin Artaud, the Théâtre Alfred-Jarry, Jean-Louis Barrault and the Compagnie des Quinze (some of Copiaus). Fallen into oblivion after the Second World War, it was still thanks to the network of the avant-garde that she managed to work, for the new generation of directors: Sacha Pitoëff or Guy Suarès. Her route without compromise illustrates the ethical, almost monastic ideal, defended by the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier and the Cartel's members: the spirit of the company searches for a collective transcendence without the temptation of ego, or even stardom, in favor of a collective work raised to a high level of creativity.

**Keywords:** Génica Athanasiou, Parisian avant-garde, theatre, cinema, actors of Romanian origin.

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**Fig 1** : Man Ray : Portrait de Gélica Athanasiou en costume roumain, vers 1925.  
Tirage original dédié par elle à un partenaire de *La Quadrature du Cercle*  
de Valentin Kataïev (Théâtre de L'Atelier, 1930).

Figure oubliée en France et plus méconnue encore dans son pays natal, la Roumanie, Gélica Athanasiou, de son vrai nom Eugenia Tănase, ne survit aujourd'hui qu'à travers la correspondance amoureuse adressée par Antonin Artaud, son compagnon de 1922 à 1927 : les fameuses *Lettres à Gélica*<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> Publiées à Paris par la NRF/Le Point du Jour en 1969, trois ans après le décès de la comédienne.

Réduite à l'esquisse d'une femme passionnément aimée, la comédienne a disparu derrière les mots du poète, comme elle a disparu derrière quelques portraits élevés au rang d'icônes – en particulier ceux de Man Ray et de Philippe Halsman – que l'on admire sans toujours mettre de nom sur ce visage extraordinairement sculptural. Sans doute est-ce le sort fatal de toute carrière consacrée au Théâtre d'Art, comme l'on disait alors. Sans doute est-ce parce que l'arrivée du parlant au cinéma rompit les chances d'essor d'une renommée en train de s'établir. Mais une vie professionnelle de quarante ans ne saurait être limitée à un portrait en creux, ni se résoudre à un rôle de muse de ses compagnons, fussent-ils Antonin Artaud ou Jean Grémillon.

Le peu que l'on sait de Génica Athanasiou dessine au contraire l'esquisse d'une personnalité affirmée. L'aventure de son émigration en France, au lendemain de la Grande guerre, laisse pressentir une volonté farouche et l'urgence d'exprimer ses choix artistiques. Mais dès lors que l'on commence à s'intéresser à la personne derrière son légendaire, force est de constater que la comédienne n'a suscité aucune recherche biographique, aucun travail exhaustif sur un parcours apparemment riche. Seules quatre études de quelques pages lui ont été consacrées depuis son décès, il y a un demi-siècle<sup>3</sup>. On y traite de sa relation amoureuse avec Artaud ou des scandales surréalistes suscités par les créations auxquelles elle a participé, on y énumère ses principaux rôles, mais de sa vocation et sa formation, de ses aspirations premières, du développement et des accrocs de sa carrière, de l'ossature même de ses choix, rien ne transparait. Pourtant, quelle matière digne d'étude que la simple succession de ses metteurs en scène : Charles

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<sup>3</sup> Il s'agit en 1966 de la préface aux *Lettres à Génica*, *op. cit.* : non signée, elle est de la plume de Paule Thévenin, éditrice alors anonyme (et aujourd'hui controversée) des *Ceuvres Complètes* d'Artaud pour Gallimard. Elle est suivie en 1970 d'un article d'Anca Costa-Foru, « Antonin Artaud și Jenica Atanasiu », *Secolul XX*, n° 4 : 168-173, et d'un court chapitre du livre de George Cuibuș, *Vitrina cu portrete : actori romani în studiourile lumii* (Bucarest : Meridiane, 1970), 126-133 – lequel comprend de nombreuses erreurs malgré son intérêt. Il faut ensuite attendre trente ans pour disposer d'un article thématique en deux volets de Mirella Patureau : « Despre o cochilie suprarealistă și lumina unei stele ce s-a stins : Génica Athanasiou în penumbrela avangardei pariziene (I) », *Scena.ro*, n° 15 (oct.-nov. 2011), et « Două scandaluri din avangarda anilor 20 : de la *Antigona* lui Cocteau la primul film suprarealist, fluerat de ei înșiși. Génica Athanasiou (II) », *Scena.ro*, n° 17 (avr. 2012).

Dullin, Jean Cocteau, Georges Pitoëff, Antonin Artaud au théâtre, Germaine Dulac, Jean Grémillon et Georg Wilhelm Pabst à l'écran.

Dès l'abord, la carrière de Génica Athanasiou semble s'organiser tout entière autour de l'avant-garde dramatique. Hasard heureux ou engagement fervent, il se passe à peine plus d'un an entre son départ du Conservatoire de Musique et Déclamation de Bucarest et la fondation de la troupe de l'Atelier aux côtés de Charles Dullin. C'est peu pour une jeune fille seule, étrangère, et ne connaissant probablement personne à Paris. Il a fallu qu'agisse une forte aspiration personnelle à participer au renouvellement de l'art dramatique, tel que l'avaient préparé avant-guerre les hautes figures d'André Antoine, Aurélien Lugné-Poe, puis Jacques Copeau. Fallait-il encore les connaître et s'y intéresser suffisamment pour en faire son utopie – une utopie motrice capable de réussir la traversée de l'Europe en cendres, une utopie bâtisseuse capable de s'assimiler à l'histoire d'une troupe à édifier. C'est à partir de cet engagement et du défi originel lancé à soi-même, qu'est né mon projet d'établir la première biographie de Génica Athanasiou. En voici ce qui n'est encore qu'un *work in progress*, tant il est vrai que les recherches restent ouvertes en Roumanie.

### *Quelques points d'état-civil*

Selon les archives municipales de Bucarest, Eugenia Tănase naît le 4 janvier 1897, un quart d'heure après sa sœur jumelle Profira, au domicile familial du 15 rue Uranus. Son père, Gheorghe, est un commerçant d'origine albanaise, avec de probables ascendances grecques. Sa mère, Ecaterina née Gheorghe, vient d'une famille paysanne de Buziaș, petite ville thermale du département de Timiș, alors sous domination austro-hongroise. Le couple a déjà une fille aînée de sept ans, Maria, et il est possible qu'un ou deux frères – Diomedé et /ou George – aient complété la famille, bien que sans certitudes actuelles les concernant. À l'exception de photographies retrouvées dans deux fonds d'archive privés, aucun témoignage ne subsiste sur l'enfance et l'adolescence bucarestoise de la jeune fille : ses domiciles successifs ont été détruits et les descendants d'éventuels neveux et nièces n'ont pu être retrouvés à ce jour.



**Fig. 2-3-4** : Premier portrait connu de Gélica Athanasiou / Avec sa classe /  
Avec des amies de lycée.

Cependant, en recoupant les différentes pièces du puzzle iconographique, quelques légendes au dos des tirages et les informations fournies par son dossier de naturalisation française<sup>4</sup>, il est possible de reconstituer partiellement le milieu dans lequel évolue Eugenia.

Pendant son adolescence, la famille habite rue Albă, de l'autre côté de calea Rahovei au regard du quartier Uranus, et semble mener une vie bourgeoise dans un cadre confortable, mais sans ostentation. L'éducation des enfants est soignée : Eugenia – ou plutôt Jenica, comme on l'appelle chez elle – apprend le français, suit des cours de danse, va au théâtre et peut-être le pratique déjà dans le cadre scolaire. Il n'est pas impossible qu'elle ait perdu sa jumelle Profira durant l'enfance, car plus tard, elle n'évoquera plus que son aînée Maria, dont elle restera proche jusqu'à la fin de sa vie<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Dossier déposé incomplet en 1929, complété en 1930 et instruit en 1931, date officielle de sa naturalisation française sous le nom francisé d'Eugénie Tanase (Archives Nationales, Pierrefitte/Seine).

<sup>5</sup> C'est pour revoir Maria que Gélica Athanasiou reviendra à Bucarest en 1936, ainsi qu'en 1964, deux ans avant son décès.



Fig. 5-6 : Génica Athanasiou aux pieds de sa mère Ecaterina (?) /  
Son père Gheorghe Tănase.

De Jenica nous est parvenue une trentaine de portraits, allant de l'âge de dix ans environ à la majorité, ce qui permet de dessiner l'évolution d'une fillette douée d'une beauté et d'une présence précoces, sachant prendre la pose et parfois même jouer à se mettre en scène. En studio ou chez elle ; seule, en famille ou à l'école ; en tablier de lycéenne, vêtement de deuil ou blouse roumaine, on la voit dans toutes les circonstances de sa vie sociale. Pendant la guerre, une série de clichés amateur la montre à domicile, sans doute à l'occasion de l'anniversaire de sa majorité, ou se préparant aux fiançailles de sa sœur Maria avec un jeune fonctionnaire, Petre Nicolescu, vers l'été 1917. C'est l'époque où, racontera-t-elle plus tard, ses parents commencent à insister pour la marier à son tour, tandis qu'elle leur oppose sa vocation, les menaçant de devoir « divorcer pour partir étudier le théâtre à Paris ».

### *Une vocation intransigeante*

Sa passion semble précoce et impérative. On peut imaginer qu'elle a été favorisée par l'essor du cinématographe et par l'activité de la scène bucarestois bien sûr, mais l'aura des tournées entreprises par les grands comédiens français a certainement du jouer... Sarah Bernhardt, Mounet-Sully, Réjane, Silvain, les frères Coquelin, sans oublier la gloire roumaine de la Comédie-Française, Edouard de Max. Il ne faut pas sous-estimer non plus

l'effet sur la jeunesse de pionniers de l'avant-garde parisienne, en particulier Aurélien Lugné-Poe et Suzanne Desprès (l'incomparable *Nora* d'Ibsen), remarquables animateurs du Théâtre de l'Œuvre<sup>6</sup>, dont on sait combien la troupe fut assidue et pédagogue auprès du public roumain. Se produisant à Bucarest à plusieurs reprises entre 1903 et 1915, Lugné-Poe assortit cette dernière tournée – propagande culturelle en temps de guerre oblige – d'une série de conférences sur l'évolution du théâtre moderne. Mais surtout, sa troupe s'enorgueillit d'avoir compté les comédiennes les plus marquantes et entreprenantes de la nouvelle scène française, telles Georgette Leblanc (muse et interprète de Maeterlinck), Louise Lara (initiatrice d'Art et Action), Camille de Saint-Maurice (âme du Théâtre du Peuple à Bussang avec son époux Maurice Pottecher) et Marguerite Moreno (égérie des Symbolistes). Autant de modèles proposés à l'adolescente piaffante qu'est Jenica.



**Fig. 6-7-8 :** Aux fiançailles de Maria, sa sœur aînée, 1917 / deux portraits d'adolescence.

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<sup>6</sup> Fer-de-lance de la modernité dramatique, le Théâtre de l'Œuvre fut initié par un groupe d'artistes proches du Symbolisme : Paul Fort, Camille Mauclair, Lugné-Poe et les peintres nabis Édouard Vuillard, Maurice Denis et Pierre Bonnard. Son répertoire des plus audacieux contribua à faire découvrir Strindberg, Jarry et Claudel.

Toujours est-il qu'après l'armistice, quand rouvrent les portes du Conservatoire de Musique et Déclamation – la direction ayant dû fermer durant l'hiver 1917-1918 faute de chauffage – Eugenia Tănase décide de tenter le concours d'admission. Un compromis est trouvé avec ses parents : ils ne s'opposent pas à ses études théâtrales, si elle accepte de rencontrer d'éventuels prétendants. La jeune fille promet et, à la rentrée 1918, intègre le Conservatoire dans la première promotion d'après-guerre<sup>7</sup>. Elle s'est faite admettre dans la classe de Nicolae Soreanu, brillant sociétaire du Théâtre National et professeur très disputé. C'est dans son cours qu'elle va être amenée à travailler et sympathiser avec celui qui deviendra l'acteur le plus fameux de leur génération, un certain George Vraca. Au printemps 1919, lorsque le Théâtre National de Bucarest organise sa première tournée officielle dans les provinces restituées du Banat et de Transylvanie, les élèves s'empressent de passer des auditions pour participer à la figuration<sup>8</sup>. L'événement est d'importance car la troupe va se déplacer plusieurs mois, l'occasion d'approcher les sociétaires à l'œuvre.



**Fig. 9 :** Nicolae Soreanu

Mais ni Jenica, ni son confrère George Vraca ne semblent y avoir participé – et pour cause : ils ont tous deux Paris en tête. Elle, parce qu'elle prépare en secret son départ pour l'été, avec sa sœur pour seul soutien. Lui, parce qu'il y a fait ses études avant guerre et qu'il y retourne avec l'équipe nationale de rugby pour disputer les Jeux Interalliés. Pour leur génération, la Ville Lumière reste un aimant, surtout au lendemain d'un conflit qui a balayé leurs illusions. Il est d'ailleurs de tradition de partir s'y former et le Théâtre National attribue des bourses à cet effet. Les bénéficiaires en furent, entre autres, Ana Popescu, Mihail Pascaly ou plus récemment le couple vedette, Aristizza Romanescu et Grigore Manolescu (qui eurent Delaunay comme enseignant au Conservatoire de Paris). Aussi peut-on se demander si Nicolae Soreanu, le professeur de Génica, n'entre pas dans la confidence afin de la conseiller sur son projet.

<sup>7</sup> Information émanant de son dossier de naturalisation, mais non recoupée encore auprès d'éventuelles archives du Conservatoire de Bucarest.

<sup>8</sup> Ioan Massof, *Teatrul românesc în perioada 1913-1925*, vol. V (Bucarest : Minerva, 1974).



### *Les écoles nouvelles du comédien*

Eugenia Tănase arrive à Paris le 21 juillet 1919. Dans un premier temps, elle va loger dans une pension de famille de la rue du Bois-de-Boulogne, comme en atteste un carnet de bons de sucre délivré par la mairie de Neuilly en cette époque de pénurie. Sa vie doit être assez précaire, puisqu'elle ne dispose que d'économies personnelles pour subsister.

Il lui faut donc trouver rapidement, à la fois un cours de théâtre et un moyen de survie, sans doute dans la figuration. Ce ne sera pas chose aisée quand toute une économie est à reconstruire, au théâtre comme ailleurs. Des décennies plus

tard, elle rapportera à des amis avoir été d'une certaine naïveté en se lançant ainsi à l'assaut d'une telle capitale. Mais tout va s'organiser grâce à sa ténacité : dès la rentrée 1919, elle a pour professeur le grand tragédien Paul Mounet, qui, en fin de carrière, professe encore au Conservatoire. On ignore si elle s'est inscrite en auditrice libre ou si elle a pu accéder par concours à l'une des cinq places réservées aux étudiants étrangers. Qu'importe, puisqu'elle semble rapidement avoir cherché une formation moins académique. Dans le Paris en pleine effervescence du début des années 1920, deux écoles sont en voie de réformer l'enseignement de l'art dramatique : celle de Firmin Gémier à la Comédie-Montaigne et celle de Jacques Copeau qui, au retour de sa difficile expérience new-yorkaise, vient de reprendre en main les destinées du Vieux-Colombier. Mais le Conservatoire syndical de Gémier fonctionne déjà,



**Fig. 10 :** Portrait de Gélica Athanasiou avant son départ de Bucarest, printemps 1919.

quand le cours de Copeau cherche encore ses locaux. Jenica s'inscrit donc au premier et y rencontre l'assistant de Gémier, un maître dont elle va suivre l'aventure pendant vingt ans : Charles Dullin.

### *Membre-fondatrice de l'Atelier*

Il faudrait plus qu'un article pour décrire l'extraordinaire dynamisme de Dullin à l'aube du Théâtre de l'Atelier. Âgé de trente-cinq ans, il a connu la bohème montmartroise, partageant foi et famine avec les artistes du Bateau-Lavoir. Il a mariné dans les tranchées, a été blessé, démobilisé, et enfin a pu rejoindre ses pairs du Vieux-Colombier au Garrick Theatre de New-York, cela pour finalement se séparer de son maître Copeau. En 1920, n'ayant plus rien à perdre, il rumine un projet d'école à sa façon. Une femme vif-argent se trouve à ses côtés, qu'il vient d'épouser : la comédienne de l'Odéon Marcelle Jeanniot (Francine Mars à la scène), fille de peintre et personnalité du monde artistique<sup>9</sup>. Ensemble, ils se lancent dans la création d'une troupe-école, avec une utopie – « Arracher le Théâtre aux mercantis qui le déshonorent, le libérer des conventions artistiques qui l'étouffent. »<sup>10</sup>



**Fig. 11-12 :** Charles Dullin et Marcelle Jeanniot-Dullin, vers 1925.

<sup>9</sup> Amie des poètes Valéry Larbaud et Paul Valéry, elle entretint une relation amoureuse avec Léon-Paul Fargue.

<sup>10</sup> Programme-manifeste de l'Atelier-Montmartre en 1922, affiche de Louis Touchagues.

Un jeune professeur géorgien – Vassili Kouchitachwili (dit Kouchita) – et quelques élèves sont débauchés du cours Gémier. Jenica fait partie de ces membres-fondateurs et prend désormais le pseudonyme de Génica At(h)anasiou<sup>11</sup>. Les autres sont Lucien Arnaud, Jean Mamy et six mois plus tard Marguerite Jamois. Une actrice aguerrie, Simone Dulac, et une musicienne en reconversion, Magdelaine Bérubet, les rejoignent. Cours et répétitions ont lieu au domicile des Dullin boulevard Pereire, dans la salle à manger familiale où a été dressée une estrade. Pendant l'été 1921, Dullin va imiter le Vieux-Colombier en ses débuts en se retirant à la campagne. Il loue une ancienne auberge à Néronville, dans le Loiret, et obtient de l'institutrice la jouissance du préau de l'école communale pour travailler. Là ont lieu les exercices – improvisation, masque, mime, diction mécanique, gymnastique rythmique inspirée de Jacques-Dalcroze. La construction de modestes décors s'effectue sous la direction de Kouchita, la fabrication des costumes sous celle de Marcelle Dullin. L'Atelier, au propre et au figuré. En août a lieu une première tournée villageoise, qui permet aux élèves d'affronter un public bon-enfant mais versatile, présent seulement les jours de foires aux bestiaux.

À la rentrée, les soutiens s'organisent<sup>12</sup>, grâce auxquels la troupe parvient à louer un local minuscule dans le quartier des théâtres de la rive gauche, entre l'Odéon et le Vieux-Colombier. C'est une ancienne teinturerie sise rue Honoré-Chevalier, qui permet de travailler et de présenter de courts essais à une vingtaine de spectateurs – presse, mécènes potentiels ou partenaires. Le répertoire, lui, est moins restreint, car Dullin soumet ses élèves-comédiens à un feu roulant d'expériences, allant des classiques français aux auteurs du *Romancero* espagnol : Marivaux, Molière, La Chesnaye, Regnard, Mérimée, Calderón, de Castro... Le chef de troupe n'est pas un théoricien du théâtre à la façon de Copeau, il préfère travailler en

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<sup>11</sup> On trouve les deux orthographes à ses débuts, tandis qu'elle use dans les formulaires officiels du nom dérivé Tanasesco, voire parfois même Stanesco sur les fiches d'hôtels. L'identité « fluctuante » d'Eugenia-Génica mérite à elle seule une étude plus fouillée, qui n'a pas sa place dans ce bref survol.

<sup>12</sup> Notamment financiers de la part du libraire d'art Henri Piazza et de sa fille Denise (future épouse de la star de cinéma Pierre Batcheff, qui jouera à l'Atelier avec Génica dans *La Comédie du bonheur* en 1926).

« pleine pâte » avant de concevoir une doctrine. Sa foi s'exprime dans le retour au texte seul et au « tréteau nu, quatre bancs en carré et quatre ou six planches dessus » : la liberté du dispositif scénique le plus simple, tel que le vantait déjà Cervantès<sup>13</sup>.



**Fig 13** : A Néronville, répétition du *Divorce* de Regnard, été 1921 : Génica Athanasiou (à gauche), Simone Dulac, Lucien Arnaud, Magdelaine Bérubet, X et Charles Dullin en Arlequin.

Génica Athanasiou trouve dans ce bouillonnement créatif le bonheur de s'engager totalement. Ses journées sont denses et réglées à la façon d'un entraînement sportif : neuf heures de cours quotidiens, échelonnées par

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<sup>13</sup> Cité dans *Jacques Copeau et le Vieux-Colombier*, catalogue d'exposition (Paris : Bibliothèque Nationale, 1963), n° 160.

tranches de trois heures, depuis le matin jusqu'à minuit. C'est qu'elle est de toutes les distributions, travaillant l'Isabelle du *Divorce* de Regnard, la princesse de *Moriana et Galvan* d'Alexandre Arnoux, doña Francisca dans *L'Occasion* de Mérimée et la magnifique Estrelle de *La Vie est un songe* de Calderón. Même si Dullin n'apprécie guère la notion d'emploi et saura la distribuer dans des rôles plus fantaisistes, il s'agit pour l'heure de rôles de jeune première dictés par son physique et son charme. Entrée dans l'âge de sa splendeur, la beauté de Génica n'a rien de classique aux yeux des Parisiens, au contraire elle les interloque : un visage puissant à l'architecture antique, que délimite l'implantation des cheveux en cœur ; des yeux dorés sous des cils noir bleuté ; une silhouette dansante et stable, qui transmet une évidence de plénitude, l'impression d'une *présence*. Et cette voix d'or expressive, cet accent « exotique » que l'on compare déjà à celui de Ludmilla Pitoëff, et dont la légende la poursuivra toute sa carrière pour le meilleur et pour le pire... Dans trois de ses rôles, la jeune femme donne la réplique à un garçon plein de fougue qu'elle a remarqué depuis son entrée dans la troupe. Un jeune Marseillais irrésistible qui vient de faire une saison chez Lugné-Poe, un poète dit-on, présenté à Dullin par Max Jacob. Il se nomme Antonin Artaud.

### *Une troupe pour nouvelle « patrie »*

La troupe s'est en effet étoffée de nouvelles recrues, que Dullin appelle « ses jeunes farceurs » et sélectionne selon des critères autant humains que professionnels : « Il faut qu'ils soient *vivants*, bons buveurs, hâbleurs, blagueurs et gentils (...), de belles natures, de bonnes pâtes »<sup>14</sup>, en plus d'être des comédiens vierges des tics du métier, travailleurs et polyvalents. Tour à tour danseur, acrobate, jongleur, mime ou clown en scène, ils seront amenés en coulisses à se faire menuisier, peintre, palefrenier, couturier, secrétaire, colleur d'affiches ou portefaix. C'est l'esprit de troupe qui exige cela : ni vedette, ni théoricien ici. Le recrutement de ces nouveaux-venus est par nature

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<sup>14</sup> Monique Surel-Turpin, *Charles Dullin* (Louvain, Ed. Cahiers Théâtre, coll. Arts du Spectacle, 1983).

très diversifié. Un jeune couple, Tania Balachova et Raymond Rouleau, arrive du Conservatoire de Bruxelles. Orane Demazis est sortie lauréate de celui de Paris. Alain Baranger vient de l'École du Vieux-Colombier, tandis que Marcel Achard y était un souffleur frustré. D'autres n'ont encore eu le temps de se former, comme Louis Allibert ou Vital Geymond.

Il y a aussi quelques jeunes Roumains, qui, à l'instar de Génica, sont venus faire leurs classes à Paris. C'est un réseau qu'entretient Marcelle Dullin, en relation épistolaire avec Elvira Popescu et son ex-époux, le sociétaire du Théâtre National, Aurel Athanasescu<sup>15</sup>. Recommandés par le couple, pensionnaires ou boursiers du Conservatoire de Bucarest débarquent à Paris, où Dullin les reçoit volontiers comme artistes de complément ou élèves de l'École – ce que l'on ignore car peu d'entre eux mèneront ensuite carrière en France. Parmi eux, citons Viorica Anghel, Mina Axelrad, Marius Mateescu, Hadji Ștephăn, Valeriu Valentineanu et Ionel Țăranu, que remplaceront dans les années 1930 Maria Burbea, George Athanasiou, Aurelia Nicolesco, Mircea Balaban et Ecaterina Vlădescu-Olt (future Jany Holt).



*A l'inverse de Génica Athanasiou, **Viorica Anghel** appartient à une famille d'artistes qui a encouragé sa vocation. Nièce du poète symboliste Dimitrie Anghel et fille d'une lauréate du premier prix de musique au Conservatoire de Paris, elle entre en classe de chant au Conservatoire de Bucarest à la suite de ses deux aînées, Andreea et Lucia. Sur les conseils de la reine Elisabeta, les sœurs Anghel achèvent leur formation en France. Viorica y intègre l'Atelier, où elle restera jusqu'en 1925, avant de réussir dans des opérettes. Rentrée à Bucarest vers 1934, elle participera à l'association de la Jeunesse franco-roumaine et travaillera pour la radio.*

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<sup>15</sup> Après l'installation en France d'Elvira Popescu en 1923, le lien de L'Atelier perdurera avec Aurel Athanasescu, comme en témoigne un échange de vœux conservé dans les archives du Musée du Théâtre National de Bucarest. Un grand merci à Mme Vera Molea pour m'avoir permis de découvrir et consulter le fonds en cours d'inventaire des compagnies françaises.

GÉNICA ATHANASIOU. UNE COMÉDIENNE ROUMAINE DANS L'AVANT-GARDE PARISIENNE  
DE L'ENTRE-DEUX-GUERRES



De son vrai nom George Ștephănescu junior, **Hadji Ștephăn** est le fils du célèbre compositeur du même nom et de la mezzo-soprano Alexandrina Gavalla. Etudiant à Paris – comme ses frères Victor, architecte fameux, et Gabriel, peintre – il se produit avant guerre au Lessing Theater de Berlin, puis intègre la troupe de Nottara en 1915 à Iași. Il devient après guerre régisseur de Firmin Gémier, rencontrant ainsi Dullin. À l'Atelier, il se lie d'amitié avec le couple Athanasiou-Artaud, suivant Artaud chez les Pitoëff et participant à sa toxicomanie. Il rentrera à Bucarest peu avant la Seconde Guerre Mondiale, mais sans parvenir à s'y faire reconnaître.



De son vrai nom Minnie Bleichman, **Mina Axelrad** est une représentante du dynamisme du théâtre yiddish roumain, développé sous l'impulsion du dramaturge Avram Goldfaden – le « Shakespeare yiddish ». Fille et sœur de comédiens, elle joue dès l'enfance dans des troupes itinérantes en Roumanie, puis au Yiddish Theater de Berlin. Suivant Goldfaden qui veut y fonder une école, la famille Bleichman se fixe à Paris où Mina joue à l'Atelier comme artiste de complément. En 1925, elle partira avec son fiancé Morris Axelrad, comédien roumain établi à Londres, pour rejoindre le Yiddish Theatre de Buenos-Aires.



**Valeriu Valentineanu** est depuis 1915 pensionnaire du Théâtre National de Bucarest. Il a obtenu une bourse d'étude à Paris grâce au ministre de la Culture Octavian Goga, impressionné par sa prestation dans le rôle du bouffon de La Nuit des rois (ci-contre). Nommé sociétaire du TNB, il devra renoncer à cette bourse et abandonner sa formation à l'Atelier pour rentrer à Bucarest. Il s'illustrera notamment en Hamlet, en 1941, en alternance avec George Vraca et George Calboreanu dans la fameuse « bataille des Hamlet ».



Les deux patries de Génica Athanasiou se rejoignent ainsi au cœur même de son nouveau foyer, l'Atelier. Ces liens se voient encore renforcés par son amitié pour Bianca Maklès, seule Roumaine avec elle à être membre à part entière de la troupe, sous le nom de Lucienne Morand. Mariée avec le dadaïste Théodore Fraenkel et proche de Simone Breton, cette compagne va introduire Génica dans le réseau artistique et littéraire qu'elle fréquente avec ses cadettes : Rose, Simone et Sylvia, qui seront les épouses respectives d'André Masson, de Jean Piel et de Georges Bataille<sup>16</sup>.



**Fig. 14-15:** Eli Lotar : Bianca Fraenkel / Sylvia Bataille, vers 1926, deux des sœurs Maklès comédiennes à l'Atelier.

Ainsi se croisent et se fréquentent deux mondes, une bande féminine qui gravite autour des sœurs Maklès et plusieurs cercles masculins regroupés, qui autour des ateliers de la rue Blomet, qui autour des dimanche de Boulogne chez les Kahnweiler<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Sylvia Maklès épousera après la Libération son nouveau compagnon, le psychanalyste Jacques Lacan.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Leiris, *Zébrages* (Paris : Gallimard, 1992), chap. « 45, rue Blomet », et Patrick-Gilles Persin, *L'Aventure d'un grand marchand d'art. Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler* (Paris : Solange Thierry Editeur/ Bibliothèque des Arts, 1990).

Par Bianca Fraenkel, Génica côtoie les écrivains Georges Limbour et Michel Leiris, rencontre de jeunes photographes comme Denise Bellon et leur compatriote Eli Lotar. Quant à Sylvia Bataille, avec laquelle elle travaillera dans la Compagnie des Quinze (peu après le décès prématuré de Bianca), elle sera son lien vers une génération de dix ans sa cadette, en particulier certains membres des groupes d'agit-prop Octobre et Mars, tels que Roger Blin ou Sylvain Itkine. Mais c'est par Antonin Artaud, partenaire devenu compagnon de vie, qu'elle accèdera au théâtre surréaliste naissant, en interprétant pour lui la première pièce de Louis Aragon (*Au pied du mur* fin mai 1925) et celle de Roger Vitrac (*Les Mystères de l'amour*, en juin 1927 dans le cadre de la programmation inaugurale du Théâtre Alfred-Jarry).

### *Débuts au Vieux-Colombier*

Mal logé, l'Atelier reste itinérant pour ses représentations, jouant deux fois par semaine salle Padeloup, rue des Ursulines, jusqu'à ce que l'entraide de l'avant-garde théâtrale fonctionne : généreusement, Jacques Copeau met sa salle à la disposition de la jeune troupe pour quelques matinées. Génica Athanasiou débute ainsi officiellement sur cette scène connue pour sa rigueur – les « Folies-Calvin » disent les mauvaises langues parisiennes ! Elle y joue les premiers rôles dans plusieurs succès remarquables, comme les intermèdes espagnols et surtout *La Vie est un songe*. C'est Antonin Artaud qui a dessinée les costumes de la pièce de Calderón et qui, très amoureux, fait un portrait de Génica dans son rôle d'Estrelle. Leur passion éclate, d'un idéalisme à la hauteur de leur exigence. Elle va lui inspirer des poèmes, des mises en scène, des dédicaces géniales et plus tard, de terribles lettres ouvertes, qu'il publiera sans adresse dans *Le Pèse-Nerf*, sous le titre emblématique de *Lettres de ménage*.



**Fig. 16-17-18** : Gélica dans *L'Occasion* au Vieux-Colombier avec Jean Mamy et Marguerite Jamois, mars 1922/ Artaud, portrait de Gélica en *Estrelle*, juin 1922 / Artaud, costume du feu pour Gélica, août 1922.

Les troupes profitent de ce partage de scène pour échanger. Au Vieux-Colombier, deux pratiques fascinent Gélica et son compagnon : le nô japonais et le mime, qu'Étienne Decroux commence à développer en tant qu'élève. Leurs exercices quotidiens vont dans la même direction – porter un seau imaginaire, figurer le feu – poser le geste avant les mots. À corps perdu, Gélica se lance dans le travail d'improvisation mimée proposé par Dullin. Sa poésie imaginative y fait merveille, lorsqu'elle « incarne » une violette sous la mousse, un torrent en crue, l'éclosion d'une rose. Son don d'extraire la ligne-clef d'un mouvement lui donne une assurance quasi musicale, dont sauront tirer parti ses metteurs en scène et leurs compositeurs. Lui-même doté d'un grand sens du rythme, Dullin fait travailler de jeunes musiciens souvent issus de la *Schola Cantorum*, ainsi Arthur Honegger pour *Antigone* en 1922, Georges Auric pour *La Femme silencieuse* en 1925 et *Les Oiseaux* en 1928, Darius Milhaud (dont l'épouse Madeleine, comédienne, jouera parfois à l'Atelier) pour *Jules César* en 1937. Dès la saison 1924, Dullin recrute le danseur Georges Pomiès comme professeur-chorégraphe et accueille le mime Decroux dans la troupe, où il saura éveiller des vocations<sup>18</sup> – celle de

<sup>18</sup> Etienne Decroux, qui fait œuvre de militant artistique, jouera dans de nombreuses distributions aux côtés de Gélica : il sera notamment le Trotsky de *Tzar Lénine* en 1930 et contribuera à l'extrémisme formel du premier spectacle de Jean-Louis Barrault, *Autour d'une mère* (où elle interprètera la dame au phono).

Jean-Louis Barrault en particulier. Vivier l'un pour l'autre, l'Atelier et le Vieux-Colombier mettent expériences et moyens, sinon en commun, du moins à disposition réciproque : ainsi Dullin recevra-t-il à son tour Copeau lorsqu'il aura son propre théâtre. Cet esprit de partage préfigure la mise en place du Cartel, qui fera joindre leurs efforts à Dullin, Pitoëff, Jouvet et Baty à partir de 1927.

### *L'Atelier-Montmartre*



**Fig. 19 :** Maurice Utrillo, Le Théâtre de l'Atelier, vers 1925.

En octobre 1922, Dullin trouve à installer sa troupe au Théâtre-Montmartre, une ancienne petite salle de banlieue place Dancourt, au pied de la Butte. Pendant dix-huit-ans, la vie professionnelle de Génica Athanasiou va s'ancrer là. Elle délaisse son hôtel du Quartier-Latin pour emménager un temps chez les Dullin, où Artaud la rejoint parfois, lorsqu'il a dépensé ses maigres cachets dans sa consommation de laudanum. C'est une vie collégiale et gaie malgré le manque de ressources, mais pour préserver son intimité, la jeune femme va ensuite louer des chambres au mois dans le quartier, en fonction des tournées tournées et tournages. Pour des raisons d'économie, elle quittera aussi Paris pendant les mois de la morte saison estivale, allant dans des villes de cure pour maintenir l'équilibre d'une santé fragile. Il est vrai que la troupe doit déployer des trésors d'inventivité pour parvenir à améliorer l'état du théâtre, produire et survivre à la fois. Cette pauvreté imposée conduit souvent l'huissier jusqu'à l'Atelier et Marcelle Dullin jusqu'au Mont-de-Piété, où elle met en gage son argenterie ou ses fourrures. Il en naîtra une farce aigre-douce, *La Parade du sou*, faisant appel aux donateurs pour « placer leur or à fonds perdu » !

Chaque comédien-membre s'est fait actionnaire de son outil de travail : Génica pour une action de 200 francs, qu'elle renouvellera annuellement jusqu'en 1932, date à laquelle elle ne travaillera plus à l'Atelier qu'un semestre

sur deux. La plus belle décennie de son engagement semble véritablement avoir été celle des années 1920, avec ses rôles contrastés – de la tragique Antigone à la pétillante Wanda Waleska du *Joueur d'échecs* – et des auteurs contemporains que le public parisien découvre grâce au flair de Dullin : Jacinto Grau, Alexandre Arnoux, Armand Salacrou... C'est la décennie de la ferveur partagée autour d'une règle commune, où les comédiens se livrent en oblats et vestales à leur art, au cœur d'une communauté au sens quasi-monastique du terme<sup>19</sup>.



X      XX

**Fig. 20 :** *M. de Pygmalion* de Jacinto Grau à l'Atelier, février 1923 :

X : Antonin Artaud en Pedro Udermalas (maquillé en noir) /

XX : Génica en Belle Pomponina.

### *Une Antigone dada*

La première grande création de l'Atelier en ses murs se prépare fin 1922 sous la houlette de Jean Cocteau, qui y met en scène son adaptation condensée et anarchisante de l'*Antigone* antique. Le choix qu'il fait avec

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<sup>19</sup> L'inspiration de la règle bénédictine de ces jeunes troupes est très bien suggérée par le travail en cours de Roberta Collu et Raphaëlle Doyon, in *La matrice religieuse de Jacques Copeau, une lecture anthropologique du fonctionnement de la communauté des Copiaus (1924-1929)* (Paris, CRAL-EHESS, 2013) : <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00981265/document>

Dullin de leurs collaborateurs montre un désir commun de dépoussiérer les versions Grand siècle dans la tradition du Français et tenter d'en retrouver une idéale pureté archéologique. Picasso est invité à créer les décors, Mlle Chanel (dont c'est la première incursion en scène) les costumes, et Honegger la partition. À cet éblouissant ensemble s'adjoint une distribution osée, donnant la vedette à deux grands débutants autour de Dullin-Créon : Génica Athanasiou dans le rôle-titre et Antonin Artaud en devin Tirésias.



**Fig 21 :** Man Ray, Génica en Antigone, décembre 1922.



**Fig. 22 :** Vogue France, décembre 1922.



**Fig. 23 :** Vogue Studio, tirage redessiné par Jean Cocteau.:  
Vogue Studio, tirage redessiné par Jean Cocteau.

C'est pour la comédienne une convergence de chances qui va la lancer sur la scène parisienne et lui faire connaître son premier scandale dada, la propulsant au rang d'icône de l'avant-garde. Drapée dans un *himation* tricoté par des artisanes irlandaises pour Chanel, fardée au khôl et au blanc de céruse selon le dessin des masques de Picasso, la « jeune Grecque » de Cocteau fait sensation par l'étrangeté de sa beauté, de sa diction et de ses poses de statuaire antique, moins dansées que mimées. Une génération d'adolescents s'identifie aussitôt à une telle héroïne, à l'instar d'un Maurice Sachs fasciné.



Fig. 24 : Julien Pavil, Gélica en Antigone, *Comoedia*, 1922.

La critique, les érudits, les écrivains s'emparent de ce spectacle novateur, en cherchant les sources d'inspiration sans parvenir à en démonter la magie. Le masque est ici supplanté par le maquillage blanc figeant les traits pour mieux styliser les expressions, dans la tradition du Pierrot au théâtre de foire, dans celle surtout des nôt chers à Suzanne Bing et à l'équipe du Vieux-Colombier. C'est aussi un rappel de l'Irma Vep de Feuillade, héroïne moderne – et proto-surréaliste – par excellence. Le travail sur la diction semble également très particulier.

Pour Cocteau et Honegger, leur héroïne prend la tonalité d'une contralto dramatique. Gélica subit un *training* astucieux visant à faire oublier son accent en le sublimant : pour retrouver le phrasé de l'Antique, on l'oblige à parler « à froid » et à jeter ses mots comme des salves. Et en effet, la générale vire au feu d'artifice ce 20 décembre 1922, quand se présentent au contrôle un commando dadaïste « anti-Cocteau » et un huissier muni du papier bleu... pour saisie immédiate de recette ! Après ce baptême du feu, *Antigone* devient l'événement de la saison et son interprète, la découverte à suivre : une « nouvelle Eve



Francis ». La notoriété du spectacle dépasse bientôt les frontières du microcosme parisien et de ses guérillas claniques. Après bien des critiques – André Gide, Paul Valéry, Raymond Duncan – et au moins autant d'éloges – François Mauriac, Marie de Régnier, Henri Hoppenot – c'est au tour de l'intelligentsia étrangère de se déclarer. Ezra Pound, alors correspondant de *The Dial*, admire sans réserve l'adaptation controversée de Cocteau, la déclarant supérieure à celle de Swinburne. W. B. Yeats envisage pour sa part d'en faire une trilogie à l'Abbey Theatre, avec ses propres adaptations de Sophocle. Quant à Igor Stravinsky, il demandera à Cocteau cinq ans plus tard d'écrire le livret de son opéra *Oedipus-Rex*. Cette *Antigone* s'impose ainsi comme l'une des œuvres-manifestes du début des Années Folles, exaspérant puristes et rétrogrades. « Antigone cubiste, Antigone dada, Antigone au Bœuf sur le toit, les chefs-d'œuvre supportent tout », ironise un chroniqueur d'*Action-Française*<sup>20</sup>. Au cœur de la mêlée, Génica Athanasiou est remarquée, encensée, portée au pinacle, malmenée parfois. Émouvante, hiératique, grandiose, exceptionnelle, pathétique, « elle est Antigone elle-même », « elle est tout ce que vous voudrez, grecque ou roumaine, barbare ou artificielle mais elle a un accent tragique qui emporte tout », « moitié ridicule, moitié sublime – au total déchirante ». Ce rôle décisif pour elle, nul n'en parle mieux qu'Antonin Artaud qui, douze ans et une séparation plus tard, l'évoquera toujours avec le même éblouissement<sup>21</sup> :

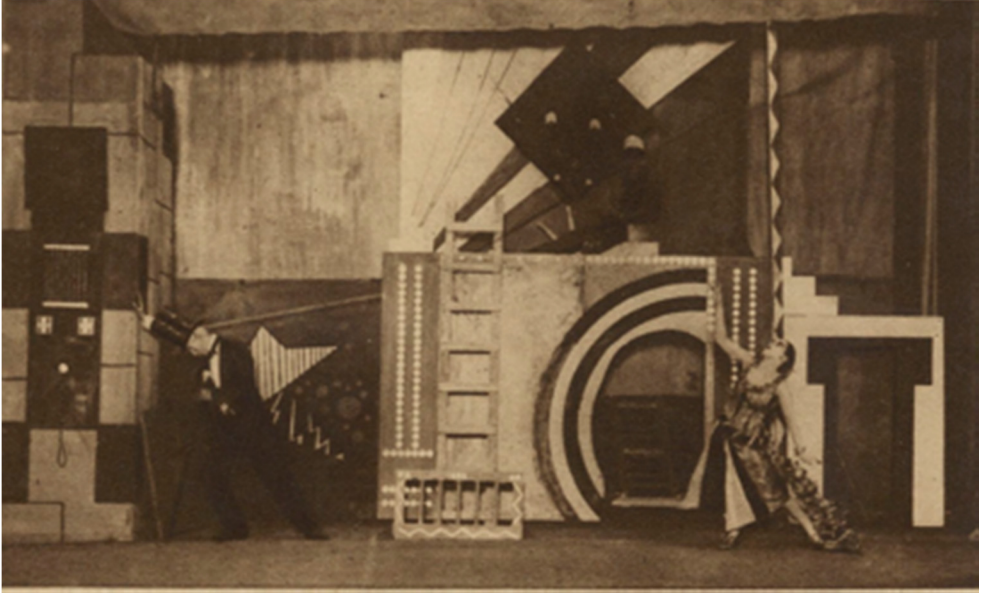
Si dans cette pièce il y eut un triomphe vraiment humain, c'est la tragédienne Génica Athanasiou qui l'obtint pour son interprétation d'Antigone. Jamais je n'oublierai la voix dorée, frémissante, mystérieuse de Génica Athanasiou-Antigone en train de faire ses adieux au soleil. Sa plainte venait d'au-delà du temps, et comme portée par l'écume d'une vague sur la mer Méditerranée, un jour inondé de soleil (...). C'était réellement la voix de la Grèce archaïque.

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<sup>20</sup> Lucien Dubech, le 25 décembre 1922.

<sup>21</sup> « Le Théâtre d'après-guerre à Paris », *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, n° 262 (1<sup>er</sup> juillet 1935) : ce texte sera repris lors d'une conférence à Mexico un an plus tard.





**Fig. 25** : Génica Athanasiou en princesse Tétragone (à droite) en 1924 dans *Petite Lumière et l'Ourse* d'Alexandre Arnoux, qui sera aussi scénariste de *Maldone*.

### *Premiers rôles muets*

Antigone a rendu Génica Athanasiou désirable aux yeux des réalisateurs. Elle débute en 1924 sous la direction de Jacques-Robert dans l'adaptation d'un roman à la mode, *Le Comte Kostia*, pour la firme des Cinématographes Phocéa. La gageure est de s'y imposer en garçon – et en fils de Conrad Veidt – dans un drame romantique dont les héros sont masculins et les interprètes, de grands noms de l'écran : Daniel Mendaille, André Nox et Paul Pauley. Ce rôle inattendu, d'adolescent travesti révolté par sa condition, est délicat, mais lui permet de se distinguer dans les scènes tendues qui l'opposent à Conrad Veidt, au sommet de son charisme. À la sortie du film début 1925, la presse salue cette performance.

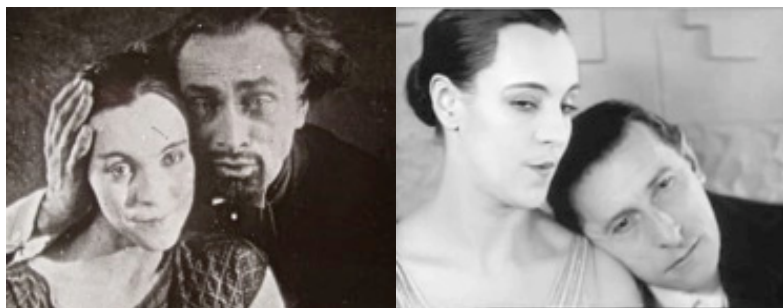


Fig. 26-27 : *Le Comte Kostia* avec Conrad Veidt, 1925 /  
*Maldone* avec Charles Dullin, 1928.

*Maldone*, sa seconde interprétation à l'écran débute en 1927 à l'initiative de Dullin, qui monte sa propre société de production pour réaliser le premier long-métrage d'un jeune musicien et documentariste, Jean Grémillon. Gélica Athanasiou est alors en train de se séparer d'Antonin Artaud, après des mois tourmentés. En juin 1925, au lendemain de la représentation difficile d'*Au pied du mur* d'Aragon au Vieux-Colombier<sup>22</sup>, elle a dû être hospitalisée en urgence pour une intervention qui va la priver de pouvoir un jour être mère. Ce sont ses amis Bianca Fraenkel et Hadji Ștephăn qui l'ont assistée dans cette épreuve, Artaud se trouvant en tournage en Italie, puis monopolisé par la correction d'épreuves de *L'Ombilic des limbes*. Tourné à Néronville avec les comédiens de l'Atelier<sup>23</sup>, *Maldone* devient pour Gélica l'occasion d'un bilan affectif et d'un épanouissement professionnel. Incarnant une séduisante gitane, elle y paraît plus mûre, pleine d'aisance et particulièrement en beauté sous l'objectif d'un réalisateur conquis. Sur le plan cinématographique, il s'agit d'une expérience audacieuse voire

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Aron, futur co-fondateur du Théâtre Alfred-Jarry avec ses amis Roger Vitrac et Antonin Artaud, a été hué par les surréalistes pendant la conférence d'ouverture, avant qu'une bagarre ne se déclenche et l'empêche de continuer. Le résultat a été une succession de brouilles, entre Artaud et Breton, entre Aragon et Aron.

<sup>23</sup> Outre Marcelle et Charles Dullin, l'entourent Edmond Beauchamp, Vital Geymond, Isabelle Kloucovsky, Jean Mamy, Georges Séroff, mais aussi hors Atelier : la jeune Annabella et Roger Karl, du Vieux-Colombier.

révolutionnaire, filmée sur pellicule panchromatique avec des procédés novateurs : effets de surimpression, d'accélération, de plongée, très gros plans... Mais amputé par le distributeur, ce film inspiré reste incompris lors de sa sortie en 1928.



Fig. 28-29 : Deux affiches de *Maldone*, dont à gauche celle non exploitée du jeune décorateur André Barsacq, 1928.

### *Icône surréaliste*

Parallèlement, Génica Athanasiou travaille avec Germaine Dulac dans un projet où elle devait initialement retrouver Artaud : *La Coquille et le clergyman*. Le scénario, qui est de sa plume, a été écrit en pensant à elle pour le rôle de la femme-soleil autour de laquelle tournoient les fantômes. Mais Dulac craint l'exigence voire l'omniprésence d'Artaud, par ailleurs retenu en studio par les retards du *Jeanne d'Arc* de Dreyer. La relation tendue de la réalisatrice et de l'auteur fait en quelque sorte écho à celle des anciens amoureux, Artaud regrettant l'adaptation et le rôle du clergyman autant que l'éloignement de son amie. Son amertume s'exprime lors de la première du film en février 1928 au Studio des Ursulines, où ses ex-camarades surréalistes mènent pour lui le tapage. On ignore si Génica est présente dans la salle, mais lui-même s'y trouve

en compagnie d'Alexandra Pecker, danseuse des Folies-Bergère avec laquelle il entretient une amitié amoureuse. Les deux jeunes femmes participent alors au Théâtre Alfred-Jarry, entré dans ses années d'intense production (1927-28) : Génica y joue dans *Les Mystères de l'amour* de Vitrac et un acte du *Partage de midi* de Claudel ; Alexandra Pecker dans *Ventre brûlé* d'Artaud et *Le Songe* de Strindberg<sup>24</sup>. Quoi qu'il en soit, l'aventure de *La Coquille* s'avère être doublement manquée pour son scénariste. Selon lui pas assez extrémiste dans l'onirisme, ce premier film surréaliste – avant ceux de Dali, Buñuel et Cocteau – marque aussi la fin des relations du couple en tant que tel.

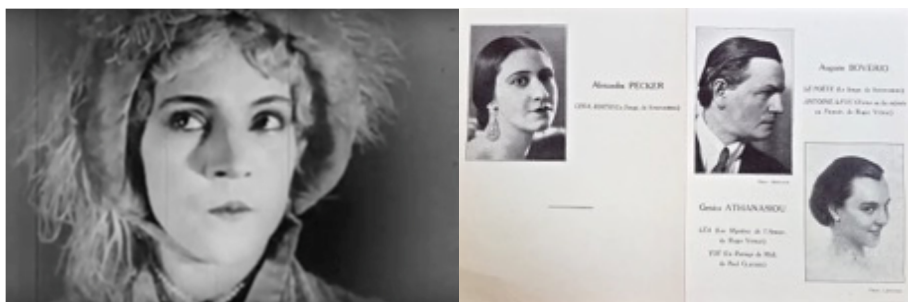


Fig. 30-31 : *La Coquille et le clergyman* de Germaine Dulac, 1928 / Alexandra Pecker et Génica Athanasiou au programme du Théâtre Alfred-Jarry, 1928.

Depuis *Antigone*, une succession de scandales surréalistes accompagne en somme la plupart des créations où Génica tient la vedette, particulièrement dans les mises en scène d'Artaud. Celui-ci, à la différence de ses compagnons, Aragon et Vitrac mis à l'écart, s'est exclu plus qu'il ne l'a été du mouvement surréaliste. Sa muse n'en demeure pas moins l'une de leurs égéries, hautement appréciée en Ysé lors de la représentation anti-censure du Théâtre Alfred-Jarry... Cette Ysé interdite de représentation par Claudel, qu'Artaud a mise en scène en une sorte d'ultime « cadeau » de rupture.

<sup>24</sup> Il était même question qu'Alexandra Pecker remplace Génica Athanasiou dans *La Coquille et le clergyman*, si celle-ci ne parvenait pas à se libérer pour le tournage.

### *De l'Atelier à la compagnie Pitoëff*

Cependant l'activité de l'Atelier, si elle ne faiblit pas, impose toujours la précarité aux comédiens. Dès 1925, Dullin autorise donc ses permanents à jouer en représentation sur d'autres scènes du théâtre d'art, dans ce qu'il conçoit comme la préfiguration du Cartel. Alors qu'Artaud vient de quitter la compagnie Pitoëff, Génica Athanasiou va s'y produire à trois reprises entre 1925 et 1932. Dans *L'Assoiffé* d'Aristide Derera, *Faits-divers* de Gobius et *La Louise* de Jean-Jacques Bernard, elle remplace chaque fois Ludmilla Pitoëff indisponible. Il est vrai que les deux comédiennes frappent par leur ressemblance et leur intensité (trop d'ailleurs, avait prévenu Artaud, pour qu'elle puisse entrer dans leur troupe). Mais Georges Pitoëff l'apprécie et recourt à ses services ponctuellement, tournant même avec elle l'une de ses rares prestations à l'écran : *La Machine à sous*, un court-métrage d'Emil-Edwin Reinert.



**Fig. 32 :** *La Comédie du bonheur*, avec Pierre Batcheff, 1932.

Après avoir donné la réplique à de nouveaux partenaires – notamment aux excellents Louis Salou, Jean d'Yd, Maria Germanova et Jim Gérald – Génica rentre chez Dullin où l'attend un peu de répit. Après ces années précaires, deux grands succès permettent à la troupe de connaître une certaine stabilisation. Avec *La Comédie du bonheur* de Nikolai Evreinoff en 1926 et *Volpone* de Ben Jonson en 1928, l'Atelier dispose d'un fonds de répertoire qui, avec son inaltérable *Avare*, lui garantit des recettes. Cela n'empêche pas Dullin de poursuivre ses tentatives risquées et de connaître de cuisants échecs. Génica participe à toutes les aventures et leurs revers : applaudie en naïve Colomba (*Volpone*), en Iris-la-Rapide (*Les Oiseaux*) ou en danseuse mystificatrice (*La Comédie du bonheur*), elle se voit ignorée dans de jolis rôles, comme la Véra de *Patchouli* d'Armand Salacrou, qui ne tient pas à l'affiche. Au tournant de 1932, s'affranchissant de l'actionnariat de l'Atelier, elle n'y joue plus en représentation que la moitié de l'année. Cette disponibilité va lui permettre de participer à des créations sur d'autres scènes, des tournées avec d'autres compagnies ou des tournages.



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Fig. 33-34 : *Les Oiseaux*, 1928 / *L'Assoiffé* avec Georges Pitoëff, 1925.



Fig. 35 : *La Quadrature du cercle* de Valentin Kataïev, avec Marcel d'Orval, Gélica Athanasiou, X, Etienne Decroux, Bianca Maklès (?) et Lucien Arnaud, 1931.



Fig. 36-37 : *Patchouli*, avec Julien Bertheau, 1930 / *La Machine à sous*, court-métrage, 1932.

### *Vers le parlant, vers la normativité*

Jean Grémillon est entre-temps devenu son compagnon. En 1928, il lui confie le premier rôle féminin de *Gardiens de phare*, un mélodrame adapté du Grand-Guignol par Jacques Feyder. À ce huis-clos tragique, le réalisateur impulse un souffle épique où son élément favori, la mer, va accompagner la descente du héros dans la folie. Le rôle est tenu par Vital Geymond, partenaire et ami de l'Atelier, qui forme avec Génica un couple idéal de jeunes premiers. Malgré un tournage très difficile en Bretagne<sup>25</sup>, ce film lyrique connaît le succès, notamment grâce aux somptueux décors en studio d'André Barsacq et au travail poétique du chef-opérateur Georges Périnal. La carrière cinématographique de Génica Athanasiou semble dès lors lancée. Plusieurs couvertures de revues lui sont dédiées au titre de jeune actrice prometteuse. Les nouvelles sollicitations ne vont pourtant pas porter leurs fruits. Son rôle de bohémienne comparse de Gilles de Rais est quasi intégralement coupé au montage dans *La Merveilleuse vie de Jeanne d'Arc*, réalisé par Marco de Gastyne<sup>26</sup>. Il n'en subsiste qu'une apparition fugitive et une très belle photographie de tournage (fig. 38). Le film connaît d'ailleurs l'échec face à la version de Carl Dreyer sortie la même année – aléas de la distribution.

<sup>25</sup> Les comédiens sont victimes d'un grave accident qui modifie la distribution et bouleverse le plan de tournage, reportant de six mois les prises de vue en raison de la création de *Volpone* à l'Atelier.

<sup>26</sup> Avec Simone Genevois dans le rôle-titre, Jean Debucourt, Philippe Hériat et Gaston Modot.



**Fig. 38-39-40 :** *La Merveilleuse vie de Jeanne d'Arc* de Marco de Gastyne, 1929 /  
*Gardiens de phare* de Jean Grémillon, 1929 / *Don Quichotte* de G. W.  
Pabst avec Feodor Chaliapine, 1933.

Suivent deux films parlants qui sonnent le glas d'une carrière cinématographique pour Gélica : avec *Don Quichotte* de Georg Wilhelm Pabst et *Colomba* de Jacques Séverac se pose avec acuité la question de l'accent et de la diction. La modestie du rôle de la servante permet de ne pas s'en soucier dans le premier opus. Mais celui de *Colomba* semble avoir été plus délicat à négocier. Avec notre oreille contemporaine, certains critiques ont prétendu que la comédienne « parlait faux », quand sa hauteur de ton était celle de sa génération. Elle ne fera en tout cas pas de doublage, comme ses camarades, dans les périodes difficiles de l'après-guerre. Cependant un autre facteur intervient, bien plus déterminant, qui est la beauté typée de l'actrice. Remarquons que depuis ses débuts à l'écran, elle n'incarne qu'une seule catégorie de femme, l'Étrangère. Gitane dans *Maldone* et *La Merveilleuse Vie*, bretonne bigoudène dans *Gardiens de phare*, corse dans *Colomba* ou castillane dans *Don Quichotte*, elle est toujours cette autre que scénaristes et premiers directeurs de casting se plaisent à opposer à de blondes rivales, telles Annabella ou Josette Day. Ce registre réduit, et sans doute l'image d'interprète de l'avant-garde, n'inspire guère les producteurs. Ce qui fonctionne une dernière fois pour *Colomba* – dont il faut souligner que Gélica seule fait l'affiche, au propre et au figuré – ne saurait servir dans le cinéma de la quotidienneté qui se développe alors. Plus rigide encore qu'au théâtre,



l'emploi filmique de Génica est celui de l'héroïne ou de la tragédienne : comment pourrait-elle faire irruption sous les traits d'une dactylo ou de la voisine de palier ? Les préjugés sont tenaces, puisque seul un débutant a été capable de l'imaginer en serveuse de café (Reinert, dans *La Machine à sous*, 1932). Dans le domaine de la réalisation, Grémillon se trouve lui aussi victime de tels partis-pris qui entravent l'essor de sa carrière : trop esthète, trop lyrique, trop poétique... il devra partir tourner à l'étranger jusqu'à la guerre. Toujours est-il que l'offre se tarit pour Génica Athanasiou, au profit de comédiennes plus lisses et primesautières.



Fig. 41 : *Colomba*, 1933.

### *Les jeunes compagnies d'avant-garde*

Les années 1930 voient l'éclosion de nombreuses jeunes troupes issues tout à la fois de l'esprit du Vieux-Colombier, de l'éclatement des Copiaus et de l'activisme des groupes d'agit-prop accompagnant le Front populaire. Dès 1934, Génica Athanasiou participe à leur action, d'abord dans la Compagnie des Quinze, puis dans celle encore informelle de Jean-Louis Barrault, bientôt dite du Grenier des Grands-Augustins. La première a été fondée en 1929 par d'anciens Copiaus – dont Michel Saint-Denis, neveu et disciple de Copeau, et Marie-Hélène Dasté, sa fille – et a fait ses débuts sur la scène même du Vieux-Colombier. Saint-Denis désire diffuser en Europe les principes de rénovation

théâtrale dont ils ont hérité. Pour ce faire, les Quinze prennent le parti d'exporter leur quatrième saison, en se produisant à Bruxelles et à Londres dans une pièce d'André Obey<sup>27</sup> : *Don Juan ou l'homme de cendres*. Génica retrouve dans la distribution d'anciens camarades de l'Atelier, Sylvia Bataille et François Vibert, et côtoie des comédiens aux parcours très divers, comme Pierre Fresnay (ancien sociétaire du Français devenu vedette depuis son interprétation à l'écran du *Marius* de Pagnol) ou Sylvain Itkine (remarquable animateur du groupe de théâtre-ouvrier Mars)<sup>28</sup>.

En 1935, Jean-Louis Barrault est élève de l'Atelier depuis quatre ans et travaille aux côtés d'Artaud sur *Les Cencis*, tout en aspirant à mettre en scène par lui-même. Lorsqu'il décide de se lancer dans l'aventure, Génica devient l'un de ses soutiens indéfectibles et bénévoles, comme elle l'a été pour le Théâtre Alfred-Jarry. *Autour d'une mère*, adaptation d'un roman de Faulkner, va être créée à Lyon et accueillie à l'Atelier en clôture de saison. Il s'agit de la quintessence des expériences sur le corps menées avec Etienne Decroux et Jean Dasté. La tentative paraît si décapante, que Dullin lui-même en reste médusé : des comédiens quasi nus mimant l'action, peu de texte, des décors minimalistes de Félix Labisse, des perruques et un masque en fil de fer, la partition du guitariste cubain Tata Nacho... rien à quoi un public même averti puisse se raccrocher. « À côté de ça, dira Dullin à la veille de la générale, Artaud c'est du boulevard ! » Certains comédiens en viennent même à se désister. Mais le spectacle, qui débute dans une ambiance de curée, parvient à retourner une salle subjuguée. Le pari est réussi. Barrault, installé au Grenier des Grands-Augustins (les combles d'un ancien hôtel particulier dont Dora Maar fera bientôt l'atelier de Picasso), officialise sa compagnie sous le nom du lieu<sup>29</sup>. Déjà lié à Roger Blin, il accueille dans ses murs les répétitions du groupe Octobre. Génica se retrouve ainsi dans le creuset de cette nouvelle vague théâtrale portée par Prévert, Itkine et Barrault, et le phalanstère bohème

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<sup>27</sup> Le dramaturge sera nommé administrateur de la Comédie-Française en 1945.

<sup>28</sup> Les deux hommes joueront ensemble dans *La Grande Illusion* de Renoir cinq ans plus tard. Sylvain Itkine, trotskiste, résistant et juif, sera dénoncé pendant l'Occupation et mourra sous la torture entre les mains de la Gestapo de Lyon.

<sup>29</sup> La troupe comprend Génica, Jean Dasté, Blanche Picard, Paul Higonenc, Marthe Herlin, Sylvain Itkine...

constitué autour d'eux. Au Grenier des Grands-Augustins s'invente un art de vivre en troupe qui inclut voisins, enfants et amis. On y voit passer Robert Desnos, Marcel Duhamel, Antonin Artaud, Théodore Fraenkel, le petit Mouloudji, les sœurs Dabija que la « bande à Prévert » a surnommé Gréty et Gazelle<sup>30</sup>... En février 1936, en plein mouvement social, les Compagnons du Grenier reprennent *Autour d'une mère*, en s'associant au caustique *Tableau des Merveilles* d'Octobre : leur coalition aussi est en marche.



**Fig. 42-43 :** *Don Juan ou l'homme de cendres* au Globe Theatre de Londres, 1934 / *Jules César* avec Marcel d'Orval à l'Atelier, 1937.

### *Retour à Bucarest*

La seconde moitié des années 30 est moins intense professionnellement, Génica se consacrant plus à sa vie personnelle. Naturalisée en 1931, elle porte désormais le nom francisé d'Eugénie Tanase et se fait simplement appeler Mme Génica à l'Atelier. Un certain George Athanasiou vient d'entrer dans la troupe comme comédien et second régisseur... peut-être s'agit-il d'un de ses frères présumés, ou d'un cousin : impossible de le confirmer pour l'heure. À partir de 1935, Génica habite avec Grémillon rue Saint-Simon et

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<sup>30</sup> D'origine roumaine, Margareta et Graziella Dabija sont elles aussi arrivées en France en 1919. La première a épousé le surréaliste Jacques Baron et fait carrière de modiste, avant de devenir compagne du peintre-photographe Otto Wols. La seconde, costumière de théâtre, est la compagne du « père de la Série Noire » Marcel Duhamel, avant d'épouser Louis Bessières, compositeur au sein du groupe Octobre.

leur appartement se fait le lieu de rassemblement de plusieurs couples amis, œuvrant tous dans les milieux du spectacle : les Barsacq, avec lesquels ils partent souvent en vacances dans le Cotentin, les Roland-Manuel, les Milhaud, les Spaak, les Sokoloff, les Vakalo... Cette période semble un apaisement dans la vie affective de la jeune femme. Après une création au Théâtre de l'Œuvre – *Gwen et sa meute* de Franz Winterstein – elle se replie sur la scène de l'Atelier, où elle participe à la reprise du *Médecin de son honneur* de Calderón : Inès en 1933, elle interprète doña Mencia en 1935.

Alors qu'elle retourne à Bucarest en 1936 pour rendre visite à sa sœur et son beau-frère, il semble qu'un hommage lui soit rendu à l'initiative de George Vraca. On sait que celui-ci a passé quelques mois à Paris en 1931, pour le tournage de *Televiziune* sous la direction de Jack Salvatori. Il y a beaucoup fréquenté le monde dramatique, et notamment l'avant-garde. Souhaite-t-il remercier sa consœur et faire reconnaître son travail à leurs compatriotes ? Selon Georges Cuibuș, il organise une soirée en son honneur au Grand Hôtel du Boulevard, en y conviant les sommités de la scène roumaine. Là, il lui offre l'occasion de se produire dans sa langue natale devant un public roumain. Entourée de son ancien professeur Nicolae Soreanu et de plusieurs vedettes du Théâtre National (Romald Bulfinski, Valeriu Valentineanu et Atanasie Pop-Martian), Génica aurait interprété un acte du succès de la saison, *Hervey House*, dans la mise en scène de Soare Z. Soare. De retour à Paris, ses derniers rôles avant guerre seront ses ultimes collaborations avec Dullin : Portia dans *Jules César* (1937) et Myrrhine dans *Plutus, l'or* (1938). Elle ne remontera en scène que dix ans plus tard, alors que l'Atelier ne sera plus leur maison, mais celle d'André Barsacq. S'ouvre alors la période la plus sombre de sa vie, cette décennie chômée du fait de la guerre et de sa santé défaillante, mais surtout de la rupture douloureuse avec Grémillon qui souhaite fonder une famille.

### *Une communauté d'amitié*

Après guerre, Génica Athanasiou reprend difficilement le cours de sa carrière. Une génération nouvelle arrive qui la méconnaît et ses anciens compagnons connaissent leurs propres revers : Dullin reste sans théâtre,

Artaud sort à peine d'internement, Grémillon peine à trouver des financements. Plus modeste et moins lisible, son parcours se tourne pourtant toujours vers des entreprises exigeantes. Pour son retour en scène, elle incarne ainsi successivement la mère du *Chemin de Damas* de Strindberg (1949) et la vieille fille sadique de *La Grande et la petite manœuvre* d'Adamov (1950). A l'écran en revanche, elle use de pseudonymes pour tourner des silhouettes qui ne sont qu'alimentaires<sup>31</sup>. Sa vie reste matériellement très difficile, au point que plusieurs compagnons de l'Atelier s'en émeuvent. À l'initiative de Marcelle Dullin, Vital Geymond et Lucien Arnaud, se crée une « communauté d'amitié » pour lui permettre de faire face en toute dignité. Des personnalités amies comme Jean Cocteau, Marcel Achard et André Barsacq vont en faire partie pendant plusieurs années – mais aussi les musiciens Henri Sauguet et Jane Bathory, les galeristes Louise Leiris et Henry Kahnweiler.



**Fig. 44-45-46 :** *Le Chemin de Damas*, 1949 / Troupe de Guy Suarès (bas :Claude Ferna, Guy Suarès, X, Pascale de Boysson, Laurent Terzieff / haut : Génica Athanasiou et Marc Eyraud), 1954 / *Yerma*, 1956.

<sup>31</sup> Elle tourne des figurations ou de silhouettes pour Jean-Paul Le Chanois (dans quatre films), Christian Stengel (deux films), Jacques Becker, Christian-Jaque, Jean Stelli, André Cayatte et Jean Renoir. Ses apparitions les plus consistantes sont celle de la duègne Fatima dans *Le Comte de Monte-Cristo* de Robert Vernay, tourné en 1953 aux côtés de Jean Marais – ancien élève de l'Atelier qu'elle connut à ses débuts en 1937 dans *Jules César* –, et de la mère supérieure dans *Les Frères Bouquinquant* de Louis Daquin en 1947, où elle donne la réplique à Jean Vilar, autre ancien de chez Dullin.

Grâce à ce soutien, Génica Athanasiou parvient à stabiliser son état de santé et peut réinvestir un emploi régulier. D'anciens camarades des Copiaus la font travailler, tel Aman Maistre. Le réseau Artaud intervient à travers Roger Blin. La famille Pitoëff l'associe à la jeune compagnie de Sacha, avec lequel elle joue Tchekhov au Studio des Champs-Élysées (1951 et 1959), au Théâtre de Poche (1952), en tournée méridionale et algérienne (1953). Enfin, elle entre dans la troupe du jeune metteur en scène Guy Suarès, dès sa création et jusqu'à sa décentralisation à Tours (1954-58). Elle y a pour partenaires des débutants qui vont constituer une relève de choix : Tatiana Moukhine, Pascale de Boyssonet, Laurent Terzieff. Avec eux, elle donne notamment *Hedda Gabler* d'Ibsen et *Yerma* de Garcia Lorca – dans des seconds, voire troisièmes rôles. En 1961, sa participation aux *Troyennes* d'Euripide, dans une mise en scène de Jean Tasso, constitue son chant du cygne.



**Fig.47** : *Les Célibataires*  
d'après Henri de  
Montherlant, 1962.

Entre 1960 et 1962, la télévision lui offre l'occasion de rôles modestes dans des dramatiques et des adaptations, tournées sous la direction de maîtres du genre, Jean Prat ou Albert Riera. En 1963, elle prend la décision de se retirer à la Maison de retraite des artistes dramatiques de Pont-aux-Dames. Elle retourne une dernière fois en Roumanie l'été suivant, pour visiter sa sœur devenue veuve. En juillet 1966, elle doit être hospitalisée à la suite d'un accident cardiaque et décède à l'âge de soixante-neuf ans. Sa sépulture au carré des comédiens du cimetière de Couilly Pont-aux-Dames ayant été détruite par l'ouragan de 1999, il ne reste plus trace de sa mémoire dans son pays d'adoption.

### *Bilan de carrière*

Génica Athanasiou aura donc connu une carrière théâtrale pleinement active entre 1921 et 1938, deux décennies où s'inscrit précisément l'existence de l'Atelier de Dullin. Plus brève a été sa carrière cinématographique, circonscrite entre 1924 et 1933, mais marquée par des premiers rôles notables chez de grands réalisateurs. Ce bilan, quelque peu frustrant quant à ses développements ultérieurs, n'en garde pas moins ses lettres de noblesse. Au terme d'une soixantaine de rôles, elle aura été parmi la première génération d'interprètes à se confronter à des auteurs contemporains inconnus en France (Pirandello, Kataeïv, Evreïnoff, Grau, Lorca), surréalistes (Aragon, Vitrac), dramaturges de l'absurde (Adamov) et tenants d'un théâtre populaire de qualité, aujourd'hui plus ou moins méconnus (Arnoux, Salacrou, Achard). Dans le répertoire classique, elle a fréquenté les grands anciens (Sophocle, Euripide, Aristophane, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Molière) comme les rénovateurs du tournant du XXème siècle (Tchekhov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Claudel). Pour une comédienne de troupe comme elle, dévouée à l'esprit collectif plus qu'à sa carrière personnelle, l'ambition porte sur la qualité du texte et la vision de la mise en scène. Exigeant, souvent confidentiel et atypique, son parcours ne dévie jamais de sa ligne et fait preuve d'une grande intégrité. En cela, il semble nécessaire aujourd'hui de réévaluer sa mesure de comédienne. Inoubliable Antigone, elle personnifie la muse et l'interprète favorite des rares auteurs dramatiques du Surréalisme. Discrète mais scandaleuse à son corps défendant, Génica Athanasiou occupe de la sorte une place rare, pour ne pas dire unique, dans le paysage théâtral de l'entre-deux-guerres.

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*Un archipel des solitudes*  
– perspective à vol d'oiseau –

GEORGES BANU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *An Archipelago of Loneliness – an aerial view.* This paper traces a map and a brief history of the presence of Romanian theatre outside the borders of Romania. It is shown here that Romanian theatre artists (actors, stage directors, stage designers) left Romania for many different reasons: a need for affirmation and of international celebrity, political and cultural persecutions etc. The emphasis is put here on the communist period, when the censorship imposed by political power determined many people to exile themselves: Silviu Purcărete, Lucian Pintilie, Andrei Șerban, Liviu Ciulei, as well as the author of this text and many others. What one can see is that Romanian theatre artists worked individually, without building complex networks, even if they sometimes collaborated: that's the archipelago of loneliness the title mentions. That doesn't mean they hadn't any influence on the theatrical life in the countries where they lived: they had a great impact, mainly through the theatre schools they founded.

**Keywords:** Romania, Romanian theatre, exile, loneliness, isolation, cultural influence.

S'il y a une parenté indéniable entre les exilés du monde et si elle a constitué l'objet de moult réflexions, une différence des « exils » intervient pourtant en raison de la spécificité des arts. L'exil n'agit pas de la même manière, indistinctement, sur les créateurs et des particularités interviennent selon l'exercice propre à chacun des domaines: la langue ne dispose pas

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d'une aussi large aptitude de communication que sons d'un instrument ! Un écrivain et un musicien ne se confrontent pas à l'étranger aux mêmes écueils et ne sont pas appelés à surmonter des épreuves similaires. Il en va de même pour un sculpteur ou un plasticien guère dépendants des mots et de leur syntaxe... tous, bénéficiaires d'une autonomie réelle à l'égard du langage ! Voilà une distinction première !

Les épreuves concernent, chaque fois, il est vrai, la séparation du contexte culturel ou familial d'origine mais ces artistes ne se trouvent pas obligés, tels les écrivains ou les comédiens, de changer de moyen propre à leur pratique artistique et d'en adopter un autre ! Voilà le défi ! Cela explique d'ailleurs la différence numérique entre les exilés qui exercent leur pratique sous l'auspice de la langue et les autres, dégagés des contraintes linguistiques. Pour un pianiste ou un acteur l'exil comporte des degrés de difficultés nettement opposés.

Un autre préalable concernant la propension à l'exil : le candidat exerce-t-il ses dons dans un art individuel ou collectif ? Cette autre distinction concerne surtout le théâtre. L'artiste solitaire connaît, en exil, un régime différent de celui propre au metteur en scène appelé à animer une équipe, à mobiliser une distribution, à exercer son autorité sur un ensemble dont il découvre la plupart des membres. Travailler « collectivement » dans le contexte d'une autre culture et dans une langue qui n'est pas la sienne implique pour celui-ci des obstacles inédits, propres seulement à la pratique du théâtre. Le metteur en scène se trouve, par ailleurs, confronté à des styles de jeu inédits, à des modes différents de gérer les relations au sein d'un groupe, bref à assumer d'un côté les données d'un contexte de production qui ne lui est pas familier et de l'autre à s'exprimer dans une langue dont il ne possède pas toujours la maîtrise. Et cela va réclamer la mise en place des stratégies propres à l'homme de théâtre en exil qu'il est. On n'anime pas de la même manière une équipe à Bucarest et à Paris. Cela appelle pour le metteur en scène l'obligation de cultiver un équilibre souvent incertain entre ses acquis personnels et les injonctions imposées par le nouveau contexte. Il est un étranger en partie démuné.

On doit ajouter une troisième précision. Et elle est de taille. Elle concerne la distinction entre l'exil comme condition, imposée ou décidée, mais toujours

à long terme, et le fait de travailler à l'étranger pour honorer des contrats, agir en artiste sans frontières. L'exil implique une douleur, un arrachement et un face-à-face sans concessions avec le cotexte d'accueil érigé en destin ! Destin plus ou moins long, mais destin qui interdit le recours rassurant au retour... retour au pays d'origine. L'exil est impitoyable, appelle à un combat sans relâche car les ponts sont coupés tandis que le va-et-vient est plus confortable et moins intransigeant. Rien de dramatique là où il y a toujours une solution de rechange ! Cela distingue l'artiste frappé de l'interdit du retour de l'autre qui peut regagner son pays et dispose de la sécurité du repli ! Leur statut diffère. Cette mise au point renvoie aux tensions engendrées par l'existence des deux camps, Est-Ouest, jusqu'en 1989. Ensuite, lui succéda la « mercénarisation » des artistes répondant à des appels déterminés, soit par leur notoriété personnelle, soit par le désir publicitaire d'un pouvoir officiel comme celui de Beijing. Car rien d'autre qu'une politique d'ouverture systématique cultivée par des dirigeants chinois et des motivations financières, Eugenio Barba me le confirmait récemment, n'expliquent pas les voyages si fréquents dans le pays soumis autrefois à la rigueur de l'impitoyable « révolution culturelle »... des politiciens stratèges et des metteurs en scène en quête du gain ! Voilà la déchéance, la version mercantile, pervertie des pratiques jadis douloureuses !

Une réflexion géographique peut s'y ajouter : si le voyage en Chine, au prix même des trahisons artistiques, n'a aujourd'hui d'autres raisons que pécuniaires, auparavant se sont cristallisés de vrais pôles de travail en raison des motifs liés à une proximité culturelle, à une intimité avec le pays choisi. L'exil ou le travail en dehors de son pays répondaient à une parenté préalable... le choix d'un lieu était orienté, presque jamais le fruit du hasard ! Il s'expliquait par le désir d'accès à un espace dont l'artiste éprouvait l'attrait. Grâce à cette intimité avec le pays d'accueil, le départ, l'éloignement ne prend pas le sens d'un dépaysement absolu ; par la familiarité au moins « minimale » à un espace autre, l'expérience de l'exil se trouve apaisée. Cela explique pourquoi Paris fut le centre qui a aspiré prioritairement les exilés roumains ou argentins, tandis que les hongrois ou les germanophones ont préféré Londres ou l'Allemagne... Ils ont servi de pôle Nord à des émigrés partis pour fuir, émigrés a priori désorientés qui se rassurent grâce à de tels

ports d'attache où ils peuvent jeter l'ancre avec davantage de sécurité ! Se retrouver en tant qu'émigré roumain à Paris n'est pas synonyme que d'être parachuté à Stockholm ou Copenhague !

On pourrait ajouter une autre précision : malgré l'existence de ces « pôles » de reconnaissance culturelle, l'émigré accompli sera celui qui ne se trompe pas de pays, qui le choisit par rapport à son univers ! L'affiliation au choix collectif d'un « pôle » peut être trompeuse et entraîner des inadaptations jamais résolues, erreurs d'une autoanalyse mal menée ou conséquences d'un accident de parcours. Pourquoi ne pas citer Matei Vişniec, parti d'abord pour Londres qu'il quittera en raison d'un sentiment d'inadéquation avec sa personnalité pour faire l'option prioritaire des artistes roumains, la France et Paris. Et d'autres exemples contraires pourraient être évoqués. Il y a une différence entre le choix culturel et le choix personnel du pays d'accueil. C'est pourquoi aujourd'hui encore je me demande si un metteur en scène comme Petrika Ionesco, avec son sens de l'humour et de la dérision de génie, n'aurait pas trouvé un terrain plus propice en Allemagne ou Grande-Bretagne ? L'idéal consiste dans la justesse du choix double concernant d'un côté la parenté avec le contexte culturel d'accueil et d'un autre la résonance artistique avec le milieu d'adoption théâtrale. C'est ce qui permet au créateur étranger de s'accomplir en dehors de son pays.

### *Les destins individuels*

Parmi les gens de théâtre qui, les premiers, ont décidé de s'éloigner de la Roumanie, sans pour autant que leurs départs soient motivés par des raisons politiques, entre le XIXème et le XXème siècle, les précurseurs furent les acteurs. Exils volontaires dont les explications varient, car de nature plutôt personnelle, exils qui ont conduit, le plus souvent, à des intégrations réussies, au point même que parfois l'origine de l'exilé a fini par être effacée, voire même gommée. Ce fut le cas de De Max, acteur roumain dont l'appartenance nationale a cessé d'être évoquée car il devint une gloire de la scène française, au point de s'imposer comme un des partenaires privilégiés de la mythique Sarah Bernhardt.



**Fig. 1 :** Agatha Bârsescu, au Burgtheater de Vienne

À Paris, Maria Ventura est parvenue à devenir sociétaire de la Comédie Française, sans qu'elle abandonne tout à fait la scène roumaine où elle revenait périodiquement. Elvire Popesco, dans un autre registre, s'érigea en étoile du théâtre parisien sur le firmament duquel son talent lui a permis de briller des années durant. Mais, détail significatif, elle a réussi à faire considérer comme « russe » son accent roumain pour un de ses plus grands succès, *Tovaritch* : ruse d'émigrée sans complexes. Agatha Bârsescu a joué au Burgtheater et, sans doute, d'autres exemples moins retentissants pourraient être dénichés.

L'acteur qui part ressemble à l'écrivain car, pareil à lui, il se heurte à l'enjeu de la langue nouvelle, peu importe qu'elle soit écrite ou proférée. Une

pareille décision dans le monde du théâtre reste périlleuse et comment ne pas citer le roman de Klaus Mann *Méphisto*, où les acteurs qui ont fui le nazisme errent désespérés dans les cafés parisiens tandis que Gründgens, le protagoniste, brille à Hambourg, devant les hauts dignitaires nazis. Il n'a pas quitté son pays et sa langue au prix du « pacte » démoniaque auquel il a souscrit... et qui l'a hissé au sommet de la scène allemande. Quelques grands comédiens, le plus souvent jeunes exilés, ont réussi à Paris à s'approprier la langue d'accueil et l'exemple le plus éloquent reste Maria Casarès. Plus tardivement, lorsque la question de l'accent a cessé d'être un repoussoir aussi sévère qu'auparavant, des acteurs en quête d'une terre d'asile et/ou de notoriété se sont décidés à quitter leur langue. Mais, ils n'atteindront jamais une égale qualité de jeu que dans la leur, la langue d'origine ! Ils restent des « étrangers » et le plus souvent ils finissent par retourner... en dépit des succès connus dans le pays d'accueil, comme Andrzej Sewerin, sociétaire de la Comédie Française, ou Andres Perez, le Gandhi de *l'Indiade* Mnouchkine.

L'acteur roumain, russe ou polonais prend une décision risquée, car il s'agit de s'inscrire individuellement dans une communauté autre, qui – même si elle ne le rejette pas – le désigne, malgré elle, comme étant un corps étranger ! Cette réserve s'apaise aujourd'hui et même si le maniement de la langue détonne plus ou moins, les metteurs en scène actuels ne le rejettent plus. « C'est comme si j'entendais ma langue venue d'ailleurs », avouait Antoine Vitez, grand défenseur des accents ! Et, à son tour, Peter Brook a osé enfreindre la barrière de la langue... afin de faire éclore « la fleur » de la présence ! Au prix parfois de la compréhension du texte, mais, dit-il, la scène est appelée à restituer la multiplicité des accents entendus dans les villes actuelles. L'accueil de l'acteur étranger ne se confronte plus aux réticences d'autrefois !

L'écrivain qui s'attaque à une autre langue que la sienne s'apparente à l'acteur, car les deux se trouvent écartelés entre un socle mnémotecnique lié à l'origine et l'acquisition biographique d'une langue. À l'exception d'un auteur bilingue comme Eugène Ionesco, on peut citer Matei Vişniec qui, progressivement, a intégré le français sans pour autant s'affranchir de la langue d'origine qu'il emploie pour rédiger ses romans et ses poèmes, convaincu que le discours subjectif exige le recours à la langue de départ.

L'écrivain et l'acteur en exil procèdent à des choix individuels et leurs défis s'apparentent. Ils livrent combat avec la langue ! Aussi bien celle d'accueil que celle du départ qui, souterrainement, repousse pareille à « une mauvaise herbe », m'a mis en garde un jour Emil Cioran. Comment jouer, comment écrire à l'étranger ? Comment se débrouiller en « Arlequin valet de deux langues » ?

### *Les pionniers de l'exil politique*

Malgré la nécessité d'un indispensable contexte communautaire de travail, parmi les gens de théâtre roumain on peut citer quelques-uns qui ont choisi le départ volontaire, synonyme dans les années 50-60 d'exil sans rémission. Ce sont les scénographes, a priori moins soumis à l'emprise de la langue, donc plutôt à même de s'intégrer dans l'espace théâtral étranger. Des solitaires... Mircea Marosin, Jules Perahim, Ion Oroveanu, Camillo Ossorovitz... L'accès au pouvoir du communisme a suscité un élan vite converti en pressentiment des restrictions à venir et des sanctions à subir. Cela a déterminé les départs des « pionniers », les artistes qui furent les émigrés de la première heure grâce à une clairvoyance qui les a conduit à prendre cette décision risquée, d'autant plus qu'à l'époque leur acte prenait le sens d'une dissidence politique à l'égard des valeurs que bon nombre d'intellectuels de gauche s'employaient à exalter et défendre. Tout exil venait les contredire. Cela explique sans doute la modestie de l'accueil dont ont été pourvus ces premiers réfractaires à l'Ordre Nouveau. C'est pourquoi la plupart de ces « solitaires » se sont trouvés cantonnés dans le théâtre privé, de boulevard, car l'autre, le théâtre « public », refusait de les accueillir. Leur destin fut l'un des plus cruels ! Mais ils restent les poseurs de quelques graines « roumaines » sur la carte européenne du théâtre, fracturée par le rideau de fer !

### *Les carrefours de l'histoire*

Le rapport aux conditions historiques, politiques, exerce un impact plus déterminant sur l'homme de théâtre sans qu'il constitue pour autant



l'unique motivation de son départ. Le contexte social, à un moment donné, accentue sa pression et cela concerne de manière plus directe, plus immédiate le théâtre, et le cinéma davantage encore, car il s'agit d'arts dont l'exercice se fait avec des moyens financiers publics et d'arts qui, par ailleurs, s'adressent en direct à des communautés qu'ils parviennent à rendre « effervescentes » en dépit de la chape instaurée officiellement. Mérite aussi bien que risque que comportent ces arts collectifs. Le pouvoir intervient plus drastiquement et bon nombre de créateurs espèrent se dégager de son emprise en empruntant le chemin de l'exil.

En 1956, la Révolution hongroise avait dévoilé tragiquement la nature du régime mis en place à l'Est sans pour autant d'engendrer une volonté commune de départ. Ce fut un signal d'alarme auquel les jeunes gens de théâtre roumain en voie d'affirmation n'ont pas réagi. Plus tard, autour de 1968 le pouvoir laissa émerger quelques espoirs et malgré des inquiétudes persistantes, notre génération bénéficia d'un régime autre, plus permissif, moins sévère qu'auparavant. Nous en avons profité sur fond d'ouverture chancelante ! Mais le Printemps de Prague fut écrasé et Jan Pallach sacrifié... le danger persistait à nos portes ! Et il éclata en pleine jour, deux ans plus tard, lors des funestes *Thèses* du mois de juillet : l'onde de choc fut dévastatrice et elle a bouleversé la donne du rapport avec le pouvoir qui, désormais, s'affirme de nouveau comme étant discrétionnaire et autoritaire. Les vieux démons ressuscitaient ! Ce carrefour a été décisif et il a entraîné un véritable mouvement migratoire : l'exil des gens de théâtre fut contagieux ! Et alors des figures éminentes ou simplement des débutants ont pris le chemin du départ car nous étions nombreux à pressentir la tournure que le pays allait prendre ; lucides et insensibles nous sommes restés sourds à l'adage rassurant que j'ai entendu de la bouche d'un ami : « l'histoire ne retourne jamais en arrière ». Il se trompait et moi-même je ne l'ai pas écouté... comme tant d'autres : Pintilie, Ciulei, Penciulescu, Florica Mălureanu, Radu et Miruna Boruzescu, David Esrig, Vlad Mugur, Lucian Giurchescu, Dan Nemțeanu, Ana Maria Narti, Ivan Helmer, Nikolaus Wolcz, Mirela Nedelcu, Alexandru Colpacci, Monica Săvulescu, Mira Iosif ou Andrei Șerban, Petrika Ionescu et Iulian Negulescu qui étaient partis, eux, peu d'années auparavant !



Fig. 2 : George Banu et Radu Penciulescu

Alors fut dépassée la solitude ancienne des premiers émigrants isolés et se constitua une véritable vague de l'émigration roumaine. Phénomène de groupe, manifestation explicite de crainte et quête de survie. Choix collectif à ce carrefour de l'histoire ! Ensuite, vue la dégradation du traitement infligé par le pouvoir s'égrènent les départs d'autres gens de théâtre, Andrei Belgrader, Petre Bokor sans qu'il s'agisse d'un mouvement tout aussi ample que le précédent : la nouvelle génération en train d'éclosion a préféré la résistance sur place, l'insoumission de l'intérieur. Silviu Purcărete, Alexandru Tocilescu, Mihai Măniuțiu, Gabor Tompa, Alexandru Dabija, Dragoș Galgoțiu se comptent parmi les protagonistes de la décennie 80.

L'année 1989 constitue l'autre et ultime carrefour décisif pour le théâtre roumain. Même si les retours ne furent pas nombreux, certains des hérauts de l'émigration ont retrouvé le pays d'origine et parfois ont engendré des désillusions comme Liviu Ciulei ou, au contraire, ont accompli un véritable sursaut comme Vlad Mugur. Pintilie a cessé de vouloir faire du théâtre pour bâtir sa statue mémorielle grâce au cinéma, Esrig n'a pas cessé de raconter inlassablement ses succès de jadis, Penciulescu s'est livré à quelques esquisses animées par son soin de toujours accorder la priorité à la relation

de la scène avec la salle, relation humaine, directe, affranchie de toute intimidation. Andrei Șerban a ressuscité sa *Trilogie antique* et a signé un mémorable *Oncle Vania*. Voilà le carrefour des... retours, pendant de l'autre, précurseur, des... départs ! Une génération rentre, les délégués d'une autre prennent leur envol libertaire ! Un cycle nouveau débute.

Une mutation s'opère : les frontières abattues, désormais, pour l'artiste qui souhaite partir, il ne reste plus que la difficulté de l'accès à un autre espace théâtral. En France s'organise un projet international THEOREM en direction des artistes de l'Est et, de Roumanie, Silviu Purcărete fut le premier invité. Il n'est plus voué au chemin de l'exil mais adopte le statut d'un artiste international qui se dirige d'abord vers la France pour ensuite déambuler sur les méridiens du monde. Mais, à la différence de artistes précédents, Purcărete travaille tout autant à l'étranger que dans le pays d'origine : c'est un artiste voyageur. À la même époque, Peter Brook ouvre un stage auquel il convie Felix Alexa, à côté de Krzysztof Warlikowski. L'un comme l'autre vont regagner la Roumanie ou la Pologne. Pour ensuite circuler... sur les scènes étrangères en toute liberté !

À ce carrefour, d'autres options se font jour et elles portent l'empreinte des temps nouveaux. La jeune génération ne craint pas les départs qui désormais n'ont plus rien de définitif ou de drastique. Des comédiennes en fleur – la dominante est féminine – tentent leur chance à Paris, Simona Măicănescu, Liana Fulga, Mădălina Constantin. Certaines furent mes étudiantes que j'ai pu aider administrativement, conscient que leur vocation n'avait rien d'universitaire ! Comme Dana Dima, aujourd'hui collaboratrice d'Andrei Șerban ou Alexandra Badea qui s'est imposée comme écrivaine de langue française. Tous ces jeunes candidats à un destin autre qu'uniquement national ont disposé aujourd'hui du statut de mes collègues grecs de jadis : le retour reste toujours possible ! Le règne de la normalité dont nous, ceux qui sommes partis dans les années 70, n'avons pas joui s'instaure ! Mais il enlève la valeur d'épreuve de l'exil, test d'une identité et acte de résistance. Et pourtant, le départ reste encore un défi ! Néanmoins il a perdu des risques qu'il comportait jadis. Des artistes roumains travaillent à l'étranger ou voyagent, Radu Afrim et Felix Alexa, ou, encore plus jeunes, Gianina Cărbunariu, Eugen Jebeleanu, Velica Panduru... ils traversent le territoire

sans frontières du théâtre moderne. Sans entraves, ils sont libres de leurs mouvements. Et, pour l'instant, les motivations politiques ne déterminent plus comme autrefois l'attrait pour l'étranger... il séduit pour des raisons de notoriété ou budgétaires, « ailleurs » dont l'attraction ne s'est pas éteinte dans un pays comme la Roumanie.

### *Des héros singuliers*

Comme dans chaque tragédie, toute émigration dispose de son chœur et, forcément, de protagonistes. Cette structure organise l'ensemble d'une communauté étrangère et facilite sa visibilité à l'échelle internationale. La diaspora théâtrale roumaine confirme cette assertion car, s'il y a eu des émigrés, nombreux et divers, la présence de la mise en scène roumaine se laisse deviner surtout par l'apport de quelques héros singuliers, figures de proue d'un théâtre de l'extérieur, disparate et disséminé. La dialectique entre l'Un et le Multiple domine avec évidence les rapports institués au sein du mouvement des expatriés. Ils se tiennent réciproquement.

Il va de soi qu'Andrei Șerban s'impose comme l'initiateur du mouvement car alors que les signes annonciateurs de la dictature de Ceaușescu pointaient à peine et ne menaçaient pas avec la vigueur qui va s'accroître ensuite au fur et à mesure, il répondit à l'appel de Peter Brook et d'Ellen Stewart pour démarrer son parcours. Il fut d'abord affilié à l'équipe du Centre International de Recherches Théâtrales créée par Brook dans l'effervescence soixante-huitarde et collabora à la réalisation de cet objet théâtral unique que fut *Orghast* à Persépolis. Au terme de la première année, il se détacha du Centre et emprunta son chemin en sillonnant le globe avec le groupe La Mamma. Puis, après la séparation de La Mamma, au début des années 90, Șerban se consacre à des spectacles de théâtre et d'opéra qui confirment sa renommée : il est le fils prodigue de la scène roumaine. Son premier héros singulier.

Rapidement, la situation du pays connut une dégradation accélérée. Et elle a entraîné l'interdiction du *Révizor* (1971) qui se trouve à l'origine de l'interdiction de travailler qui fut intimée officiellement à Lucian Pintilie.

Invité d'abord par le Théâtre National de Chaillot il signa une mise en scène en scène baroque de *Turandot*, avec des nains et, ensuite, une inoubliable *Mouette* au Théâtre de la Ville de Paris, théâtre avec lequel il a poursuivi des années durant sa collaboration. Pintilie n'a pas décidé son départ, il y fut contraint mais son régime – précisons-le bien! – ne fut pas celui d'un exilé, comme on l'a répété récemment, car artistiquement banni il bénéficiait pourtant d'une facilité de circulation entre Paris et Bucarest dont les autres émigrés étaient dépourvus. Pintilie fut le « héros » du théâtre roumain à Paris, mais il resta muet, toujours rétif à la moindre déclaration : était-ce en raison d'un pacte secret, conclu avec le pouvoir qui lui accordait ce régime intermédiaire ? N'a-t-il pas été piégé par le statut dont il a eu le privilège ? Ni d'ici, ni de là-bas... un grand artiste de « transition ».

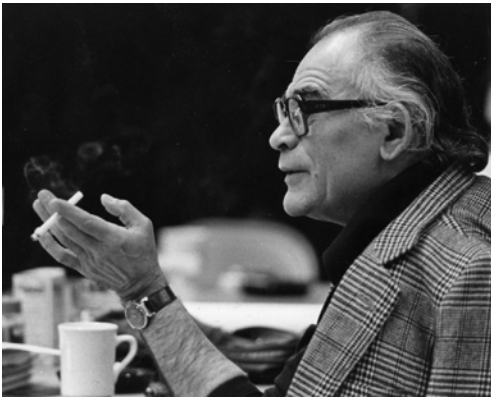


Fig. 3 : Liviu Ciulei



Fig. 4 : David Esrig

Le troisième « héros » fut Liviu Ciulei qui, victime co-latérale du conflit suscité par le *Révizor*, avait perdu la direction du Théâtre Bulandra et s'était trouvé astreint à travailler sur « la planète » du théâtre, d'Allemagne et France à l'Australie ou l'Amérique, où il a dirigé le théâtre de Minneapolis. Trop loin des circuits européens, la présence de Ciulei sur notre continent fut plutôt fantomatique, tel un écho faiblement audible à Paris, Bucarest ou Londres. Et pourtant son œuvre fut appréciée et respectée dans les contrées éloignées de l'Amérique où il trouva refuge sans qu'aucune affection

artistique préalable ne justifie cette appartenance. À son tour, Ciulei, lui aussi, ne formula nulle opinion critique sur la situation du pays et se contenta de cultiver une sorte de neutralité diplomatique. Prudemment, il a assuré ainsi ses arrières !

Est-ce ce silence persistant qui se trouve à l'origine du respect suscité par les spectacles des metteurs en scène roumains et non pas par leur engagement, car ils sont tous demeurés silencieux à l'égard de la situation en Roumanie ? Ils se sont imposés sur la scène internationale en tant que metteurs en scène de référence, mais restés inaudibles au-delà du théâtre, artistes soucieux de respecter les précautions d'un pacte de non-agression politique.

Dans ce sens, Vlad Mugur se distingue, puisqu'il a pris la parole et a affirmé des positions explicitement critiques, mais son œuvre en exil n'a pas connu la réussite et n'a pas engendré la reconnaissance suscitée par le travail du groupe des trois artistes évoqués. Il va falloir attendre le retour pour que Vlad Mugur signe des spectacles admirables, inoubliables, comme s'il avait été nourri par le drame de l'exil qui lui a permis ensuite de s'affirmer tel un metteur en scène hors-pair. David Esrig ne se constitua pas non plus en référence au sein du théâtre allemand en dépit d'un certain nombre de mises en scène ; elles ne sont jamais parvenues au niveau des chefs-d'œuvre qui, dans les années 60, avaient marqué le théâtre roumain. Il reste un exilé inaccompli. Un errant dans le paysage d'un pays qui l'a accueilli et qu'il n'a pas convaincu de son génie.

Une hypothèse pour expliquer le déficit de notoriété à l'étranger du théâtre roumain par rapport au théâtre polonais : il lui a manqué une figure centrale, emblématique, pareille à Grotowski ou Kantor. Un « héros culturel » qui inscrit son empreinte sur l'univers d'une époque. Et renvoie à une appartenance nationale, à une identité culturelle bien précise. La mouvance roumaine fut reconnue, mais resta diffuse !

### *Des micro-communautés sécurisantes*

L'aventure de l'exil au théâtre, on l'a dit, ne permet pas l'isolement d'un artiste solitaire et exige un travail d'équipe. C'est à l'injonction de l'assurer que

doit répondre tout metteur en scène. Cela entraîne une stratégie le plus souvent confirmée : l'homme de théâtre appelé à travailler hors de chez lui forme un ensemble de collaborateurs proches, met en place une « ceinture » de partenaires qui le sécurisent habituellement, se pérennise. Pour des raisons théâtrales mais aussi d'identité nationale. L'artiste s'appuie sur une relation commune à l'art, tout en baignant dans un climat identitaire dont l'équipe partage les données : le pays d'origine se reconstitue tel un îlot rassurant. Ainsi Lucian Pintilie a travaillé dès le début avec Miruna et Radu Boruzescu et, parfois, a fait appel à Iulian Negulescu en tant qu'assistant. Famille qui a profité aux uns et aux autres ! Vlad Mugur a collaboré avec Helmut Stürmer et, d'un commun accord, ils associaient la dévotion au travail et les coutumes du pays. La vie et la scène ne se séparaient pas dans le contexte de l'exil et cela leur servait d'apaisement teinté d'ironie, d'arme contre la nostalgie. Plus tardivement, Silviu Purcărete cherche, lui aussi, la cohérence d'un groupe de compatriotes qui réunit Dragoș Buhagiar, Helmut Stürmer, Vasile Șirli. Ces équipes roumaines servent de terrain nourricier aux metteurs en scène soit en exil, soit simplement extraits de leur contexte d'origine : remède contre la solitude pour des leaders ainsi accompagnés artistiquement et confortés humainement grâce à des compatriotes qui les entourent.



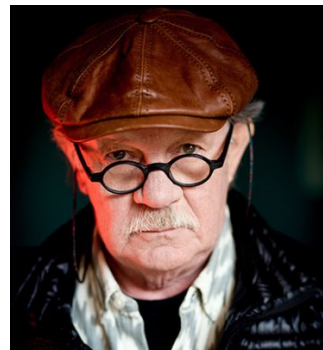
**Fig. 5 :** Claudia Woolgar, Mihai Măniuțiu, Sorin Alexandrescu, George Banu, Stefana Pop-Curșeu, Tompa Gabor.

### *Pédagogues dispersés*

Les écoles de théâtre des pays de l'Est jouissaient, à juste titre, dans les années 70 d'un prestige indéniable et cette réputation a ouvert les portes de la voie pédagogique à bon nombre de metteurs en scène. Elle leur a souvent servi de recours et permis une intégration plus aisée. La pédagogie fut la chance de survie pour des émigrés, moins réputés artistiquement, émigrés dépourvus de leur statut ancien aussi bien que de ressources matérielles. Mais l'enseignement dispensé par des pédagogues roumains ne se résuma pas seulement à un pis-aller, bouée de sauvetage pour des enseignants en déshérence, car il fut, parfois, à l'origine de véritables expériences pédagogiques ayant eu un impact réel sur les pays d'accueil et les générations des jeunes créateurs en train de s'y former. Ce fut le cas en Suède où Radu Penciulescu, doté d'une véritable vocation pédagogique, a enseigné l'art de la mise en scène mais surtout s'est consacré à la formation des acteurs à Stockholm ou Malmö. Les traces de cette activité se sont avérées profondes et bon nombre de créateurs de plusieurs générations se sont réclamés de son enseignement. David Esrig, à son tour, a ouvert une école qui a acquis un renom indéniable en Allemagne grâce à sa dévotion pour l'enseignement comme préalable de l'accès à une profession parfois abusivement dépourvue d'assises techniques. David Esrig a constitué, lui aussi, une communauté sécurisante autour de lui en s'associant des professeurs d'origine roumaine, Ovidiu Schumacher, Magda Stief. Aux Etats-Unis, Andrei Șerban, Nikolaus et Ulla Wolcz ont constitué un véritable noyau pédagogique à l'université Columbia...



**Fig. 6 :** Margareta Niculescu



**Fig. 7 :** Helmut Stürmer



Ainsi, en nous penchant sur les divers itinéraires des uns et des autres, nous pouvons déceler une véritable trace « roumaine » inscrite par des pédagogues consacrés sur le paysage théâtral de différentes régions du monde. Il est indispensable d'évoquer également le travail pédagogique hors-normes effectué par Margareta Niculescu dont l'obstination a assuré l'essor de l'Institut International de la marionnette à Charleville-Mézières et a posé les bases d'une véritable structure pédagogique. A ces références exemplaires peuvent s'ajouter d'autres noms, des émigrants qui portaient sur leurs semelles la trace d'un théâtre dont ils ont assuré la diffusion, *le théâtre d'art*. Ion Omescu à Maastricht, Andrei Both à San Diego, Andrei Zaharia au Canada, N. Ularu en Californie, Alexandru Ivăneanu à Gand et tant d'autres... De manière plus atypique, nous pouvons évoquer le passage épisodique d'Alexa Visarion dans diverses universités américaines et, de manière constante, la présence pédagogique en Californie de Gabor Tompa et Mihai Măniuțiu. Ils pratiquent, aujourd'hui encore, une alternance programmée entre enseignement et mise en scène : complémentarité bienvenue ! Posture intermédiaire entre persistance pédagogique et renouvellement scénique.

Souvent l'enseignement a eu à l'étranger un impact plus profond que des spectacles passagers à résonance moyenne ! Les artistes roumains ont exercé surtout *la pédagogie-processus*, la plus constructive et non pas *la pédagogie-événement*, fondée sur des interventions ponctuelles, master classes, workshops comme ceux effectués par Felix Alexa à Paris ou Milan, par Andrei Șerban en Roumanie, Gabor Tompa en Corée... les deux sont indispensables, mais le sillon creusé dans le temps sera toujours plus fécond. La pédagogie implique un enracinement à long terme. Elle laboure le présent pour préparer le théâtre à venir.

### *Un pays de choix*

Si les Roumains se sont dispersés dans le monde, selon des hasards du moment ou des choix personnels, selon la disponibilité ou la clôture des pays d'accueil, un cas particulier se dégage : Israël où des gens de théâtre de tout ordre et de partout se sont rendus au point de reconstituer une sorte

d'Europe de rechange. Et les Roumains n'ont pas fait défaut car surtout les acteurs, engagés sur des trajets différents, ont constitué l'écheveau d'une vraie famille diverse et complexe, mais on peut leur ajouter le nom des metteurs en scène qui soit sont passés fugitivement, soit sont restés en Israël, comme par exemple Ivan Helmer ou Gheorghe Mileteanu, ou même celui d'un scénographe de talent, Paul Salzberger, ancien collaborateur d'Aureliu Manea. Pour attester la constitution d'un véritable réseau roumain, nous pouvons citer des universitaires comme Madeleine Schechter, Andrei Strihan, Arie Sover ou d'autres qui ont œuvré dans le champ de la culture théâtrale. Après la France, Israël fut, sans doute, la terre d'accueil privilégiée où une communauté des gens de théâtre s'est constituée et a agi en assumant sa spécificité. Elle a servi de refuge aussi bien que d'affirmation des valeurs nationales pleinement reconnues dans le contexte israélien. Ce fut une autre scène sur laquelle se sont inscrits des gens de théâtre de passage ou se sont assimilés pour le bonheur d'un public toujours en manque de ces retrouvailles affectivement fortes.

### *Un nuage d'électrons libres*

Comment qualifier des expériences individuelles liées aussi bien à un contexte politique oppressant qu'à un désir de s'accomplir ailleurs ? Expériences humaines qui pourraient constituer des matériaux romanesques ou cinématographiques. Dans ces cas, la vie l'a emporté souvent sur l'art et cela explique pourquoi ici la biographie compte davantage que la réalisation artistique. Pour exemple cette comédienne d'exception, poète remarquable, Ioana Crăciunescu, voyageuse entre pays, cultures et arts... jamais immobile, toujours ailleurs, au nom d'une vocation diffuse dont elle incarne la dérive on ne peut plus déroutante. Étoile filante... Ou cet acteur unique, Dumitru Furdui, arrivé en France, bien accueilli, correctement distribué qui se laisse emporter par un alcoolisme galopant et qui revient à Bucarest pour se suicider. Ou cette jeune comédienne fragile qui, à ses débuts, profite des faveurs d'un metteur en scène plus âgé pour tomber ensuite dans l'oubli, une fois son protecteur décédé ? Sans parler de l'admirable scénographe

Florica Mălureanu qui travaille d'abord avec Petrika Ionescu pour se limiter, une fois leur séparation consommée, à faire équipe avec Michel Făgădău, metteur en scène modeste, et vivre en Suisse avec un grand écrivain. C'est un parcours étonnant qu'emprunte Alexandru Hausvater qui a fait le choix de poursuivre sa carrière en Roumanie tout en cultivant l'aura imaginaire d'un artiste reconnu au Canada, sans parler d'autres metteurs en scène comme Florin Fătulescu qui travaille aux Etats-Unis et attend, pour l'instant sans succès, de trouver un lieu d'accueil dans le pays... En mal d'appartenance, les uns comme les autres semblent être les électrons libres d'un nuage fait d'espérance et de défaites ! Ils ont tous des destins, non pas des carrières réussies, ils sont les héros d'aventures personnelles ayant toujours le théâtre au cœur. Un théâtre aimé, source d'illusions, ou, au contraire trompeur, à l'origine des disparitions, des abandons, des oublis douloureux. Les noms de ces amants contrariés sont légion.

### *Un archipel des solitudes*

Les artistes roumains à l'étranger ne sont pas parvenus à imposer une école, à affirmer un style ou à dégager une identité. Ils ont tissé un réseau de subtiles relations affectives ou ont cultivé une réserve réciproque décente, mais sans jamais se constituer en courant à même d'apposer son empreinte sur le théâtre de leur époque. Tout le contraire du cinéma roumain actuel... Pourtant, nous pouvons repérer une multitude d'individualités et d'identités personnelles qui forment, à l'extérieur du pays, un véritable archipel, un archipel des solitudes. Il fait apparaître une dissémination qui cultive le mouvement mais se montre inapte d'homogénéisation. Artistes qui se sont dispersés dans le monde sous la pression de l'histoire sans chercher à s'affirmer en tant que groupe ! Les Roumains, en êtres latins, restent individuels ! Mais par leur présence ils ont inséminé des cultures théâtrales et ont pu cultiver leur différence personnelle. Ce n'est pas le moindre mérite de cet archipel où chacun continue à voguer pour retrouver des partenaires plus que des partisans. La différence l'emporte sur l'unité... mais comment oublier la phrase ironique d'un grand ami qui, espiègle, paraphrasait le

dicton connu « un train peut en cacher un autre » lorsqu'il me disait : « un Roumain peut en cacher un autre ». Le critique réputé qu'il était formulait le diagnostique juste de « la chaîne » et non pas de « la masse », du dynamisme personnel davantage que de l'affiliation nationale. Mais n'oublions pas qu'il y a de l'eau qui relie les îles de tout archipel. C'est elle qui coule et les fait communiquer par-delà les solitudes ! Ainsi s'établit l'équilibre précaire entre identité personnelle et l'autre, plus large, communautaire.

P. S. Ce texte se veut plutôt une carte qui trace des parcours et signale des options sans la moindre tentative d'exhaustivité pour ce qui est des exemples cités. Que les artistes qui manquent excusent leur absence qui, en l'occurrence, n'a rien de délibéré mais s'explique seulement par les limites de l'enquête et les contraintes typographiques imparties.

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*GEORGES BANU, after his debut as a theatre critic and professor, left Romania in 1973 and continued his work in France. He taught in various European universities, where he held many classes on theatre studies, and wrote many books translated all over the world. He is Doctor Honoris Causa of many prestigious universities, but also Honorary President of the International Association of Theatre Critics, after three mandates as a President. He directed a special issue of the journal Cahiers de l'Est on the Eastern European theatre. After 1989, he took part at the Romanian theatrical life: his books have been translated and published and he organized various cultural and theatrical events. The reflections that are made in this paper are nourished by a biographical experience and by the friendship with most of the artists who lived far away from Romania, their country.*

*Le théâtre roumain, années soixante (1963-65).  
Regards de France et de Russie sur le travail de David Esrig*

**BÉATRICE PICON-VALLIN<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *The Romanian Theatre in the Sixties (1963-65). Views from France and Russia on David Esrig's Theatre.* This research tries to present a brief period of the Romanian theatre, the sixties, from the point of view of its international echoes, mainly in France and Russia. Stage directors such as David Esrig and Lucian Pintilie, among many others, were very admired by theatre critics who had the opportunity to know their work. Denis Bablet, for example, wrote in 1967 a laudatory article in *Les Lettres françaises*, on Esrig and Pintilie, and it is entirely transcribed here, as an important document for Romanian theatre history. Bablet's article is the starting point for this research, where the focus is put on Esrig's work that is situated in the great meyerholdian tradition.

**Keywords:** Romania, David Esrig, Lucian Pintilie, stage directing, Meyerhold, international experiences, Denis Bablet, the sixties.

Invité en 1964 à Bucarest, A. M. Julien, directeur du Théâtre des Nations à Paris, le plus grand festival mondial de théâtre alors, a un coup de foudre : il s'enthousiasme pour *Troilus et Cressida* de Shakespeare, mise en scène de David Esrig au Théâtre de la Comédie « au point de monter sur la scène à la fin de la représentation, d'embrasser tous les comédiens » et de leur faire immédiatement, devant tout le public assemblé, une invitation pour le Festival parisien de l'année suivante<sup>2</sup>... La tournée aura bien lieu. C'est la dernière année du Festival qu'il dirige. En plus du spectacle Shakespeare, Esrig y présentera *L'Ombre* d'Evgueni Schwartz, qu'il a monté en 1963 au Théâtre de la Comédie.

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<sup>2</sup> Odette Aslan, *Paris capitale mondiale du théâtre* (Paris : CNRS Editions, 2009), 263.

« *Un metteur en scène physique* »

En se servant des critiques de l'époque (et en particulier de Gilles Sandier) et de ses propres souvenirs, Odette Aslan résume ainsi les fortes impressions que font ces spectacles. Elle parle pour *Troilus et Cressida* qui remporte le prix de la critique française pour le meilleur spectacle étranger (ex-aequo avec *Romeo et Juliette* par F. Zefirelli), d'une autopsie burlesque de la guerre représentée « avec une partition de mouvements ». Elle décrit : le plateau est un « tréteau de théâtre où l'humour le dispute à la bouffonnerie. De petits morceaux de décor surgissent, des glissières emportent les acteurs sur des praticables mobiles, les guerriers s'affichent comme des personnages de théâtre accomplissant l'absurde rituel d'héroïques combats démythifiés. David Esrig a mis en péril les acteurs sur le tréteau crevassé, après les avoir entraînés pendant de longs mois à un travail corporel intensif. »<sup>3</sup>

« Partition de mouvements ». Cette expression est explicitée dans l'article que Denis Bablet – théâtrologue français, fondateur du LARAS (Laboratoire de recherches sur les arts du spectacle, auquel appartient aussi Odette Aslan), dont l'intérêt professionnel était fortement attisé par la créativité des théâtres de l'Est (Tchécoslovaquie, Roumanie, Pologne) – consacre au théâtre roumain en 1967<sup>4</sup>. Il a vu à Paris *Troilus et Cressida*, il voit cette année-là, à Bucarest, alors qu'il est en mission de recherches, *Tête de canard* de George Ciprian monté par Esrig au Théâtre de la Comédie. Bablet décrit un spectacle « réglé », une précision étonnante dans le jeu des acteurs, leurs mouvements, déplacements et rythmes, un dessin net des corps dans l'espace ; il parle d'une impression générale de ballet mécanique, mais sensible, de *commedia dell'arte*, d'influence du cinéma muet et des grands burlesques américains sur les acteurs, il voit des comédiens qui maîtrisent un jeu distancié, et souligne même le décalage entre le geste et la parole. Il affirme qu'Esrig est « un metteur en scène physique ».

<sup>3</sup> Odette Aslan, *Paris capitale mondiale...*, 207.

<sup>4</sup> Denis Bablet, « Vitalité du théâtre roumain », *Les Lettres françaises*, n° 1212 (13 décembre 1967), 23-24. Le texte de l'article est reproduit en entier dans une *Annexe* du présent travail.



Fig. 1 : David Esrig, photographie par Florin-Biolan

Étrangement aujourd'hui *tous ces mots* résonnent comme une description précise d'un jeu meyerholdien, mais le nom de Meyerhold n'est pas évoqué. Bien sûr personne en France n'a gardé le souvenir de la tournée du GOSTIM<sup>5</sup>, en 1930, à Paris. Mais les traductions d'extraits de textes du metteur en scène russe publiées par Nina Gourfinkel dans son livre *Le théâtre théâtral* en 1963 avaient attiré l'attention de la communauté théâtrale française sur le grand metteur en scène russe. Cela aurait pu suffire pour qu'il soit clairement fait un rapprochement entre les recherches d'Esrig et celles de Vsevolod Meyerhold. Peut-être la réserve était-elle politique ? ou s'agissait-il de prudence pour protéger les artistes ? Pourtant Meyerhold était juridiquement réhabilité depuis 1955... Mais il était loin d'être vraiment

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<sup>5</sup> Sigle du théâtre de Meyerhold.



réhabilité artistiquement. Et cet article était publié dans *Les Lettres françaises*, journal dirigé depuis 1953 par Louis Aragon, et qui bénéficiait du soutien financier du Parti communiste français. Malgré l'absence du nom, on peut dire que la réception de la mise en scène d'Esrig par Denis Bablet est celle d'un héritier de Meyerhold. On peut se demander si c'était le cas en Roumanie, en 1963-64, étant donné le peu de connaissance qu'on y avait encore de cette œuvre<sup>6</sup> ?

*Les structures différentes du théâtre roumain et deux metteurs en scène remarquables*

Dans ce long article, Denis Bablet expose aussi ses découvertes et impressions sur l'état général du théâtre roumain. Il rend compte de l'organisation de la scène roumaine sur laquelle on le renseigne avec précision sur place, à Bucarest même, et semble la comparer mentalement à celle du théâtre français. Il énumère l'ensemble des organismes dédiés au théâtre et à la théâtrologie (le mot n'existe pas en France ou s'il l'est il est alors décrié – Bablet le met entre guillemets). Il indique qu'il existe un institut chargé de former les acteurs, les metteurs en scène, les critiques et les historiens, alors qu'aucune formation à la mise en scène (en dehors de celle que tente le Théâtre des Nations) n'existe en France. Il rend compte aussi de l'organisation du travail artistique dans des troupes permanentes auxquelles sont attachés des metteurs en scène et des scénographes, du long temps pris pour répéter, du style de jeu des acteurs bien formés, de la qualité des scénographes, et de la forte personnalité des certains jeunes metteurs en scène où, en plus de David Esrig, il distingue Lucian Pintilie et il décrit sa mise en scène de *Scènes de carnaval* de I. L. Caragiale où tragique et comique se frôlent, s'étreignent. On peut ajouter ici : comme dans le grotesque meyerholdien.

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Georges Banu, « Meyerhold, Shakespeare de la mise en scène », in B. Picon-Vallin V. Chtcherbakov (éd.), *Meyerhold . La mise en scène dans le siècle / Mejerhol'd. Rezissura v perspective veka* (Moskva : OGI, 2001), 412-422. Ici, Banu témoigne de sa connaissance clandestine et partielle de Meyerhold avec un ami de son père parlant russe, de ses découvertes où les textes traduits par Nina Gourfinkel jouent ensuite un rôle et d'une conférence à l'université qui en a résulté.

Presque rien de ce qu'il décrit n'existe alors en France, mais en même temps Bablet ne semble pas dupe des risques que ce contexte peut entraîner, et critique sans pitié des spectacles qui lui paraissent médiocres ou schématiques, dans lesquels les problèmes politiques sont traités dans une forme boulevardière, associant ainsi le réalisme socialiste à un théâtre politique de boulevard. Mais dans son enthousiasme pour le travail de ces deux metteurs en scène, Esrig et Pintilie, il appelle à les faire venir en France pour y monter le répertoire classique ou roumain avec des acteurs français à qui l'expérience ne peut être que bénéfique. Jacques Lang invitera et l'un et l'autre. Esrig viendra dans le cadre d'expérimentations sur le théâtre de foire, pour un spectacle sur les farces de Tabarin avec Geneviève Serreau, en 1973-74, dans la salle de la Gaîté lyrique dépendante du Théâtre national de Chaillot. Il demeure de ces essais une trace-publication : *Archi-farce tirée des farces, dialogues et facéties de Tabarin* par Genevieve Serreau et David Esrig, Paris, Plasma, 1981.

### *Moscou. 1963*

En 1963, la réception de *L'Ombre* d'Evgueni Schwartz, une des premières mises en scène de David Esrig, qui viendra en 1965 à Paris, comme on l'a vu, a été résolument quoique discrètement perçue comme « meyerholdienne ». David Esrig raconte que, interdit pendant ses années d'étude à l'Institut d'art théâtral et cinématographique I. L. Caragiale (1953-1957) comme « hérétique, contre-révolutionnaire, ennemi et décadent », Meyerhold l'a troublé, dès le début de ses rencontres avec le théâtre. Non par son art sur lequel il ne circulait pas grand chose mais par les histoires qui couraient sur cette « ombre géante ». Il dit avoir compris par cette présence-absence « que l'art a un but. (...), que le théâtre porte en lui une mission secrète, celle de tailler des brèches dans les murs de l'ignorance et de l'indifférence ».

*L'Ombre* connaît pendant la tournée de 1963 à Moscou et Leningrad un grand succès. Pavel Markov, un célèbre critique, le metteur en scène et acteur Iouri Zavadski, qui tous deux ont connu de près l'œuvre de Meyerhold, et beaucoup d'autres félicitent avec effusion mais discrétion le metteur en scène et ses acteurs. Esrig se souvient : « Tous, avec une émotion presque identique,

me confessèrent qu'avec *L'Ombre* j'avais réveillé en eux le souvenir "sacré" de Meyerhold et de son théâtre. Longtemps j'ai eu peur de rechercher des informations historiques (ce n'était pas facile d'ailleurs) sur l'art de Meyerhold – peur que le mythe qui m'avait donné des impulsions si importantes, succombe sous la vérité sèche des archives, peur que Meyerhold ait cherché peut-être tout à fait autre chose que ce qui m'animait moi, peur que Markov, Zavadski et tous les autres – puisque j'étais moi-même mécontent de mon spectacle – aient pu se tromper. »<sup>7</sup>

### *Où il n'est plus question de réception mais de transmission*

Reconnu internationalement lors des tournées dans les pays du bloc de l'Est et dans divers grands festivals après sa venue au Théâtre des Nations (Biennale de Venise, BITEF – où il obtient un Grand Prix partagé avec Jerzy Grotowski et Otomar Krejca, en 1967 –, Wiener Festwochen...), il met en scène à l'étranger et monte avec un grand succès en Roumanie au Théâtre Boulandra *Le neveu de Rameau* (1968), puis *En attendant Godot* (1970) que la censure condamne. Puis ce sera le tour de *La tempête* de Shakespeare, interdite après de longs mois de répétitions (1973). Empêché dans sa liberté d'artiste, David Esrig quitte la Roumanie, et émigre en Allemagne, après le bref passage en France, à Chaillot.

Théoricien et praticien, Esrig enseigne la science du théâtre dans différentes universités, met en scène, dirige des théâtres successivement dans plusieurs villes allemandes (Brême, Munich, Essen). Il a avancé dans sa pratique, dans ses recherches, en particulier sur la commedia dell'arte sur laquelle il a publié en Allemagne un bel ouvrage scientifique et très richement illustré en 1985<sup>8</sup>, édité en Roumanie en 2016 traduit de l'allemand, chez Nemira.

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<sup>7</sup> Les citations des deux paragraphes précédents sont tirées d'un texte de D. Esrig écrit pour la publication des actes du Symposium international « Meyerhold. La mise en scène dans le siècle » (Paris : LARAS, 2000), traduit par Mirella Patureau, in *Meyerhold . La mise en scène dans le siècle / Mejerhol'd. Rezissura v perspective veka*, 422-429.

<sup>8</sup> David Esrig, *Commedia dell'arte: Eine Bildgeschichte der Kunst des Spektakels* (Nördlingen: F. Greno, 1985).

Il fonde, en 1995, à la frontière autrichienne, l'Académie Athanor, école de théâtre et de cinéma-modèle qui aujourd'hui se trouve relocalisée à Passau (2014). En 2000, il est un de mes invités<sup>9</sup> au Symposium international sur « Meyerhold. La mise en scène dans le siècle » que j'organise au LARAS. On lui confie une *master-class* où l'on voit tout son art de diriger les acteurs. Il assiste à des débats, des conférences, des ateliers, des démonstrations de biomécanique par des élèves-acteurs du CNSAD<sup>10</sup> qui ont travaillé avec un acteur-metteur en scène russe, Alexei Levinski, un des rares à avoir reçu un enseignement direct de la part d'un des biomécaniciens du GOSTIM, Nikolaï Koustov. Une partie des nombreuses personnes rencontrées lors de cette semaine consacrée à Meyerhold à Paris va être conviée à son tour régulièrement à l'Académie de Burghausen. Ainsi la réception intuitive, retenue, ou discrète pour des raisons politiques a pu non seulement se confirmer au grand jour mais se matérialiser en transmission nécessaire, ouverte et inspirée. La vitalité créative s'est en partie concentrée en vitalité pédagogique.

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<sup>9</sup> Sur les conseils de Mirella Patureau.

<sup>10</sup> Conservatoire National Supérieur d'art dramatique, Paris.

**Annexe**  
**Vitalité du théâtre roumain (1967)**  
**Denis Bablet**

Quarante théâtres dramatiques (dont douze pour la seule ville de Bucarest), cinq scènes lyriques, vingt-deux ensembles de marionnettes et six théâtres musicaux ; un institut du théâtre chargé de former des comédiens, des metteurs en scène, des critiques et des historiens ; à l'Institut d'Histoire de l'Art, une section de dix « théâtrologues » qui consacrent leur temps à des recherches sur l'histoire du théâtre et ses différentes formes (dramaturgie, art de l'acteur, etc.) ; une revue, *Teatrul*, qui publie chaque mois une pièce et des études diverses. Voilà des chiffres, des faits et des organismes qui témoignent de l'activité théâtrale en Roumanie, activité qui s'est considérablement développée depuis la dernière guerre.

Mais chiffres et statistiques ne disent pas tout. Le théâtre roumain, que l'on connaît si peu en Occident, ce n'est pas seulement un ensemble d'organismes. C'est aussi une certaine organisation du travail artistique.

À la tête, au Comité d'État pour la Culture et l'Art, un conseil des Théâtres où figurent notamment certains des plus importants metteurs en scène roumains d'aujourd'hui, fait le point, analyse la situation, oriente, conseille, propose.

Chaque théâtre est animé par un directeur artistique (metteur en scène, comédien, etc.) assisté d'un vice-directeur chargé de régler les problèmes administratifs et d'un conseil artistique dont le rôle consultatif est important lorsqu'il s'agit par exemple de résoudre des problèmes d'orientation générale, de choix du répertoire ou d'appel à de nouveaux cadres.

Chaque théâtre dispose d'une troupe permanente de comédiens qui représente de 75 à 80% du nombre des acteurs participant à divers spectacles, tandis que les 20 ou 25% restant sont constitués d'engagés temporaires (pour un, deux, trois ans, ou pour un spectacle). Système aux avantages certains : la troupe permanente offre une garantie de continuité et d'homogénéité, elle permet un travail collectif approfondi. Mais qui n'est point sans danger : celui d'une trop grande fonctionnarisation de métier artistique, celui d'une

routine qui peu à peu risque de s'infiltrer si l'on n'y prend pas garde. Ainsi cherche-t-on à l'assouplir et envisage-t-on de réduire prudemment le nombre des engagés permanents afin d'éviter la sclérose et de stimuler l'activité créatrice des acteurs.

Chaque théâtre dispose de metteurs en scène qui lui sont directement attachés (Esrig et Giurchescu pour citer l'exemple du Théâtre de la Comédie que dirige Radu Beligan) ; de même a-t-il ses propres décorateurs ou « scénographes », pour employer un terme si justement en faveur dans les pays de l'Europe centrale et orientale, ces décorateurs et ces metteurs en scène pouvant d'ailleurs travailler à titre d'invités temporaires dans d'autres théâtres roumains ou étrangers.

Ajoutons que les subventions accordées aux théâtres représentent en moyenne 75% de leur budget, chiffre très élevé mais qui ne paraît pas avoir toujours permis la nécessaire modernisation de leurs équipements techniques ; que les conditions de travail sont telles qu'un metteur en scène chargé de la préparation d'un spectacle peut commencer à y travailler avec son scénographe cinq mois avant la première et que les répétitions avec les comédiens durent fréquemment de trois à quatre mois : certes, ce système risque de favoriser la routine, voire d'encourager une certaine paresse chez le comédien, mais ses avantages l'emportent sur ses inconvénients : l'acteur est disponible, plus libre, plus relaxé, et, comme me le disait David Esrig, les choses se marquent plus profondément en lui, on a le temps de revenir sur une mise en scène, d'en modifier l'orientation ou de la corriger.

J'ai eu l'occasion de juger des résultats d'une telle organisation, bien que mon séjour en Roumanie ait coïncidé avec les débuts de la saison et ne m'ait pas permis d'apprécier certains spectacles dont on m'avait dit le plus grand bien. Vue partielle, donc, puisqu'il ne me fut pas donné de voir telle ou telle réalisation de Penciulescu, le directeur du Théâtre Mic, telle *Mort de Danton* de Ciulei, l'animateur du Théâtre Bulandra, ou telle mise en scène de D. Cernescu, premier metteur en scène du Théâtre Giulești, dont la vocation populaire semble en faire un équivalent de notre TEP<sup>11</sup>. Mais pour partielles qu'aient pu être mes impressions, j'avoue avoir été sensible à la vitalité du

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<sup>11</sup> TEP : Le Théâtre de l'Est parisien est la première Maison de la culture fondée à Paris en 1963, devenue Centre dramatique en 1966 et dirigée par Guy Rétoré (ma note, Béatrice Picon-Vallin).

théâtre roumain : elle ne tient pas seulement à des questions d'organisation, mais aussi à un style de jeu qui paraît propre à une lignée de comédiens roumains, à la personnalité de jeunes metteurs en scène dont le travail me paraît capital : David Esrig et Lucian Pintilie.

Certes, j'ai assisté à un très médiocre spectacle : *Des souris et des hommes* monté au Théâtre National dans ce style désuet qui règne encore sur trop de scènes « nationales » à travers le monde. Ce n'est pas non plus le succès remporté auprès du public par *L'Opinion publique* d'Aurel Baranga qui me fera croire à la valeur artistique de cette pièce présentée au Théâtre de la Comédie. Loin de moi la pensée de refuser la critique de la bureaucratie et toutes les formes d'irresponsabilité, au contraire ; mais les bons sentiments ne suffisent pas, surtout lorsqu'ils aboutissent à un aussi curieux schématisme et à la naissance de nouveaux « héros positifs » : cela relève d'une conception boulevardière du théâtre politique. J'avoue aussi avoir été déçu par *L'Opéra de quat' sous* monté par Ciulei au Théâtre Bulandra : un remarquable décor d'Oroveanu (il faut dire qu'avec Oroveanu, Bortnovski, Bubulac, Nemțeanu et Popescu-Udriște, la Roumanie possède quelques excellents scénographes), de bons comédiens, mais une mise en scène hésitante, dans son parti pris de modernisation, entre l'art culinaire et la critique sociale, une direction d'acteurs flottante et une « jazzification » de la musique pour le moins contestable.

Mais il est deux spectacles qui m'ont paru absolument remarquables : *Tête de canard* de Gh. Ciprian mis en scène par David Esrig au Théâtre de la Comédie et *Scènes de Carnaval* de Caragiale monté par Lucian Pintilie au Théâtre Bulandra.

On connaît en France le travail de David Esrig grâce au percutant *Troilus et Cressida* que nous avait présenté le Théâtre des Nations il y a quelques années. *Tête de canard* est l'une de ces pièces qui font date dans l'histoire du théâtre dans la mesure où elles annoncent des courants, des thèmes et des structures dramaturgiques. Pièce étrange où l'on sent l'héritage de Jarry, l'atmosphère dada, où l'on retrouve des traces de surréalisme ; pièce qui annonce le théâtre de la dérision sous ses formes satiriques les plus aiguës. À travers l'aventure de ces quatre « copains » qui élisent domicile dans un arbre qu'ils ont acheté sans avoir acquis le terrain qu'il entoure, à travers leurs jeux

et leurs facéties, la pièce offre une sorte de joyeuse défense de la liberté individuelle face à toutes les formes de conformisme. Sans doute paraît-elle un peu désuète dans son curieux alliage d'un esprit de farce qui rappelle *Les Copains* de Jules Romains et d'un symbolisme naïf quand il n'est pas pesant. Mais voilà qui ne diminue en rien son intérêt historique et surtout voilà ce que l'on oublie presque lorsqu'on assiste à l'excellente représentation réglée par Esrig. « Réglée » est bien le terme qui convient : une extraordinaire précision dans le jeu, les mouvements, les attitudes, les rythmes. Esrig est un metteur en scène physique. L'impression d'un ballet mécanique, mais d'une mécanique toute pénétrée de sensibilité. Comme une commedia dell'arte moderne... Sur un fond presque abstrait, l'efficacité des acteurs de cinéma muet. Le geste amplifié ou réduit à sa géométrie ; le décalage voulu entre le geste et la parole. Des comédiens qui savent conserver leurs distances à l'égard de leurs personnages. Le dessin est net, sans la moindre bavure. « Chaplin, Buster Keaton, etc., c'est beaucoup plus philosophique et beaucoup plus important qu'O'Neill », me déclarait Esrig. Voilà une mise en scène qui illustre parfaitement son propos.

Comme Esrig, mais dans un style très différent, Lucian Pintilie est un remarquable directeur d'acteurs. Il suffit de voir sa réalisation de *Scènes de carnaval* de Caragiale pour s'en convaincre.

Cette pièce n'est sans doute ni la plus célèbre ni la meilleure des œuvres du dramaturge roumain. En plein carnaval, une série d'aventures burlesques : des personnages de la petite bourgeoisie des faubourgs qui imitent les mœurs distinguées. Un ensemble coloré, des péripéties multiples, un réalisme satirique qui débouche sur l'absurde, mais la pièce fait l'effet d'une esquisse trop vivement enlevée en dépit de moments extraordinaires. Pintilie a réussi à gommer les défauts de l'œuvre, à l'enrichir d'un réalisme de détails rigoureusement choisis qui humanise les personnages dont certains risquaient de n'être que de purs fantoches. Il a su également diriger les comédiens de telle sorte qu'ils se maintiennent en constant équilibre entre la farce satirique et la comédie réaliste. Une comédie qui grince, où le comique frôle le tragique quand il n'en est point l'envers. Là aussi on pense à la commedia dell'arte et l'on ne peut s'empêcher d'admirer le jeu constamment canalisé des comédiens, leur naturel insolite. Lucian Pintilie



prépare actuellement *La Cerisaie*. Voilà une réalisation qui promet d'être passionnante, car Pintilie est l'un de ces metteurs en scène qui savent non pas faire fi des traditions mais lire les œuvres d'un œil neuf.

Une suggestion pour clore ce trop rapide panorama. Des metteurs en scène tchèques montent des spectacles à Berlin, à Munich ou à Bruxelles, le Roumain Ciulei vient de présenter *La Mort de Danton* au Schiller-Theater de Berlin. Ne pourrait-on envisager de développer les échanges de metteurs en scène entre la France et l'étranger ? Pourquoi ne pas inviter un Esrig ou un Pintilie à venir monter en France tel Shakespeare ou tel Caragiale ? L'expérience serait profitable à tous.

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## *Bringing the Romanian Theatre to American Universities: The Plays of Mona Chirilă at Arizona State University*

ILEANA ALEXANDRA ORLICH<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** When talking about Romanian theatre staged abroad, in the United States and especially in Phoenix, Arizona, it is impossible not to mention the extremely talented director Mona Marian (Chirilă). She started her theatrical journey at Arizona State University in the Romanian Studies program at the Department of Languages, due to her encounter with prof. Ileana Orlich, after a performance at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca in 2000, where a beautiful friendship started. An important number of poetical and most creative performances toured to the United States, where the Romanian diaspora audience and the American student audience could participate to these unforgettable shows.

**Keywords:** Mona Marian (Chirilă), Romanian theatre in Arizona USA, National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, puppet theatre.



*Life must be lived as a play, playing certain  
games,  
making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and  
then a man  
will be able ... to defend himself against his  
enemies, and  
win the contest.*

Johan Huizinga

**Mona Marian (1961-2013)**

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In the quote above, the word *man* needs to be read in Mona's name as she lived her short life playing literally, in the world and on stage, while defending herself against adversity: first through her art as a theatre director, then as a beloved teacher and friend, and finally as a winner<sup>2</sup>. Today she is remembered, and still loved, by those whose lives she touched in so many ways. Of those ways, I will address in this homage the manner in which Mona changed my life and my professional career during the time span of almost two decades and within a space that brought into focus her beloved Cluj and my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona.

In this interplay of time and space, I will begin with a significant moment in my past – the year 1998, when I was asked to start a Romanian language program at my home academic institution, the Arizona State University. As the newest addition to the Department of Languages, the

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<sup>2</sup> Stage Director at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre and professor at the Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj, Manager of "PUCK" Puppet Theatre of Cluj, **Mona Marian (Chirilă)**, was born on 17 August 1961. She graduated from the "I. L. Caragiale" Theatre and Cinema Institute in Bucharest in 1987, the class of Cătălina Buzoianu.

Ever since she was a student, she had a passion for challenging productions, from *Matca* by Marin Sorescu, to *The feather dress*, a Nō Japanese drama and to the productions for children, each one of them an artistic wonder. She participated in a workshop conducted by Peter Brook and his collaborators from Bouffes du Nord Theatre in Paris, a meeting which placed her among the few blessed ones who had the chance to study the game of the subtle energies of the human body.

She directed more than 40 productions, 25 of them in puppet theatres. She started her career as director at Constanța Puppet Theatre, and those productions were highly praised by the critics and awarded numerous national prizes.

Her passion for Commedia dell'arte was used not only in the productions she directed but also in her PhD thesis.

Since 1996, she directed at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre, The Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, The Dramatic Theatre in Constanța, Târgu-Mureș National Theatre and Oradea State Theatre, parallel to directing puppet theatre productions. The list of her important productions at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre started with *The Queen Mother* by Manlio Santanelli, *The Overcoat*, script by Mona Marian based on Gogol's novel and his *Death Souls* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*; *Ubucurești*, based on I.L. Caragiale and A. Jarry; *Servant of Two Masters* by Goldoni (her longest lasting production); *Travesties* by Tom Stoppard; *How to explain the history of communism to the mental patients* by Matei Vișniec; *The Inspector General* by N.V. Gogol; *Zenobia* based on Gellu Naum and *Carnival* by I.L. Caragiale and others. She left this world on September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

Romanian Studies program initiated in 1998 did not seem destined to achieve great academic visibility beyond its immediate reach. Towering language programs, such as those in Spanish, French, Italian, or Chinese were better funded and associated with a tradition of cultural immersion familiar to Humanities students. Nothing could predict the rise and growth of the small Romanian language program connected to the Babes-Bolyai University through a summer program that advanced primarily history, a mythology of vampires, and the socio-political examination of a country that had been a part of the now defunct Soviet bloc.

A random invitation, initiated as a surprise event within a heavy schedule of language and culture courses, took the summer program students to the “Lucian Blaga” National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca for a performance of the Romanian Avant-garde titled somewhat cryptically as *MEMO*<sup>3</sup>. We did not know what to expect within the confines of a small and dark acting studio, surrounded by a mostly young crowd of spectators. Then the music began and two actors engaged in a most enticing performance complete with seductive body language, nostalgic music, and unsettling dialogue. Slowly, the magical stage performance, made up of a mix of romantic and provocative appeal enhanced by the lyrics, proposed an interplay of the emotional components of human behavior that drew in the students.

At the end of the performance, we were invited to a reception to meet not only the two principal actors, Miriam Cuibus and Dragoș Pop, but also the play’s director, Mona Chirilă. She appeared to us as a most extraordinary personage, fluent in a sort of English that enchanted through an unusual pitch, an almost acrobatic movement of bejeweled hands, and an overall charming warmth. We found ourselves enticed in the presence of a powerful person, whose strength was gently clothed in the dark velvet of her eyes and the sound of her voice.

By the time our summer program ended, we became Mona’s friends and held out the hope that she would visit us in Arizona, bringing along the fascinating *MEMO* play. In the following year, she came to the Arizona State University and we could thus share with our American friends and colleagues the beauty of the performance and its culturally rich context.

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-440/memo/>



**Fig. 1:** Miriam Cuiibus and Dragoş Pop in *Memo*, a production of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca<sup>4</sup>

Before long, many students from the Arizona State University wanted to sign up for our program that began to show growth and visibility beyond a language program; indeed, the students' and faculty interest reached deep into Romanian culture and its wealth of contributions to world literature and theatre: Tristan Tzara and the Romanian the Avant-garde, Eugene Ionesco, and the period between the two great wars, all of which became attractive topics for our courses and cultural offerings.

Mona's first trip to Arizona State University in 2001 with *MEMO* also marked the beginning a long series of annual visits that highlighted the Romanian theatre and its trove of dramatic repertoire. Her plays engaged us in an amazing stage odyssey that Mona made possible through her impressive

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<sup>4</sup> All hereby presented photographs are taken by Nicu Cherciu.

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talent, professional dedication, first-class elegance, and unmatched directing style that incorporated a great variety of dramatic material. Plays of great playwrights, from Mikhail Bulgakov to Matei Visniec and Gellu Naum, deployed in Mona's stagings a comparative cultural perspective on the political, social, ethical and aesthetic problems tackled in contemporary West- and East-European and Russian drama.

More importantly, by exploring the collective biography of modern Europe – a multicultural, ethnically and nationally diverse space *par excellence* – Mona's stagings explored the intertextual web of references that connects plays, lodging the cultural decipherment and interpretative approaches to the dramatic corpus under analysis from a trans-disciplinary perspective. Her stage adaptations provided a synoptic model of dramatic conflict and resolution patterns and a global perspective that stressed inter-cultural understanding through theatre and theatrical performance.



Fig. 2, 3: Miriam Cuibus and Dragoş Pop in *Memo*





Beyond these theatrical productions, Mona inspired a sense of cultural engagement that redirected my research toward the Romanian Avant-garde within a comparative context. As a follow up on a performance of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*<sup>5</sup> that I had seen in the UK during a visit at Oxford, I translated the play into Romanian and offered it to Mona for what I knew was going to be an unforgettable staging. With Miriam Cuibus, her collaborator in and principal actor of *MEMO*, Mona captured in *Travesties* the various techniques by which Stoppard dramatizes the continuous operations of subterranean thought – what Lionel Trilling in a different context called “a poetry-making organ” – that underscored Tzara’s Dadaism<sup>6</sup>.



**Fig. 5:** Cornel Răileanu, Maria Munteanu, Cătălin Herlo and Cătălin Codreanu with archaic Romanian masks, Dragoș Pop, in *Travesties*, 2006

<sup>5</sup> Tom Stoppard, *Teatru: Travestiuri*, translated by Ileana Alexandra Orlich, (Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, 2004).

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-392/travestiuri/>



With her inimitable combination of melancholic verve and tragic cheer, Mona brought to her rendition of *Travesties* an ingenious presentation of the characters that redefined performance, time, and space while retaining the purity of the main characters' unconscious thought process. In the play, Lenin, Joyce, and the ingenious Tzara bring to the fore an enactment of the transition process, of how reality, dream, and history can recreate and reenergize one another on stage. Paraphrasing Stoppard's use of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* used as a palimpsest to *Travesties*, Mona's staging of *Travesties* can be seen as *The Importance of Being Tzara*, before Breton and Surrealism, before Lenin and his Bolshevik theories of class struggle, and before Joyce's anxious exposure of hypocrisy in language and society.



**Fig. 6:** The poster of the performance *Travesties (Travestiuri)*



**Fig. 7:** Eva Crișan and Dragoș Pop in *How to explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*

Conveying the same sense that the theater offers a unique mode of cultural engagement, this time with politics within a society, Mona's adaptation of Matei Visniec's play *How to explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*<sup>7</sup> proposed to show how dramatists examine their societies and politics through the prism of theatrical performance by using the lenses of established literary or philosophical models from Marxism (in its Stalinist pose) to Existentialism (with Sartre's *No Exit* as a backdrop *avant la lettre* to Communism). In Mona's ingenious adaptation, this play offered a case study in theater construction, by transforming, editing, and reshuffling the political agenda of Central and Eastern Europe under Stalinism to identify through theatrical performance the conspiratorial, conniving, and scheming politics of the totalitarian communist era. Mona's directorial lens underscored the denunciation of Communism and its aberrant politics by seeking the representation of politics on contemporary stages. The play's pulse, complete with music that underscores the characters' acts of empathy and kindness in an otherwise forbidding mental asylum, brought to the stage Mona's rich imagination, that makes full use of Visniec's use of heavy irony and dense political metaphors, aiming to imply that after the Fall of the Berlin Wall becoming European means no longer being Communist.

Another adaptation of Visniec, *The Body of Woman as Battlefield in the Bosnian War*, a play that articulates and analyzes collective anxieties and national politics that are missing from the more visible texts and official political discourses, could have been a mere automatic by-product of being a stage director in a politically tormented European space. However, Mona's staging of this play in Phoenix, Arizona proved to be another successful performance bearing her trademark: intellectually challenging, inventive, experimental, and porous in its engagement with traditional models of the classical repertoire and the Western canon. In the outstanding interpretation of Anca Doszi and Dana Bontidean, the play explored a critical understanding of the philosophical-moral attitude of respect for otherness and cultural diversity that underlies the aesthetic – literary and theatrical – dimensions of this staging that guides the audience to political analysis and self-decipherment.

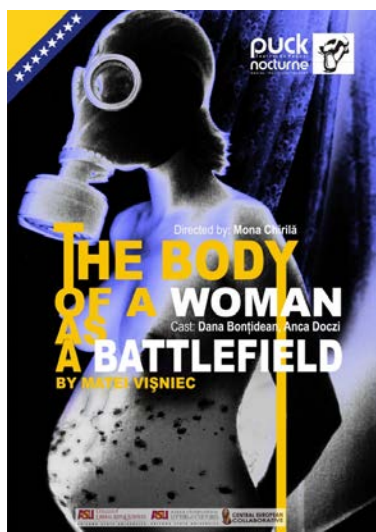
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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-508/how-to-explain-the-history-of-communism-to-mental-patients/>

One step beyond this dramatic assessment there is a world devoid of belief systems, where the mind and heart cry out for validation and the assurance that life has meaning and life has purpose. Such a play is Matei Visniec's *Old Clown Wanted*, another great directorial accomplishment that Mona brought to the Arizona State University. As time passes and one ages, the three clowns on stage hold unto goals and belief systems as if they were still to be met, with Mona directing the three aging men's need for a moral and spiritual anchor: a new job as a clown. Her superb achievement as a director, beyond the masterful performance of the three actors, surprised with emotional intensity the emptiness of their meaningless actions, the fragmented communication, and the unfathomable sense of despair that accompanied their continuous compulsion toward purposeful activity as the only anchor left in the disjuncture between their thoughts and actions. In the reality of the stage Mona captured with infinite tenderness, the clowns tumble and struggle amongst themselves in temporarily purposeful engagement defined by a disarming courage. Their anxiety and mutual intimidations, that replace their boredom and despair, generate a similarly disheartening future that underscores their lack of a coherent sense of self or direction other than the one prefiguring an impending death without a legacy.

Mona's masterful scenic command of the clowns' useless act or of political experiments that generate despair is certainly not a defining dimension of her directorial talent. She could, in fact, bring life and diversity to the stage through puppetry and the enticing world of the children's stories, as in the case of her beautifully rendered version of *Punguța cu doi bani* (*Little Purse with Two Pennies*) tale written by the Romanian writer Ion Creangă. To the delight of the Romanian diaspora of Phoenix, Arizona, Mona brought this puppet show to the Valley of the Sun and turned it into a great creative task that registered an immediate success with the children and their parents. There was no sign of the existential dimensions of human life in its conflicted interactions as an assorted audience reminisced about childhood and its enchanted days, about the tales of the unkind and greedy *boieri* (noblemen), the rooster's tirades in a chant that echoed the familiar obligatory ritual, and divine justice served in the most extraordinary ways.

BRINGING THE ROMANIAN THEATRE TO AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES: THE PLAYS OF MONA CHIRILĂ AT ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY



The Romanian Studies  
And Central European Collaborative  
in the School of International Letters and Cultures  
At  
Arizona State University  
In collaboration with the Puck Theatre  
Presents:  
**THE BRAVE LITTLE TAILOR**  
COWDEN HALL  
October 18, 2008  
2:00 - 4:00 pm

Admission is FREE!



Fig. 8, 9: Posters of two performances directed by Mona Marian presented at ASU

There was also the more elevated type of story like Gellu Naum's famed *Book of Apolodor*, another stage success that Mona brought to the Phoenix Children's Theatre. The audience clapped and sang alongside the traveling Apolodor, who covered lengthy territory, to the North Pole and back, to satisfy his yearnings. Long after Mona and her puppets left Phoenix folks here still asked about her, about the marvelous performance that brought wonder in the lives of their children, filling them with high pitched emotion and artistic yearning.

How does one forget such theatrical events? How does one forget the fascinating Mona, her cultivated talent, and her infinite dedication to the theatre world? Her stage plays incorporated a created universe occasionally stripped of its prescribed functions and filled with piercing music, yet gratifying to one's intellectual curiosity and aesthetic need. In retrospect, the riddle of her creation alone seems to have been the only constant of a world that Mona brought to the stage, and then into our lives.

She is as dearly missed today as she was in the first days of her long goodbye and final departure to a better world where she enchanted the angels by calling them "păpușă."

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*Balkan Dreams/Western Nightmares –  
An exploration of the American Dream/Nightmare in Plays by  
Romanian Women Playwrights*

DOMNICA RADULESCU<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** This article is an exploration of the aesthetics of exile in works by three Romanian women theater artists: Aglaja Veteranyi, Saviana Stanescu and Domnica Radulescu. I focus on the closely-knit relation between the experience of exile and the theatrical aesthetics that emerges in the construction of different versions of the American dream often turned nightmare. The arc of the study stretches over the intersections between gender, ethnicity, nationality as embodied in the practice of theater from the vantage point of displacement and fractured identities.

**Key Words:** exile, displacement, theater aesthetics, identity, liminality, gender, women, carnival/carnavalesque

“Exile is the unhealable rift between being and a native place, between the self and its true home. Its sadness can never be surmounted. “[E]xile is tremendously secular and unbearably historical; [...] it is produced by human beings for other human beings, and [...] like death, but without death’s ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from traditions, family and geography”<sup>2</sup>. I am such an exile myself torn by the unhealable rift of exile yet also enriched by its multiplicity of perspectives and bold explorations of unexplored territories, frontiers, margins. An immigrant/exile from a former

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<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2002), 172.

Communist dictatorship, I am haunted by artistic representations of the uprooting of exile understood in the modern sense of abrupt and irreversible dislocation from one's native geography due to political reasons and profoundly caught in the historical moment.

I am interested in the ways in which the ontological uprooting of exile influences the aesthetic shapes of works that have emerged from this experience and determines not just what we write about but how we write about it. The theater of exile I am interested in is soaked in the sadness of loss that "can never be surmounted" yet it tries to surmount it through carnival, through the alchemic transformations of the tragic into the comic, and through polyphonic voices that speak of different and often conflicting experiences of the world. The "exilic authors" discussed in my study "employ hybrid transnational styles" both from a desire to "make their experiences comprehensible on the new markets"<sup>3</sup> and to embody artistically the balancing act of straddling across different cultural, linguistic, geographical and psychological realities. Feminist theater of exile goes a few steps further and encompasses in its startling fragmentations and dislocations, in its reverse chronologies and carnivalized languages the female experience of foreignness and displacement. It unfolds with an array of gender specificities from being exoticized, sexually objectified, threatened or violated, to forms of marginalization from employment possibilities to dating, to economic status and freedom. These East European female playwrights explore even deeper realms of marginalization as they emerge from and attempt to artistically deal with Balkan realities or Balkan identities transplanted into American landscapes in fierce attempts to grasp that ever illusive American Dream only to see it morph into terrifying variants of an American Nightmare. The Balkans is already a place of exile and liminality, a space of strife and indefinite identities in search of a definition. In the Foreword to the Anthology of plays by East European playwrights titled *Balkan Plots*, Cheryl Robson reminds us that "the definition of the word to *balkanize* is: to divide an area into small antagonistic states" and points to "the history of political double-dealing in a troubled region within southern Europe,

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<sup>3</sup> See the article by Diana Manole mentioned in the Introduction of Jestrovic, Silvia and Yana Meerzon. *Performance, Exile and America*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 66.

surrounded by the Adriatic, Aegean and Black Seas”<sup>4</sup>. It is at the confluence of such Balkan liminality and spatial parceling, of exilic homelessness and postmodernist plurality that I situate myself both as a playwright and a critic of theater from these parts of the world.

The discussion of East European women’s voices in theater as forms of resistance to oppression and violence is more pertinent today than it has ever been. The opening of the Eastern borders after the fall of Communism has not necessarily had all good repercussions for the lives of women. The almost three decades since the fall of what was known as “the iron curtain” has seen, in fact, a rise in mass abuses and violence against women from these parts of the world, either as a result of new ethnic wars, or of the new and rapidly increasing social phenomenon of the trafficking of women and young girls for sex from East European countries to Western countries.<sup>5</sup> While there have been improvements in the lives of women with the rise of the new democracies in Eastern European countries, of which one of the most significant has been the gaining of reproductive rights, women have also been affected negatively as a result of the ills that are often encountered in Western democracies, such as prostitution, AIDS, drugs, unemployment, and newly unleashed levels of sexism which were kept in some control under Marxist rule.<sup>6</sup> The women playwrights I discuss in this essay explore such themes in innovative, shape shifting theater aesthetics that defy traditional representations of gender, raise consciousness about social inequities and the traumas of displacement that are often specific to women immigrants and refugees.

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<sup>4</sup> Lindor, Gina & Cheryl Robson, eds. *Balkan Plots. Plays from Central and Eastern Europe*. (London: Aurora Metro Press, 2000), 6. This collection, edited by Gina Lindor also contains the play by Matei Visniec, *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War*.

<sup>5</sup> See the study by Phil Williams, *Illegal Immigration & Commercial Sex. The New Sex Trade* (London: Frank Cass, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> In the Introduction to the edited collection titled *Women in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union*, Tova Yedlin lucidly articulates the tensions and contradictions that existed, in Marxist Eastern European countries, between “the Marxist Model of Sex Equality” and the “failure to promote more than a minimal restructuring of working and living arrangements within the home,” with the well-known result that the majority of women had “to undertake two jobs: one in the family and one outside the home” (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1980), 15.



I choose to start this essay with the dramatic or epic poem by the Romanian writer of German expression Aglaja Veteranyi. At the height of her writing career, with several literary prizes among which the 1999 Swiss Prize for Best Book of the year for the work *Warum das Kind in der Polenta kocht* (*Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?*) Aglaja Veteranyi committed suicide in the year 2002 just after submitting her last novel to a German publisher. She was also an actress, a circus performer, the creator of a theater group in Zurich and a successful poet. Like the playwright Sarah Kane before her, like the poet Sylvia Plath before Sarah Kane, she staged and prepared her death with some meticulous care, leaving behind a small but powerful body of work that is edgy as it is startling in the honest and sharply ironic documentation of displacement, abuse and grief. She was a refugee from Romania and for years, she travelled and lived with her family – all circus performers from the Bucharest National Circus – the nomadic life of circus people moving from place to place, from country to country.

I consider Veteranyi the emblematic exile writer to the point of flagrant literality, where she documents in a puzzled and fractured voice a nomadic and terror filled existence, telling, living and recreating a story of displacement and homelessness. The narrator/protagonist of the work is the young girl/Aglaja who tells her story and that of her family in an edgy bold and irreverent voice that indeed crosses borders, countries and cultural landscapes. Embedded in her story of displacement of the young girl is also the tragic story of sexual abuse of her sister by the step father, a fugitive but slightly threatening figure of the book. The story is that of an itinerant circus family crossing European countries in their *vargo* mostly supported by the mother's formidable act of hanging from her hair in the trapeze, an abusive stepfather and two girls, one of whom is the young Aglaja. The startling title *Why Is the Child Cooking in the Polenta?* is also the refrain of the book, a sentence and image that her sister is urging her to conjure up in order to transcend the terror she feels at the thought of her mother falling from the height of the circus cupola. According to the sister, imagining the pains of a child being boiled in the polenta would take her mind away from the mothers' predicament. The fractured and dreamy narrative is held together by the crystal clear and perky voice of the young girl. The discourse is like a

hopelessly foreign language: in the Romanian translation it sounds foreign, in the English translation it sounds like it should have been Romanian. Foreign words and particularly proper names are thrown in once in a while together with a metalinguistic layer of description of the languages spoken in the family of nomad circus performers. Mostly the bulk of the story is narrated in the language of stark, uncompromisingly ironic and honest poetry. “Does God speak other languages?/ Can he understand foreigners too?/ Or are there angels sitting in little glass booths and translating? AND IS THERE REALLY A CIRCUS IN HEAVEN?”<sup>7</sup>. To Veteranyi as for most exile writers, language is a space, a world, an entire universe of living. The dislocation caused by exile is both experienced through the loss of the native language and of the universe enclosed in it and partly recovered through the adoption of a new language. But because new, adopted and recovered, the new language is fractured and points to a fractured existence where the basic existential concepts and experiences – God, mother, life, death – are perceived and felt in the second degree – through translation.

The aesthetic of exile is made palpable through the fracturing of narrative line, syntax, perspective, the technique of “carnivalizing the sentence”<sup>8</sup>, yet always kept hanging by the thread of the fierce narrative voice just like the narrator’s mother hanging from her hair in the trapeze. The circus is her literal home, her education, her entire universe. It is for Aglaja the closest thing to a universal language that crosses cultures and idioms and even gets to heaven. The storytelling itself is a nomadic experience about nomadic lives and mixed ethnicities told in absurd contradictions: OUR STORY SOUNDS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME MY MOTHER TELLS IT. We’re Orthodox, we’re Jewish, we’re international!/ My grandfather owned a circus arena, he was a salesman, a captain, travelled from country to country, never left his own village and was a locomotive engineer. He was a Greek, a Romanian, a farmer, a Turk, an aristocrat, a

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<sup>7</sup> Veteranyi, Aglaja. *Why the Child Is Cooking in the Polenta*. Trans. Vincent Kling. Champaign, IL & London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Little develops the theory that in many works by women writers, the parody and satire of patriarchy and gender inequity is encapsulated in the technique of embedding sexist statements or stereotypes, in reversed and comedic form within feminist comedic discourse.

Gypsy, an Orthodox believer”<sup>9</sup>. The Balkan fragmentation and exilic disorientation soar to unmatched heights of ironic poetry in Veteranyi’s discourse, mixing categories and superimposing contradicting realities onto one another to a delicious multiplication of identity. She reconstructs the world through playing and through the bitter carnival of her circus homeless existence and the reconstruction takes place with the means of writing. Yet the writing is itself an experience of loss and recovery, of uprooting and failed re-rootings, mostly of an existence in the second degree, as it is an existence in translation or in an adoptive/adopted language. “Before I saw my father for the last time, he made a movie in which God was one of the characters. My mother played God’s grandmother and I played the Guardian angel. [...] GOD IS SAD. HE IS PLAYING A HUNGARIAN SONG ON THE VIOLIN.” The linguistic carnival of Veteranyi’s child-like but not childish voice becomes her one and only home away from home, in a restless search for a home. Ultimately it is in the power of her voice that the young girl finds her home and refuge, a voice that she owns fully and that empowers her throughout her many traumatic journeys.

Saviana Stanescu is another playwright of Romanian origins living and writing in the United States since 2011 and recipient of several playwriting awards. It might be best to start the discussion of Saviana Stanescu’s theater with her own self characterization:

I am a Romanian-born playwright with Balkan roots. Back in Romania I used to write surreal and absurd plays and to create interdisciplinary performances. Here in the USA [...] I became concerned with issues of identity and immigration, content-wise, and with character development and innovative dramatic structure, form-wise. At this point I work on integrating my 12-year American experience and newly developed craft with my (b)old Balkan inventiveness and imagination, while tackling meaningful/global issues.

In the same interview quoted above Saviana Stanescu refers to her work as an immigrant writer in the United States in the following way, mentioning her fascination and interest precisely in hybrid realities and identities:

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<sup>9</sup> Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the child...*, 53.

BALKAN DREAMS/WESTERN NIGHTMARES – AN EXPLORATION OF THE AMERICAN  
DREAM/NIGHTMARE IN PLAYS BY ROMANIAN WOMEN PLAYWRIGHTS

In my American plays I explore topics of displacement and reinvention, of cultural clashes and power dynamics between countries, groups and individuals. I am interested in that *in-between* space where migrants dwell, living in the “hyphen” between two cultures or communities. That hyphenated/hybrid identity fascinates me. I’m always ready to analyze and dramatize ways in which the American Dream turns into a nightmare for many people while remaining an idealized Paradise for others.

Diana Manole has aptly noted that “Saviana Stanescu attempts to change the stereotypical view of immigrating to twenty first century United States and, implicitly, of America and the American way of life”<sup>10</sup>. Stanescu’s theater offers a superb illustration of the aesthetics of exile and a feminist one at that. The characters, voices, images and dramatic actions of her plays emerge from that liminal zone of the hyphen in between cultures, countries, ethnicities and languages and give voice to empowered female characters and their stories of displacement, loss and at times recovery. The interplay of dream sequences and naturalistic scenes, the mixing of chronologies as they flow out of the characters’ conscience and subconscious realities with no regard for historical time and the juxtaposition of Romanian and American landscapes and actualities create a sense of simultaneity of fractured lives. In her award-winning play *Waxing West*, the experience of immigration of the protagonist, Daniela, a cosmetologist who comes to New York in order to marry an American computer engineer with kinky sexual habits, emerges in truncated clips that move between the before and the after of her American experience and are woven with nightmarish sequences of the former Romanian dictators Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu. They have become vampires “sucking capitalist blood in a socialist, democratic way”.<sup>11</sup> They follow Daniela’s progress and actions everywhere and subject her to cruel tests. There is also a constant rotation of images of America as

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<sup>10</sup> In Jestrovic & Meerzon, *Performance, Exile and America*, 66-7.

<sup>11</sup> All quotes from *Waxing West* are given from the 2007 anthology called *roMANIA after 2000, Five New Romanian Plays* (New York: Martin E Segal, 2007), 180.

*chronotope*<sup>12</sup> – an interplay between exilic imaginaries that collapse time and space in disorderly ways – what it would be like to be there in the American dream with magic plastic cards that can buy everything, and the actual reality of Daniela’s American dream in which she steals bottles of chewable Vitamins C and books from Barnes & Noble, pretends to eat her soon to be husband as a Thanksgiving Turkey and reads self-help books with no visible benefit. A similar sliding out of existence, a slipping in the space of the hyphen, the in-between cultures, countries, languages, cuisines that Veteranyi’s protagonist goes through is also present in Stanescu’s play in the surreal dance between Daniela’s American life, her yearning to go back to Romania and the cruel tortures inflicted upon her by the Elena and Nicolae turned vampires.

Uros, a Bosnian homeless man in New York who is Daniela’s only American friend is a tragic illustration of what Said has called those “immense aggregates of humanity” who “loiter as refugees and displaced persons,” “undocumented people, suddenly lost, without a tellable history”<sup>13</sup>. Uros is obsessed with the story of Enkidu and Gilgamesh, an ancient tale of journeying and exile across the worlds of the living and the dead in search of his beloved friend. We should indeed mind Said’s urging that “we must set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the unaccountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created”<sup>14</sup>. Just as for Veteranyi’s circus nomad protagonist, her only home was in her words and in her voice, for Daniela, her only home and zone of comfort is in the fragile tie with one who is even more of a homeless person than she is and in the eternal story of search for love and meaning on a long lonely journey across real and imaginary landscapes, among the living and the dead. Daniela’s story is her only home. “Here is the story,” she claims loud and clear at the beginning of the play: “The whole

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<sup>12</sup> The concept of chronotope was developed by Bakhtin in his article “Forms of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics.” He defines the chronotope as “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature”. In *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press, 2002), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 201-02.

<sup>14</sup> Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 139.

story. Nothing but the story. My story. Yes. Everything that happened ... [...] Tell the story, the story... My story. My story"<sup>15</sup>. In the abyss of that hyphen between worlds, continents, languages, histories, her personal story singles her out of the large "aggregates" "without a tellable history" and gives her a space, precarious as that may be, in the book of immigrant stories, in the journeys of perpetual return. Beneath the dark humor and carnivalesque reversals, underneath the scrambling of dream sequences with reality and the macabre "Balkan" humor, there is a profound, wrenching sadness that oozes throughout Stanescu's play and that dictates the dislocated form to match a dislocated self. The "eternal return" takes places in the nightmares with Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu as cruel vampires who abuse and mock Daniela, in the dream/nightmare "Good-bye, America (Another end)," in the conversations with her dead father and in the actual desire and attempt to go back to Romania.

The refrain of the return which precedes, in the structure of the play, the initial leaving from Romania with "five suitcases" in the scene "Goodbye Romania (An end)," which in turn precedes the scene of the attempted return with only three suitcases in a scene titled "9/11. Flash Back, Flash Forward," gives the latter part of the play a melancholy sentimentality despite itself, the hopeless circularity of nostalgia: "I'm thinking of going back./Back./To Romania. Back home." Or "I should go back Charlie [...] I do horrible things here, Charlie, I'm a thief"<sup>16</sup>. And then another departure, another good-bye, a new uprooting is layered on the story of an already uprooted individual: "Bye-bye, New York, that's all (violin music goes louder)"<sup>17</sup>. In the scene of the first attempt at return to Romania, Uros the homeless war survivor who wants to go to Iraq to find his soul dies on a bench in the subway after Daniela has used Charlie's credit card to buy plane tickets for herself and him, one to Romania, one to Iraq. Reality is as much a nightmare as are nightmares, and the lines between the two are blurred in the same structural confusion as the reversal of beginning and end. At the conclusion of the play the words "end/beginning" are written on a screen. Nostalgia is a failed

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<sup>15</sup> Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 242.

<sup>16</sup> Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 218.

<sup>17</sup> Saviana Stanescu, *Waxing West ...*, 240.

return, the suffering caused by a desire to return. In Daniela's case the return is a failed return, and the settling in the American Dream is a failed settling. If the initial departure was somewhat hopeful, with five suitcases, the attempted return is shameful and pathetic, with only three suitcases and violin music.



**Fig. 1:** Saviana Stanescu, *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*: Women's Project Production; October 2008; directed by Tea Alagić. Gian Murray Gianino (INS officer, left), Natalia Payne (center), and Shirine Babb (INS officer, right). "Dreamscape," or nightmarish scene, in which Nadia is being tormented with threats of deportation and cruel questioning by INS officers (photograph: Carol Rosegg).

In *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* Nadia, a professional clown from Moldova who earns money by twisting rubber balloons into animals follows the American Dream of working as a clown at McDonalds and moves to New

York where she shares an apartment with the Dominican Lupita. In her chase for jobs, money, happiness, love she ends up being gang raped all while being followed and interrogated by INS officers and being threatened with deportation. The circus and clowning elements, much like in Veteranyi's dramatic poem of the circus family crackle with dark humor and are heavy with layers of sadness, desperation, "nostalgia for the future," yet they become, like for Veteranyi's protagonist, a portable home where Nadia can find solace, refuge, and occasionally money (Figs. 1 & 2 *Aliens*).

The aesthetics of carnival combined with the mixing of naturalistic and dream scenes titled "Dreamscapes" in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* and dream scenes of Elena and Nicolae Ceausescu as vampires in *Waxing West* reflect both the elusive nature of the American Dream and the disjointed nature of the immigrant existence always caught in a dangerous, sad and sometimes funny acrobatics of survival, mastery of fear, the ghosts of a past they often cannot escape and utopian plunges into an uncertain future. "You gotta talk to yourself," the Dominican Lupita advises the Moldovan Nadia: "Stuff like I'm gonna make it. I will ... such and such, whatever you dream to be"<sup>18</sup>. The interactions between the immigrants in this play, balanced between ironic bantering and matter of fact affection or support of one another that alternate with the terrifying interactions with the INS officers who taunt Nadia with the menace of constant deportation in the "Dreamscape" seem to echo the words of the Slovan-American author Louis Adamic, himself an immigrant and passionate advocate of the diversity of America: "The American Dream is a lovely thing but to keep it alive, to keep it from turning into a nightmare, every once in a while we've got to wake up."<sup>19</sup> For the characters in Stanescu's plays the tensions between the nightmare that their own reality is turning into in the chase after the dream and brief moments of waking up create a constant aesthetic vortex of comedy and tragedy, tears and laughter, sadness and hopefulness exacerbated of course in *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* by the very literality of the circus in Nadia's

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<sup>18</sup> In Saviana Stanescu, *The New York Plays* (New York: No Passport Press, 2010), 312.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted by R. Lawrence Samuel, *The American Dream: A Cultural History* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012) 30.



line of work as “professional clown.” Despite the airy happy ending in Stanescu’s *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills*, the last staging direction of the play is that “INS1 and INS2 enter wearing scary-clown masks.” The party is never over in this aesthetic of the open-ended work dealing with themes of exile and rupture just as for the immigrant chasing for the American Dream and torn between “nostalgias for the future” and a constant re-imagining of the past, any beginning is also an end and no end is final, often triggering with it other happy or miserable beginnings/endings.

In my own plays, my heroines move in disjointed leaps through histories, expanses of space and chronologies, and have patchy identities. Generally, the construction of my plays reflects the same disrupted relation between my characters’ selves and the perception of time and space, often with multiple endings or reversals between endings and beginnings not unlike Saviana Stanescu’s plays. For instance, the plot of my play *The Town with Very Nice People*<sup>20</sup> is driven by the heroine Roxana, an immigrant from Romania who has settled in a small Southern Town where she has been the subject of various forms of discrimination and marginalization at the hands of the towns’ people. The tableaux move between scenes of the town and the towns’ people talking about the heroine Roxana in the present, scenes of Roxana in the past and scenes in a utopian future in which she reconstructs the bigoted town into a place of vibrant diversity called the Town of Multicolor. The heroine moves between the dystopian world of the small Southern Town and the utopian universes of real or imagined cities and places across the world driven by the hunger for diverse and multicultural worlds and always searching for a home. In the creation of my play the mangled chronologies and fractured narratives imposed themselves with an imperative and urgent force. It seemed to me the only way in which to deal aesthetically, with the heroine’s broken sense of self and belonging, with her experience of straddling across cultures, cities, geographies and languages and trying to develop some sense of unity out of the chaos caused by

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<sup>20</sup> Chosen as runner up for the Jane Chambers Playwriting Award of the Association of Theater in Higher Education, June 2013, (Manuscript, 2014).

displacement and the alienation of exile. The different endings, some of which consist of the heroine's death after which she comes back to life in the next tableau, illustrate in an almost hyper real manner the idea of starting over as an immigrant again and again and again in search of an ever elusive and never to be grasped American Dream. Breaking the suspension of disbelief by having the characters refer directly to the play and its multiple endings and even begging for an ending arose equally from my own resistance to closure and embracing of multilayered cultural identities which I keep reinventing as I go along the tenuous paths of my own search for a home or rather, for homes.

In my first play *Naturalized Woman*<sup>21</sup>, the protagonist Nina, a Romanian immigrant who is going through a grueling naturalization interview in the immigration offices in Chicago in the eighties, is confronted on stage by her double – an actual character – who embodies her alter-ego. Between the two of them, one carries the memories of home and of the adventure of the escape from Romania while the other is implanted in the unfolding of the naturalizing interview and its urgency. This too is a play which turns the dystopian universes of American immigration offices, practices and policies into an utopian world of equality and openness where refugees are not only welcome but celebrated. Such utopian theatrical worlds demand unconventional non-linear and non-Aristotelian aesthetic. In *Naturalized Woman* I not only proclaim the death of Aristotle in the play's dialogue itself, but my heroines invoke the ghost of Mrs. Aristotle in order to find an ending to the play in a mockery of the classical concepts of *deus-ex-machina*, reversal of fortune, *peripeteia* or even the famous *catharsis*. Seen from the perspective of the female experience, the reality of immigration and naturalization imposes new and irreverent aesthetics which keep unfolding and morphing under our very eyes just as the exile experience imposes a constant recreation of the self, and overlaps genres, chronologies and spaces. This is how the conversation with Mrs. Aristotle about the ending of the play goes:

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<sup>21</sup> Manuscript, 2012. The play *Naturalized Woman* was presented as a staged reading at Nora's Playhouse in New York City in 2010 and as a full production at Thespis Theater off, off Broadway in 2012, directed by Kimberly Jew.

**Nina:** Is this Mrs. Aristotle? I would like to speak to Mrs. Aristotle please.

**Mrs. Aristotle:** You want to speak to *me*?

**Nina:** Yes, I am very sure. Mrs. Aristotle, I am here in the United States of America with a group of friends and we are in this play about a woman who is a refugee from Romania and just got naturalized after all sorts of obstacles and now we want to find a memorable way of ending the play. How should we do it?

**Mrs. Aristotle:** Well my husband would end it in *catharsis* of course, or with a *deus ex machina* device coming after the *peripeteia*, the reversal of fortune of the noble hero. Who is your noble hero?

**Nina:** We have no noble heroes here, Mrs. Aristotle. This is a different kind of play, it's a modern women's play.

**Mrs. Aristotle:** Oh Zeus almighty I've never heard of anything like that. But you know, I've never left my house, ever! Where is this United States? Is it where old Troy was?

**Nina:** No, it's a whole new continent. Why don't you come down here with us to celebrate and then we can talk more about how to end this play.

After Mrs. Aristotle joins them in the present time in America, the play ends with each of the women giving birth to a new self and to a new world, a utopian world in which under the magic wand of Aretha Franklin, who joins the women at the end of the play, the very concept of refugee is being reinvented: "From now on, Refugee is going to be a good word, a word that makes you think of roaming happily across a poppy field in the summer. Refugee will mean free and gutsy, brave enough to start all over. It will be the sequel to the Natural Woman song, and it will go like this: You Make Me Feel like a Refugee Woman."

In *The Town with Very Nice People*, the heroine and her story make constant leaps through space and time, as the play starts in the future, moves back to the past, then to the present and ends in an utopian future. There is not only no unity of time, space and action but these unities are deliberately broken and even mocked as the play has four different endings, each in a different space that range from the French Riviera, where the heroine invents a modern paradise of glamor and joyousness, to an American city where the heroine has fled leaving her small Southern Town and reunites with her woman lover, to the heroine's funeral in the small Southern Town at the end

of which she jumps up and resurrects from her coffin and finally to the utopian recreation of the small Southern Town into the Town of Multicolor where each corner becomes a riveting space of diversity and imagination at work. The play ends not with an ending but with a beginning in which the Tourist Guide who for years had given the historic tour of the town speaking only of its confederate history, now has changed his tune to the description of a postmodern futuristic town to which everyone with a creative mind and open heart can immigrate: “Yes, sure you can immigrate, find asylum, and settle in our town, the immigration process is really easy. All you have to do is choose a corner or make a corner of your own and that gives you a share of the town, a portion of ownership. It’s Marxist capitalism softened with performance art.” Both *Naturalized Woman* and *The Town with Very Nice People* use dark humor and an actual festival atmosphere in which the margins are brought to the center, refugees save the day, immigration is the new cool, quilted identities and life stories are at the forefront and are also literal storefronts in the town’s new urban configuration.

The heroines of my latest play *Exile Is My Home*, Lina and Mina, are intergalactic nomads in search of a place to belong, carrying a portable home on their backs, being their own and each other’s homes and exploring different planets to compare with their native planet Earth. They explode and mock all notion of belonging yet are torn with yearning to be able to do just that. The plot unfolds in a perpetual present and moves across unrecognizable spaces while memories of countries, songs, a particular house, a pond, a tree, haunt and devour them with longing. On one planet they literally devour and eat the landscapes in an attempt to quench their yearning for a home and in a desperate hope that their nomadic existence and the imaginary spaces they create will suffice. Famished for a home and a place to settle one of the heroines in the play cries out: “I’m hungry. I’m hungry for home, I’m hungry for dirt, for earth dirt, birth dirt, native dirt. All this exile stuff is crap. I’m going to eat everything. I’ll eat everybody. I’ll eat you all until I have a home. I’ll be everything then, like a big fat pregnant Goddess of the universe.” My heroines take me to the darkest places of history and illustrate extraordinary capacities of survival and resistance in a violent world too often hostile to women and their power. The play traces the eerie journey of Lina and Mina, two female lovers who cross the galaxies and travel from planet to planet in

search of home, peace, memory, a place to belong, after having survived wars and unimaginable acts of violence. Mina and Lina visit planets devastated by wars that had started from inane reasons, terrifying snow covered lands where bodies and souls are brutally separated and hearts frozen in the moment of yearning for lost homes and families, they recover a lost son, land on a planet where the inhabitants soothe their yearnings for home through role playing and gorging on edible landscapes and finally return to planet America, a dystopian landscape haunted by fascist immigration officers and cannibalistic haters. The heroines, tied to each other for life by a fierce bond of love and friendship, save the day and recover their lost memory as they save the life of their lost son, and rid planet America of its grotesque haters. My heroines are survivors who find meaning after trauma and reinvent a comforting version of home while reinventing themselves on the move. They are travelers whose journeys are heroic as they are obstacle ridden and they initiate new trajectories for the creation of a world based on love, imagination, collaboration and humor.

Inspired by modern wars, the realities of immigration, displacements and traumatic experiences *Exile Is My Home*<sup>22</sup> focuses on the female experience of these political realities, most often initiated and carried out by compulsively patriarchal societies. It dramatizes the passage from modern patriarchal dystopias to imagined female and feminist utopias. The eerie and fantastical style of the play is an attempt at evoking the inconsolable sadness of exile and homelessness all while confirming its enormous potential for adventure, cultural and geographic richness and ultimate freedom:

MINA: I was born in exile. Where were you born?

LINA: I was born on the way to the market.

MINA: Oh, that makes sense then, that's why we get along. Why we sort of get along. In any case, it's better than with the others who were born somewhere precise. Good for us that we were born in the air.

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<sup>22</sup> *Exile Is My Home* and *The Virgins of Seville*, in *Dos Obras Dramaticas de Domnica Radulescu*. Bilingual edition with Spanish Translation by Catalina Iliescu Gheorghiu. (Valencia, Spain: University of Castellon Press, 2017) 201-202). *Exile Is My Home* received Honorable Mention at the Jane Chambers Playwriting Competition in 2014 and was produced for a full run at The Theater for the New City off, off Broadway, in 2016.

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LINA: Nowhere.

MINA: Out there.

LINA: In the air.

MINA: If it wasn't so damn inconvenient to spend one's life on the road I would say living in constant exile is the best home there is.

[...]

LINA: I remember a pond. A blue pond with a red flower in the middle. I was very little and I had a mother and a father. They were not house carrying people like we are and they had a regular house with a foundation in the ground and all. And a small potato garden in the front. My mother had always said I was born by the side of the road. After she gave birth to me she put me in her bag and carried me around for a while until she met my father and he built her a house with a foundation and a potato garden and a blue pond with a red flower in the middle.

MINA: That's a nice story LINA, I never knew that about you and your family. My mother dropped me on the way to the market in another country, as she was going to buy fruit. She crawled in the desert with me in her fruit bag right after she had given birth. She wanted to say I was born in the country of Lugubria, so when she came into the town and went to the authorities to say she was asking for asylum from bad people in her country and produced me out of her bag of fruit from the market together with guava and oranges, and said "I just gave birth to this," everybody was stunned and said I was a country citizen right away. My mother was so happy that she died on the spot<sup>23</sup>.

[...]

MINA: Now I know everything. There was a war.

LINA: There was a war and we barely escaped.

MINA: Like a miracle.

LINA: I wish I had never remembered.

MINA: I wish we were still in the garden.

LINA: It was a happy time. What came after ...

MINA: Don't talk about it, now we need to forget again.

LINA: Start over as they say ...

MINA: Yes, start over ... Who says that?

MINA: Are we already dead LINA?

LINA: I don't know, maybe not. We'll just have to wait and see.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Domnica Radulescu, *Exile Is My Home*, 32, 34.

<sup>24</sup> Domnica Radulescu, *Dos Obras...*, 86.

My play *The Virgins of Seville* treats the immigrant experience of Romanians and other east Europeans to Western Europe, in particular Spain. It also uses the dramatic style of the tragicomic, leaps into the carnivalesque and the use of theater within theater as a game of mirrors and reflections of reflections, a *mise en abîme* which parallels the concentric identities, cultural reverberations and hyphenated existences of migrants and displaced people. Unapologetically here too I primarily take the point of view of female refugees and immigrants, desperate mothers looking for lost sons, migrant workers and sex workers in the margins of society, women of all walks of life searching for a home, questioning and reinventing the notion of home as in the following scene:

VIRGIN OF THE CAVES: Where is home?

VIRGIN OF AFRICA: Good question, where is home? My home is in a willow tree by the Danube River. I'm not from Africa, I just say so because it sounds cool and people turn their heads. I'm just a Polish Gypsy Romanian homeless prostitute.

VIRGIN OF THE CAVES: I bring men to my caves and tell them it's their home. They believe me and they want to stay because it's dark and warm and colorful inside. Now I live in a cave in the barrio of Santa Cruz. I send jeans and leather jackets to my people at home. Home is where the caves are.

VIRGIN OF ANTIGUA: I miss my mother, I miss my daughter, I miss my dog, I miss my apple tree, I miss my stove in Romania. I became the Virgin of Antigua because it sounded cool and exotic. Everybody wants exotic here, exotic sells. If you're not exotic enough, you die.

MARCOS: I am Marcos the American. Everybody wants to go to America, and here I am leaving America to look for roots, sheep, gold, silk, poppy fields, breaking my mother's heart, sleeping with the Virgins, doing bad things and being a good thief.

SUZON: I am truly exotic. I don't mind it when people call me exotic. I am the Jewish sister of Punka, the Romanian Bulgarian Gypsy mafia man that everybody is so scared of. He's not so bad. He's a good brother. Mafia is not so bad after all, once you get to know them.

RAMONA: Home is in a little log cabin in the Appalachian Mountains. Home is in a cave at the bottom of the ocean. Home is in a stone house at the foot of the Carpathians. I go back and forth, back and forth, I'm always on the run, always crossing the Atlantic one way or another.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Domnica Radulescu, *Dos Obras...*, 162.

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I was inspired to write this play on a visit to Sevilla, Spain where I was stunned by the multitude of the kinds of holy Virgins that populated the history of the city and gave it so many of its street names. It seemed I was moving on a stage or a movie set with mothers of the world searching for their children. The district of Triana is until today home to many Roma people, some middle class, others still wearing the traditional dress and living at the margins of poverty. Stanzas from Gypsy flamenco songs are to be found on tiles and mosaics in the Triana neighborhood, black letters on glossy deep yellow and red ceramic tiles, verses of irrepressible desire, of wrenching desperation and reckless abandon. In Sevilla, I found myself at the intersections between the authentic flamenco art and its desired preservation as a multilayered performative art and its many sanitized or utterly exoticized forms for tourists who want a taste of that Spanish soul, an exotic experience without any real desire of understanding the full and meandering history of the genre which is organically connected to the history of the Roma people in Spain and elsewhere in the world, and is equally a history of surviving poverty, oppression, violence.



**Fig. 3:** *Exile Is My Home. A Sci-fi Immigrant Fairy-Tale*, April 28–May 22, 20016, Theater for the New City, New York City. Directed by Andreas Robertz. With: Nikury Rodriguez, Naomi de la Puente, Mario Golden, Vivienne Jurado, A. B. Lugo, Mirandy Rodriguez, David van Leesten. Music by: Alexander Tanson



The Flamenco songs written on colorful mosaics in the street spoke of passionate and tragic loves, of living in the margins of society, of deep yearnings and of the travails of life in exile, of crossroads and water crossings: “ventanas de la muralla/ventanas que dan al mar/por donde yo veo venir/los barcos de la caballa.” Very much like the thousands of today’s refugees washed ashore, crossing perilous seas, reaching the shores of Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, pushed from country to country, from refugee camp to refugee camp, from one hellish state of homelessness to another, to put it in Edward Said’s words “immense aggregates of humanity .... who loiter as refugees and displaced persons without a tellable story”.

What I understood about the complicated and often jumbled puzzles of the theater works I am fascinated with or that I create myself has largely been through the processing of my own journey across margins and chasms across geographies and cultures and through creating art from these existential acrobatics. Feminist theater and performance by immigrant playwrights have the great potential of traveling across such chasms and transforming dystopian worlds where discrimination, injustice, indifference and bad immigration laws are the norm into multicolored utopian universes of diversity and inclusion. Maybe in the absence of stable homes, in the exhausting searches for home, the *story* itself is the only reliable home and form of belonging fluid as it may be. The flamenco poets and artists knew it that wherever they may land or arrive, one thing nobody could take from them is the story, the song that sings and dances the story. Home is in the story. Survival is in the story, as Shaherezade proves it night after sweltering night with her one thousand and one stories unraveled to postpone and, in the end, reverse her own death. Home is in the well-crafted story, survival is in the spinning of the golden thread of the story

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DOMNICA RADULESCU

*People (2013) and Exile Is My Home. A Sci-fi Immigrant Fairy Tale (2014) were finalists in the Jane Chambers Playwriting competition. The latter was produced at the Theater for the New City in New York in 2016, to excellent review.*

*Theatre Is the People Who Make It*  
*The Romanian Theatre-work Experience by an Italian Director*

**ROBERTO BACCI<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** The present paper presents the journey of an Italian director in Romanian theatre, from the first encounter with Romanian great performances abroad, in Festivals, to the work on stage with Romanian actors, and for a Romanian audience, in Cluj-Napoca. The National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca offered the place of this encounter of different energies, ways of living, making and approaching theatre, and the space for an artistic challenge: to work not only in the experimental way the director was used to at the Laboratory in Pontedera, but to find the right path in the more strict system of a Repertory Theatre and for a much larger audience in a shorter laps of time. This journey is not only about theatrical places but also and mainly about people met there, about exchanges, work, challenges, wishes, artistic results in the past and the present and projections in the future.

**Key-words:** Romanian Theatre, National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, Theatre Laboratory, Era di Pontedera.

*Acknowledgments*

*“Theatre is the people who make it”, these are the apparently tautological words belonging to a friend and a theatre master. And yet, in my experience at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, they sound absolutely true. So, I would like to thank a Theatre which, for some years, on three occasions, has been also mine. In Cluj, I have passed through experiences that in 45 years of theatrical work I had never encountered before and all that has happened with attention and lightness. I believe that I gave and that I received something, but above all I learned a lot.*

*We have been, all together, a Theatre.*

*Thank you.*

**R B**

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*Theatre and Show*

In Romania it is difficult to encounter, at least in my experience, a theatre which doesn't move towards the show.

The centralised organization of both national and municipal theatres often imposes a working approach aimed to the exclusive production and consumption of "shows". The attention on the size of the audience (generally even very attentive and prepared) implies a working process that, assumed the quality of excellent directors and actors, tends to produce plays achieving to an immediate "success" offered to an undifferentiated audience. It is a bit like it happens in the production of films, in which the art of cinema with its potential is directed from the industry to the films' market, with its stories frequently told by using narrative stereotypes, names of known actors, etc...

It seems to me that this is the way it happens with respect to the theatre when a decision is taken to produce shows for a general audience, forgetting in this way the potential the word "theatre" encloses. It has even come, certainly not only in Romania, to identify the art of the theatre with the building where the shows take place.

The working time often reduced, the use of spaces most of the time relegated to the relationship between seat/stage, the training of the actors and directors who can't look for other ways towards the "spectator" which are not the traditional ones, even if the tradition is renewed in its forms, all these factors reduce the spectator to a hidden number among the audience.

All of this has as a result a theatre which reproduces, in different ways, and sometimes even with high quality, only itself.

A theatre as a reflection of another theatre.

In my Romanian experience, this is the limit I could ascertain. The same happens in Italy with the official theatre even if this aspect is challenged by many groups and artists who have been able to find their own independent path by creating languages, places, production's models and experiences which make the word "theatre" itself plural, bringing back the audience to be "spectators".

That said, in Romania as well there are important experiences of directors who are looking for other possibilities in the theatre with sometimes

extraordinary shows. To name a few: Mihai Măniuțiu with *Electra* (the play which fascinated me and pulled the trigger on my long Romanian trip), Silviu Purcărete with *Faust*, Andrei Șerban with *Uncle Vania*.

But the theatrical machine and maybe the drama schools too tend to create a quality that is only conveyed to a profession producing “shows” and which doesn’t consider theatre as a territory to dig in search for its richness and potentialities.

This theme would be interesting to explore and, in my view, locations and institutions that could be “anomalous” with respect to the existing ones should be organized. I think that a new audience might be ready to lose himself along new and unexplored paths.

Just as painting and music have transformed themselves to the limits of their traditional definitions, theatre should research and experiment new dynamics inside the relationship between actor/ spectator.

### *Next Stop: Romania*

I have known and worked together with the Polish theatre for many years.

Directors, actors, theatres, Festivals... Masters such as Jerzy Grotowski who lived and worked in Pontedera (where he died in 1999) for 15 years, Tadeusz Kantor, Andrej Wajda, Woitek Krukowski, Jarek Fret, Wodek Staniewskij and many others, they all are a part of my personal history into the theatre.

So it was for Russian artists and men of the theatre like Anatoli Vassiliev, Valery Shadrin (director of the Chekhov Festival), Yuri Kordonski. That is to say how Eastern theatre has always been an artistic reference point to me and a space of great personal friendships.

Then I arrived in Romania. Romania’s door has been opened for me by an old and dear friend who recommended that I see a beautiful “*Electra*” directed by Mihai Măniuțiu. The show was produced by Oradea State Theatre where I saw it for the first time in 2008, then I invited the show in Italy for the “Fabbrica Europa” Festival in Florence, of which I was the theatre director.

The old friend who guided me was Georges Banu, a great Romanian critic and intellectual whom I owe many other encounters with great artists which took place in the subsequent years thanks to his encouragement.

Mihai Măniuțiu directed then the Cluj - Napoca National Theatre and it was under suggestion of an American theatre professor (Robert Cohen), one of Măniuțiu's friends who saw my *Hamlet* in Wroclaw (Poland), that he invited me for the first time in Cluj to stage that play again with Romanian actors. And that is how I set foot on a planet I didn't know and that today has become, at least in my feeling, my second "Theatrical Home".

To stage *Hamlet* again in Cluj has been an experience that obliged me to enrich and transform the show thanks to the actors who didn't want to consider the original Italian one as a starting point but as a challenge to accept and then to win. And they had all the skills to do that.

So the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre became a working place of an unknown nature, because of the warm reception, the professionalism of the actors who over the years have become friends' of mine into the theatre, the spaces (the big stage I had never worked on in Italy), the human atmosphere created: Cluj has represented the perfect door to start learning about Romanian theatre.



**Fig. 1:** *Hamlet*, after William Shakespeare, National Theatre in Cluj, 2012

That's why in the following years I accepted two very difficult challenges such as *Livada de Visini* (*The Cherry Orchard*) and *Don Juan*.

I knew at this point how to guide the actors and the technicians, I had my back covered by Mihai's direction and Ștefana Pop-Curșeu's one, the literary assistant director who was always available for whatever problems we had.

A fundamental detail: my encounter with Maria Rotar (Assistant Director of the Excelsior Theatre of Bucharest), first *Hamlet's* translator, as well as the translator of other Romanian plays I directed, then assistant director and finally my wife.

"*Hamlet*" and "*Livada*" have also been presented in Italy, in Florence, Modena, Pontedera and, in addition to the Romanian community living in Italy, the audience's and the critics' reaction has always been very positive thanks to the actors' high professional quality which can be hardly found in Italian theatre. In particular, what's striking the most in Romanian theatre is the quality of "all" the actors on stage, even the one of those who, that night, are playing an apparently secondary role. Which rarely happens in Italy, for the quality tends to diminish according to the importance of the character the actor is playing.

Even if I came from a different theatrical culture and from being the director of a Center of Experimentation and Research I have created in Pontedera since 1975, the Cluj experience has represented for me a way to look at myself and my work in a completely new and different context.

In a sense, I've seen myself starting over, even though I had a long experience as a director, festival director and a Research Centre director which has become today the Tuscany National Theatre in conjunction with the Pergola Theatre of Florence.

In 2019 there will be the forth work to do, but every time I come back at the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre it's like the first time and I feel I can transform it into a new adventure.

From Cluj to Bucharest, then the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, and many other theatres, even in the small Romanian villages, when the National Theatre's door has been opened to me, that was the beginning of my journey made of many encounters with Romanian artists, a journey still going on today.





**Fig. 2:** Roberto Bacci with Maria Rotar, at the National Theatre in Cluj

### *In Cluj: Into My Garden*

*After Hamlet, Livada de Visini, and after Livada de Visini, Don Juan.*

For me, each theatrical experience is a challenge and the challenge consists of two precise aspects: the first is to look at me in the mirror, the second is to guide the actors along a path we don't know yet.

If I am able with my theatre to look at myself and ask myself new questions, I'm sure I can bring into this research the audience too, even if not necessarily everyone.

Each play is a philosophical and existential subject with which theatre challenges me to observe myself from its craftsmanship. For me a theatre without this necessary condition would be a mere aesthetic exercise with which to capture the spectator's attention.

When I start a new theatrical work the "shipwreck" must always be possible, but for this journey I need not to be alone, so for me the actors are always my necessary companions in adventure.

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In Cluj I found excellent comrades in arms.



**Fig. 4:** *The Cherry Orchard* (*Livada de vișini*), National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, 2014



**Fig. 4:** The main stage of the National Theatre in Cluj during the rehearsals for *The Cherry Orchard*

*Livada* has been a complex experience also because of the short time available.

The working time represents the basis for each artistic production and when the institutions have to shorten the time due to economic reasons, the quality has only one destiny: the fast-moving consumption. To a fast production a superficial thought corresponds, however *Livada de Visini* has disclosed a world opened to this era's concerns that I could question to understand them better.

A disappearing world, the cherry trees to cut down, the new vacationers looming over, the memory of what has been moving and torturing us, imagining who we are not anymore with respect to the future awaiting us, all that asks us a question: "who have we been?". All this and more is enclosed inside a story that has to be brought up to life, to be witnessed even in front of only one spectator. To read each word and each dialogue, each pause, each hidden and mysterious sound like a cracking violin string... how many of us can travel in a similar way, how many of us can do that with trusted companions who show you what you wouldn't see if you were alone... this is for me the theatre I need to create and in Cluj I found people who helped me realize a theatre as a real philosophy.

### *Getting Lost: Finally*

"To go where you don't know, you have to pass through what you haven't experienced". For me, this is the only possible practice. Not in general, but in every detail, in every particular, in every working moments. Not knowing where we are going, waiting for the "thought" and not the single "right idea" to create the conditions to understand which is the experience that has to be realized, what necessity is linked to, and only then understand how to realize it.

Suspending judgement on the form to dig into the substance. "Getting lost" is very difficult.

There was a time in my artistic life in Pontedera, before we turned into a National Theatre, in which getting lost was my rule.

Not knowing where to go to reach the unknown, turning back, starting again, throwing away what was too early found and that seemed working, being aware that what was abandoned through the process would have been in any case something that would have helped you to proceed.

For all this, when I asked Mihai Măniuțiu to work at the “*Nullafacente*” by Michele Santeramo with whom I shared two years’ work only to define the text and its philosophical, economic and political aspect, and when Mihai suggested that I prepare it into the little Cluj theatre’s room, I accepted straight away.

I needed to lose myself together with the actors towards a subject that concerns us all: our functioning as human beings in front of the weakness of our thinking in our choices.

Why do what we call “work” on the one hand and “real life” on the other hand have taken such different paths in our civilization?

Are we maybe heading down the wrong way without being able to turn back?

### *Being an Actor?*

To connect oneself with another one: the character. To criticize it, love it, hate it, dialogue with an unknown entity which hides a part of us, a story we didn’t know we could share and which offers us the possibility of another existence on stage, to confront ourselves with the director’s ideas, to react to the space, to the sounds and to the lights with all ourselves...yes, it’s an extraordinary experience to recreate such a true life that it is even more real than the one we live under the shadow of our ordinary life. Certainly, sometimes all this happens on stage, but there are two major obstacles: the profession’s routine and the performances’ repetition.

This happens wherever there is a stage to go on, a costume to wear, a text to play...

The challenge of truth fights against an institutional theatre (of any Western country), which each night needs the “performance” of a good professional. The first time, to repeat helps to deepen, but then it turns into

something which loses life, the energy of the “first time” slowly dies down without the actor even being aware of it. The technique, the drama academy, the early enthusiasm, the energy coming from the audience can help...then the lie begins and the form becomes a shelter.



**Fig. 5:** Cristian Grosu as Hamlet with Miron Maxim and Cătălin Codreanu

This journey inside the profession and the routine has been the major issue the great Western theatre masters tried to report and solve but, unfortunately, the official or commercial (in Italy) theatre organization has been the enemy imposing its own rules.

In Romania I often discussed about these questions with very good actors and their difficulties to try to find a solution were quite clear.

If an actor can deal with fiction until transforming it into an occasion of a major self – awareness, can his professional routine arrive to betray also the spectator who is looking for a moment of authenticity into the theatre?



**Fig. 6:** Cătălin Codreanu with  
Cătălin Herlo as Claudius in  
*Hamlet*



**Fig. 7:** Cătălin Herlo as Sganarelle in  
*Don Juan*, 2016

Is there, using Grotowski's words, "a prostitution of the actor"?

And can the spectator be a prostitute of a theatre, too? Can a spectator "be a prostitute" of a theatre which replies, in different forms, basically itself, and can he accept attending it without even asking himself questions and without searching for a real transformative experience?

Those who look for a new quality of relationship into the theatre, even as spectators, end up choosing titles which leave them unharmed in front of a real confrontation with themselves. And yet, there are experiences which expand the word theatre and restrict the general definition of "audience" with the one of "spectator". Experiences which, as it happens with the scientific research, amplify the fields of investigation by experimenting new ways for those who seek "another" theatre which is not only about the next show.

I don't know to what extent this problem is being discussed in Romania, but certainly, given the quality of the actors and their need to get rid of the professional automatic tasks in order to make use of what theatre

and their profession offer them more freely and consciously, I think that spaces and times to search for other sources and definitions of theatre itself should be needed.

The theatre as a form of live “show” can be a possibility (for how much longer?), but if this is the only one, then it is doomed to see its roots dry. This is a common problem for the official Western theatre which, even though the great culture and beauty it has produced, risks keeping itself into a self-referential museum.

### *The Laboratory*

The Romanian theatrical system is certainly one of the most prestigious and efficient in Europe. As far as locations, organization, fundings, and artistic qualities are concerned, few other countries can present the same result. The audience number can confirm that too.

However, precisely for this “strength”, “tradition” and “experience”, I think it needs to develop antibodies to survive and fight against the spirit of the times and the culture these “times” produce. Is the theatrical machine we know enough to reflect on and question the man of today?

Can it evolve and open up to new generations?

Are there some other theatrical art’s potentialities which haven’t been explored yet?

Is it possible to create locations where this research can develop with the collaboration of men of the theatre and of other disciplines’ too?

Time passes and, without us realizing it, the theatre is more and more closed, surrounded by needs it can’t answer to, distracted as it is by the “numbers” which make it survive in a routine show after show.

Without destroying all the beauty that has been created, we need to rethink a theatrical culture, its transmission (the drama academies), and how to “betray” it in order to make it grow outside what is repeated of itself. It is a great question which needs the collaboration of many people in order to initiate a change before it is too late and theatre becomes just its own reflection. For this new and necessary perspective the great theatre masters have coined a word and built a space: the “Laboratory”.



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**Fig. 8:** Matei Rotaru and Petre Băcioiu as Don Juan and his father, and the spirits of the commander's house (Diana Buluga, Paula Rotar, Alexandra Tarce)



**Fig. 9:** Matei Rotaru and Sânziana Tarța as Don Juan and Dona Elvira.

If we think about Western theatre history, the Laboratory (borrowed from the scientific research or the craftsman's work) has been the thinking and action tool that has opened new ways to the actor's, the director's and, why not, the spectator's work.

The Laboratory is a place of freedom from the automatic theatrical life producing shows.

In the Laboratory the actor's role can be questioned since the training, the director can imagine different times, spaces and new types of relationship between actor-spectator; the spectator can encounter theatre with a different definition and all the theatrical system can be helped to



rethink itself, dealing with the other media the cultural and commercial system impose with new tools and possibilities. The concept of a human being encountering another human being becomes the means and the goal of a new research.

The Laboratory is a place of free work.

It's Stanislavski, who during the last phase of his life worked from home with his young students on the physical actions' method; it's Grotowski who, starting from his Laboratory Theatre, took the way of the "Paratheatre", with the "Theatre of Sources", until arriving at the "Art as a Vehicle"; it's Peter Brook, who left Europe to go find in Africa the origin of the art of storytelling; it's Eugenio Barba, who travelled in search of the Theatre and Theatre Anthropology developed by the I.S.T.A. (International School of Theatre Anthropology) it's Anatoli Vasiliev and his research on theatre pedagogy.

These are only a few examples to show how the idea and the practice of the Laboratory has been and can still be today an essential nourishment to "move" the theatre from its defined tracks established once for all by the institutions. In my experience I could personally verify how these anomalous experiences can be realized if we pursue the idea of the Laboratory, that is to say by creating the conditions for new possibilities.

I will show only three examples I can't properly describe here, but of which there is documented evidence: *the first* as a Director of an International Festival, Santarcangelo Theatre Festival 1978- (the Town inside the Theatre).

For one week, groups coming from different countries (Italy, India, Poland, Cuba, Venezuela, the Netherlands, Indonesia) worked together, changing every day the space and the perception of this Romagna's little village starting from prefixed "themes": Fire, Music, Vertical Theatre, Mask and Food, Fair, Theatre all of a Sudden, Political Theatre.

Thousands of spectators came to Santarcangelo to attend and participate to a real street theatre's Laboratory which has entered into theatre's history books. Working tools never used before, unpredictable locations and hours in which theatre appeared into town changing its perception (the music waking up the town at 7.00 a.m.)

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Is it a Festival? Yes, it is. But conceived as a Laboratory, that is to say as if it were “the first”. Not a list of shows, but a unique one in which the artists create and realize something all together.



**Fig. 10:** Roberto Bacci with Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba

*The second* example: the Trilogy: Trip inside the spectator’s mind. A three-year work documented in a book and in a film produced by RAI. Three “pieces” created over the three years are presented on a single day for three days in a row.

The first work: Over There it blows (Trip around the world) from Melville’s *Moby Dick*.

The second work: Era (Trip within the two cities, the visible and the invisible one).

The third work: In the Flesh (Trip inside the dreaming mind), based on the actors’ dreams.

These three works, gathered in the Trilogy, have been experienced by five spectators at a time. Each of the works moved in between outdoor spaces (the town or the theatre's backyard) and the enclosed space of the Manzoni Theatre (our old headquarters composed of large rooms without a stage). The timetable: two works scheduled in the afternoon, when the city is alive and the other one during the night, when no one goes to the Theatre. The actors: some actors, some others who collaborated with Grotowski for the Theatre of Sources. The work, too much complex to be described here, has been defined as the "dramaturgy of the experience". Evidence can be found inside Theatre's History books.

Georges Banu has been one very special spectator of the Trilogy, realized in the early '90s.

The third example of my Laboratory's experience is still active after four years. It is entitled "Dreaming in Theatre". Even of this experience there are many written reports belonging to the spectators who took part of it. Duration: 12 hours, from 8.30 p.m. until 8.30 a.m. next morning. Participants: maximum 12 spectators. Location: moving in between the spaces of the Era Theatre or the Pergola Theatre of Florence. A fundamental rule: it is forbidden to talk. Subtitle: "How to escape for one night from ordinary life's prison".

A guide leads the 12 spectators through different experiences:

1. seeing a performance,
2. changing ordinary clothes with pyjamas,
3. simple and guided relaxing exercises
4. an infusion
5. proposal of a guided meditation about the subject of the self
6. ablutions
7. going to bed on 12 beds prepared on stage
8. an offstage actress reading a Michele Santeramo's text about sleeping
9. music to accompany the sleeping time (by Ares Tavolazzi)
10. wake up at 7 o'clock
11. ablutions
12. simple and guided awakening exercises
13. back to ordinary clothes

14. excellent breakfast in common, accompanied by a Michele Santeramo's reading about dreaming.

15. leaving the theatre and coming back to the use of words.

Here in these three abovementioned examples lies the idea of the Laboratory, in other words Western theatre's own attempt to make the very roots of theatre moving to search for new nourishment.

### *In Conclusion*

After these brief observations which might need further reflection and, why not, a dialogue with those who know better than me the deep reality of Romanian theatre, I will briefly return to the principal subject, in conclusion.

Today's theatre, at least in Western countries and in Romania in particular, is a complex system made of different professions; of an economy essentially supported by public institutions; of so mostly defined "Italian-style theatre" buildings (with very limited exceptions). This big machine which implies and employs thousands of people is very difficult to transform just because of its size. If we think that thanks to the enactment of one or more state laws a great change or a transformation of the "system" can occur, I think we will be disappointed. Indeed, the first thing any long-term surviving system does, is preserve itself, and politics has all its own interests to consider theatre as a "public service" to be delivered (in the same way as water or lighting) to the largest audience possible without intervening to create at least the conditions for an alternative theatre. To accept this system with its automatism doesn't certainly give a future to the art of the theatre, that is to say to all the surprising, vital and necessary aspects that can happen between the actor and the spectator. It must be admitted however that nowadays this "system" has also produced beautiful pieces of work even full of questions.

The question still remains: what has to be done?

Shall we wait for the spectators to migrate to forms and tools of communication that the Western cultural system is offering us, or shall we seek and experiment through the theatre alternative modalities to "make the

audience work” and, with it, the actor? We must ensure that a new challenge grows from the very roots of the word theatre. What I see and feel in Romania is that I am in front of this challenge thinking about the theatre of the future instead of the future of the theatre.

But this is not just about Romania.

*ROBERTO BACCI is the Artistic Director of the CSRT Theatre of Tuscany and founder of Fondazione Pontedera Teatro, from Italy. Together with Carla Pollastrelli he invited Jerzy Grotowski in Pontedera, in order to create an Institute, where to develop a permanent research activity. In 1986, Grotowski moved in Pontedera and he established, in the same year, The Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski.*

*Roberto Bacci took part in various theatre projects, along with Peter Brook, Anatoli Vasiliev, Raul Ruiz, Sanjukta Panigrahi, Julian Beck and Judith Malina. Between the years 1978 and 1987 he was the Artistic Director of The International Theatre Festival of Santarcangelo di Romagna, and from the year 1990 until 1998 he has been leading The International Festival Volterra Teatro and Passaggio in Pontedera (the last known as Generazioni starting with the year 2000). From 2002 to 2015, he has been the artistic director of the theatrical section of the international festival Fabbrica Europa in Florence.*

*He directed over thirty performances in Italy and three performances on the main stage at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca.*

# **INTERVIEWS**



## *A Dialogue about Romanian Theatre and Directing from an International Perspective*

**DANA RUFOLLO and ANCA MĂNIUȚIU<sup>1</sup>**



**Dana Rufolo** is the executive director of the Theatre Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl), Luxembourg. She is the editor in chief of the well-known theatre magazine *Plays International & Europe* since January 2016; it is owned by TRIE and operates out of Constance, Germany.

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<sup>1</sup> This public dialogue took place on October the 11th 2018 within the 8th edition of the International Meetings in Cluj, organized by the National Theatre in Cluj; Transcription by Dana Maxim and Dana Rufolo.



She graduated from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) with a B.A. in English and American Literature. Her Masters (on Adolphe Appia) and Doctorate (on Edward Albee) are from the University of Wisconsin at Madison; she also specialized in Art Therapy and in Drama Therapy. She ran a professional practice as an art therapist in Luxembourg in English and French for several years. In that context, she presented and published on several lectures and workshops, including a drama workshop in Georgia for Azerbaijani, Georgians, and Albanians involved in peace and reconciliation that incorporated concepts of psychodrama in it, and gave training in her methodology at the Austrian Study Centre for Peace and Conflict Resolution in Stadtschlaining, Austria. Her most notable publication to date in the field of Art Therapy advances her theory of Aesthetic Empathy (“Aesthetic Empathy and Salutogenesis through Beauty” in *Gestalten-Gesunden, Zur Salutogenese in den Künstlerischen Therapien*, ed. Heinfried Duncker & Ruth Hampe & Monika Wigger (Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2018)

Her credits as author include the two-act play *Hurt, Dignified*, produced in a professional context for the European Capital of Culture 2007 in Luxembourg and numerous street theatre events that she wrote and directed for Amnesty International Luxembourg and African Women’s Association under the production wing of TRIE called *TRIE Justice* (try justice). She also authored essays poems and short stories.

**Anca Măniuțiu** PhD is professor at the Theatre Department of the Faculty of Theatre and Film at Babes-Bolyai University Cluj. Her main research field as well as her teaching activity focus on the innovative theatre theories and stage practices of the XXth century European directors, on the contemporary tendencies that emerge in nowadays performative practices and on the mutual influences between theatre and cinema, since the beginning of cinematography. She published 14 volumes of translations from French, English and Spanish authors, numerous critical essays and four volumes dedicated to the Belgian playwright Michel de Ghelderode, a complex comparative research implying Bakhtin’s categories of the carnivalesque, Artaud’s „Theatre of Cruelty”, Meyerhold’s „scenic grotesque” and „Theatrical Theatre”, as well as the plays and manifestoes of the Futurist and Dadaist artists.

In 2006, Anca Măniuțiu was invited as a visiting professor at the Institut d’Etudes Théâtrales, Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle (France), and in 2008 she was granted a Senior Fulbright post-doctoral fellowship for lecturing and research at the University of South Carolina, Columbia (USA). In 2016, she received Lifetime Achievement Award from UNITER.

**Anca Măniuțiu:** Welcome, Dana, I'm glad to be here with you. I'd like to tell to our audience some words about you and your activity in the field of theatre. Presently, Dana Rufolo is the executive director of the Theatre Research Institute of Europe (TRIE, asbl), based in Luxembourg. She is the editor in chief of the well-known theatre magazine *Plays International & Europe* since January 2016; it is owned by TRIE and operates out of Constance, Germany. Dana was born in New York, grew up in southern California, and is living now in Germany at Konstanz. She graduated from the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) with a B.A. in English and American Literature. Her Masters (on Adolphe Appia) and Doctorate (on Edward Albee) are from the University of Wisconsin at Madison; Dana also specialized in Art Therapy and in Drama Therapy so I think it would be very interesting to put her questions about this specialty which is not very common with us. She ran a professional practice as an art therapist in Luxembourg in English and French for several years. Her most notable publication to date in the field of Art Therapy advances her theory of Aesthetic Empathy. The article is entitled "Aesthetic Empathy and Salutogenesis through Beauty" (in *Gestalten-Gesunden, Zur Salutogenese in den Künstlerischen Therapien*, ed. Heinfried Duncker & Ruth Hampe & Monika Wigger, Munich: Verlag Karl Alber, 2018). Her credits as author include the two-act play *Hurt, Dignified*, produced in a professional context for the European Capital of Culture 2007 in Luxembourg and numerous street theatre events that she wrote and directed for Amnesty International Luxembourg and African Women's Association under the production wing of TRIE called *TRIE Justice* (try justice). She also authored essays poems and short stories. I've just realized that for those who want to learn more about Dana's biography, there are leaflets available at our staff. Now I'd like to tell you how Dana and I we got in touch.

It was thanks to Robert Cohen, who is professor of drama at University of California at Irvine and also Professor Honoris Causa of Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj. Many of you know him, he is a very good friend of our Faculty, the Faculty of Theatre and Film. It happened that I read a couple of years ago some articles written by Robert Cohen about the Romanian theatre. He came to Romania for the first time in 2006 and – I'm not afraid to

use a very powerful word – he was amazed and thrilled by what he saw on Romanian stages. He came back and during almost 6 years he saw performances at the International Theatre Festival in Sibiu, at the National Theatre Festival in Bucharest and wrote reviews for the magazine *Plays International*. I gathered his reviews in a book, because it seemed important to me to have an outside look at what theatre practice is in Romania. I asked Robert the permission to entitle the book *A Director's Theatre. The Romanian Theatre from an American Perspective*, because this was one of the main issue Robert was tackling in his book. He noticed the fact that in Romania the director's vision was very important, both for the audience and the theatre practitioners. This practice has generated a special kind of theater "a director's theatre", that is quite far of what he was used to see in the US. Cohen writes in one point that in the States when he goes to see a play, he never knows and he never asks who has directed it; he asks about the playwright, about the actors, but he learns from the booklet who the director was, just a few minutes before the play begins. This is a great cultural difference between theater in USA and Romania.

*Dana, what was the idea when starting publishing this theatre magazine, Plays International & Europe, where many Cohen's reviews about the Romanian theatre where published by you?*

**Dana Rufolo:** It's a pleasure to be here, Anca. First, I should say that the magazine exists since 1985 and I was the theatre critic covering Luxemburg, Paris and Vienna, starting with 2003. But Peter Roberts, the founding editor of the magazine, had his own vision. Robert Cohen wrote for the magazine when it was under Peter's control, and it was called "Plays International" – that's the confusion. When I took it over in 2006, I was able to keep the same ISSN number, so it's the same magazine, but I added *and Europe*, because, even if I am born in America, I represent Luxemburg to you, I don't represent America to you. I was over 30 years living in Europe, so longer than I spend in the States. I understood that there is a difference between European theater and American theater. So when Robert Cohen wrote for the original founding editor, who asked me to take over the magazine when he reached the ripe age of 82 and was told by his doctor "It's either the magazine or your life." I could

take it over because I have the Theater Research Institute of Europe, which has the statutory right to purchase a magazine. I was more than happy, I've been waiting to take it over and to twist it in the new direction of *What is European theater*. And the project I am working on right now for universities and events like, possibly, the Biennale, is in fact what I call *The New European Critic*. What I have noticed is that Robert was looking, as you say, from a very American perspective. And in fact, Romanian theater, for the two days I've been watching every single play here, falls into the so-called *Regietheater* tradition – to use a German term. You call it a director's theatre, but the term for that is the German word *Regietheater*. *Director's theatre*: it isn't an official term, but we will use it today. Robert comes from a tradition, as did I, since my studies were done in America, of valuing the playwright and valuing the words of the play; they are for us something sacrosanct – by us meaning in this case the Americans. And the European *Regietheater* can go to great extremes in allowing the director complete control over everything about the play: the era in which it was written, the national identity which it tried to capture and the language. And *Regietheater* has gone so far in some of the main European capitals, and I include Switzerland in that, as to totally disrespect all those aspects. Actually what Robert Cohen was praising, something I've noticed myself, is that you are a director's theater, but it is not the director's theater which is so extreme that it disrespects the text.

**A.M.:** Yes, it is a long debate about the relation between the dramatic text and the way the director is approaching it. It is one of the main issues of modern theatre practice, that emerged once modern directing was born. The debate is over 100 years old in Europe. Let's remember the great Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold. He was accused of disrespect of the classics, while staging his masterpiece *Inspector General* by Gogol, but his directorial vision was actually revolutionary. We know today that the text, be it literary or dramatic, does not have a unique, absolute meaning, it has several meanings, depending on a variety of social, historical, cultural factors and contexts. Umberto Eco speaks about the *opera aperta*, about the fact that each work of art might engender a different understanding and interpretation, according to the historical moment when it is judged, the subjectivity or the cultural background of the person who is judging. The 20th century was named the century of directing, and the director was seen either as a dictator

or as a magician. Starting with modern directing, theatre became in fact the realm where the director is reigning, of course if his artistic approach is legitimized by a vision which is authentic and creative. Even if the vision might seem disrespectful regarding a certain text, if it brings a new perspective of understanding, some new meanings, this means that it is capable to enrich a canonic work of art. But this is another discussion.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, since the emergence of the historical avant-gardes, with their disrespect concerning the established values in art and culture, I don't think we can speak anymore of a total respect regarding the text of a play. The problem is that we should not fall into arbitrariness, into gratuitousness. I mean the big question is *how the director uses the extreme freedom* he has gained during the 20th century. Robert Cohen, in the beginning of his speech at the Professor Honoris Causa ceremony – that I have included in the present volume – is quoting Randy Gener, who wrote in a cover story for *American Theater*, America's major magazine on the country's professional theatre: "In the field of directing it is not Romania, but America that needs to catch up." 'Mr. Gener, says Robert, knows what he is talking about, he is the magazine's senior editor. And shortly after this essay appeared, the equally distinguished American theater journal, *Theater*, published by the Yale Drama School, devoted an entire issue to Romanian theater.' Robert's opinion about the concept of *Regietheater* doesn't seem to demonize it, it's a good concept.

**D.R.:** Yes, of course and I have several things to say about that. First of all we are talking about somebody else. So Robert came into the tradition of *Regietheater* via Munich for 2 days and then he came to Romania. We are talking about somebody else; we are talking about 2009, we are talking about someone who came from the tradition of American realism, and the lower budget American theatre productions, because there is no national support for the theatre, something that Europeans are used to. So he came from a different tradition and he was very pleasantly surprised, and he said basically "Romania is better, they do it better".

What we will talk about today is how you Romanians fit in with *Regietheater* and I will be using my own eyes, I cannot speak for others. Of course, Robert introduced us because he loves your theater, and for good reason. What he didn't know is that *Regietheater* has been progressing on the

continent in the western part of Europe and we'll have to distinguish between say Meyerhold or Stanislavsky or any of those methods – those are methods of production which are applied onto a text: you have physical theatre interpretations, you have psychological interpretations. So you are getting an overlay of the director interpretation or vision of the play which can be legitimized.

Now, in a recent issue of *Plays international and Europe*, we are talking about 2017-2018, a very interesting debate happened about a young director born in Basel, but Australian, working in Switzerland and all over Europe – Simon Stone who did what was called *Ibsen Huis*, a Dutch title, that was done for Ivo van Hove's Toneelgroepamsterdam in 2017. It means *Ibsen House* and then he did *Hotel Strindberg* in 2018, in Basel and elsewhere in Europe. And he went too far, in the eyes of one of the magazine's critics, one of my favorite critics, she said he goes too far. And which since our focus here is on the Romanian Theater, you don't do, and which Robert Cohen never felt you did. He was amazed by your set designs, the attempt to elaborate minor scenes and to reflect the meaning of the play even in small scenes in the design environment. Costume design, like what we saw yesterday in *Master Manole*<sup>2</sup>, Lucian Broscăţean's costumes yesterday support the philosophy of the play and not really the philosophy of the director.

The critic for our magazine I am talking about, Natalia Isaeva in Paris, I asked her to see Simon Stone's version at Théâtre de l'Odéon of Chekhov's *Three Sisters*, because he has done his usual technique of using famous playwright names and improvising with his actors and putting them in a house on stage, which in all his productions has transparent plexiglass all over it and it revolves, so the audience gets to see *Three Sisters* in an extremely modern setting. Natalia is Russian, she was in fact the dramaturg for Anatoly Vassiliev who directed *La Musica Deuxième* by Marguerite Duras at the Comédie Française in 2016, and is living in Paris. And she understands the original Russian and I know that she knew every word from the original

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<sup>2</sup> Dana Rofolo is referring to the play *Meşterul Manole (Master Manole)* by Lucian Blaga, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Scenario after Lucian Blaga: Andrei Măjeri. Director: Andrei Măjeri. Set and video designer: Mihai Păcurar. Costume designer: Lucian Broscăţean.

play, and she wrote a scathing condemnation of Simon Stone because not a single line of the play was in the original words of Chekhov.

So we are not talking about a new view of the play by using a physical theatre interpretation or a psychological theatre interpretation, we are talking about invading the space of the dramatist, the author. And that's something you haven't done in your theatre work. I asked you about that in a private conversation because I was a bit concerned about the Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*. Robert Cohen said that if the Romanian production of that play had been seen by the Beckett estate it would have been closed because Beckett does not allow radical transformations of even the scenography of his plays. The tree was growing above and into the sky, and that's something that wouldn't be allowed. Even if it enriches the scenography. I do actually understand that there is a *Modelbuch*<sup>3</sup> idea, a rigid playwright's theatre approach. It is a sort of fixed three dimensional vision, auditory visual and linguistic which the playwright has embraced, and is trying to force it, as if the play is a film. You can argue that that's not right. And the Romanian's *Purcărete* interpretation was very valid and disrespected this three dimensional *Modelbuch* version of *Waiting for Godot*, in order to extract something new and relevant out of it.

And then of course what was very interesting, is the same *Three Sisters* was produced in Germany, in Berlin, by Simon Stone, and our Berlin theatre critic Hans-Jürgen Bartsch who is a Berliner from birth and is no longer young and is extremely knowledgeable about Berlin theatre, he loved the *Three Sisters*. So I had Natalia, and her review saying it was a McDonald's version of Chekhov, an Ikea/McDonald version. And I had Hans-Jürgen from Berlin saying it was a wonderful performance capturing the true spirit of the play. And I want you to remember, said Hans-Jürgen, that furthermore Simon Stone is not to be accused of any misconduct because Stone had said it was a "nach Chekhov", a take-off or following of Chekhov and declared that it wasn't authentic Chekhov and that excused him from the fact that he didn't use any original words. Now what's the difference here? We see what

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<sup>3</sup> *Modelbuch* is a German term proposed by Bertold Brecht meaning Modelbook. Brecht documented some of his productions to help theatre-makers understand how they were made and what they were trying to achieve. Brecht was trying to spread his way of making theatre, but not dictating how it was to be done, as some have accused him to do. (Note Anca Măniuțiu)

the difference is: in one play we have a native speaker, somebody who grew up loving Chekhov, the way you grew up loving Blaga, who feels it was a sacrilege because not a single word of the author was present in the play. Improvisation around the themes of the play had been used, and mainly that's what was there. We have a non-Russian speaker saying it was fantastic because all he has ever seen was adaptations, translations. What a non-speaker will do is they will draw out the essence, the mood of the play, depression, joy, fear, future looking, expression, whatever. They will draw on that and they are not worried about the language. So *Regietheater* becomes even more complicated, when we are talking about the incredible intra-cultural, inter-European cultural aspects of it.

**A.M.:** I agree. We have here with us a guest from Italy, director Roberto Bacci, who staged *Waiting for Godot* with women, and he was sued by the Beckett estate, there was a trial because of this. But he was declared winner. The judges decided that it was not a sacrilege. *But now let's come back to the theatre you saw in Cluj. How many shows have you seen?*

**D.R.:** Every single one so far. I haven't made the talks in the mornings, but I've made every play. And I have very strong feelings. I am here because I represent the European vision. I understand the American one, I come from that tradition, but I represent the European vision. I felt every single play fantastically, I especially enjoyed the Reactor play. I had more trouble understanding the *Portraits of Decadents* in *Gallants of the Old Court*<sup>4</sup> because this has something to do with your culture. Again, we are talking about how do we make theater move outside its country of origin.

Now, I am not a Romanian, I have really no antecedent with Romanian culture, you are asking me how I feel. Remember I am speaking from the European perspective. I could say if I were Romanian, "Look, for me all the plays were fantastic", and it would be true. But you don't want me to say

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<sup>4</sup> The play Dana Rufolo is referring to is *Craii de Curtea-Veche* (*The Gallants of the Old Court*) by Mateiu Caragiale, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Adaptation of the novel and dramatic script: Răzvan Mureșan. Director: Răzvan Mureșan. Set designer: Andreea Săndulescu. Costume designer: Ilona Lőrincz.



that. You want me to look from the outside and... You are basically asking me, Anca, how well do this plays export? I thought about this. In every single play, I felt what I call *contagious fear*, an undermining and unexamined contagious fear. Which is so real that both the actors and the director, they are not challenging it. You know consciousness, human consciousness, our own consciousness – which is why psychotherapy is such an exciting trip to take if you have a very good psychotherapist, whether or not you have any supposed issues or conform to any issue conformed to any conventional ideas about being normal or abnormal – consciousness enlarges and what we are not conscious about is our unconsciousness. So I felt this fear, and it started in the performance *M.I.S.A. Părut*<sup>5</sup>. I loved *M.I.S.A. Părut* it was very, very close to us, the staging was simple, the costumes were simple, but it was on top of us. It was a small space, and the reality of Anna's misery was both private reality and a collective reality. I understood she was speaking about groups. But what I immediately noticed as a non-Romanian was that her mother – or the authority figure, which I must say I noticed over and over again seems to be the mother – had not (that's my impression) had not ever dialogued with her own daughter. And my impression in the M.I.S.A.'s play – *M.I.S.A. Understanding* – is that the daughter wasn't even in an Ashram where there was a problem. I had the impression that there were many Ashrams where there were no problems. But the mother has received an infection of fear through the television, and she had gone off in her own little hysterical and insane thought direction, and gone back into really ancient values like whether or not her daughter was a virgin, which by the way the daughter was never asked about. She was examined but she was never asked. The daughter was never asked, "Are you a part of the people who are working with this particular individual?" It was a growing fear of everything, to the point of the mother declaring that her daughter was insane – which none of her words or actions or any of the actors' words or actions ever portrayed – that allowed me to see that here is somehow a lingering collective fear living in Romania, which makes it the most different from going to see a play in Germany, or going to see a play in England especially.

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<sup>5</sup> Play by Alexa Băcanu, staged at Reactor de Creație și Experiment, Cluj. Director: Dragoș Alexandru Mușoiu. Set designer: Anda Pop.

*A.M.: But how different this fear is if we speak about the two other performances you have seen here?*



**D.R.:** I found that what I call contagious fear repeated in milder versions again and again but that's not the end of the story because that would be only the negative kind of thing. I understood that Romanian Theatre right now is in the process of healing itself. It's showing the healing process for something I can't understand. I know fear too. It's not that people in the west don't live lives where they are never afraid; after all where does the #metoo come from? We all have known fear, but this was, I felt somehow, a very Romanian response. And then I thought about the word oppressed. Because what I felt is that this fear came to level the playing field, so we don't say, "Oh, this terrible mother and this victimized Anna, daughter". To level the playing field you have to say what's happening to both – to all of them in this play. And what was happening to all of them was a miasma of oppression that didn't have a clear source. So oppression was hanging down on all of the characters all of the time. Anna's oppressor had a face – it was her mother, but the oppression that was on the mother was also oppression. So it was a hierarchy.

And then having seen the other plays I have come to some conclusions, should I tell you? I am not criticizing here, all is very real here, you have absolute brilliant actors, and the intensity of yesterday's performance (*Master Manole*) was aching, achingly intense. I am sure I wasn't the only one in the audience that wanted a different ending. I don't know the myth. I thought she (Mira) was going to break out of the wall, I wanted nothing more than for her to break out of the wall and be free again. And alive. And of course it wasn't to be that way. I want to clearly distinguish between the effect of the play and this level of oppression. And then I thought about how was oppression being dealt with? Let's go to Bertolt Brecht and his *Verfremdungseffekt*. Germany has had to deal with the consequences of oppression more perhaps clearly than any other nation and they have been perhaps the best treated as a result of having had the most extreme situation, life being very unfair. And what he does is to separate the different units, the forms of oppression, and this keeps us protected as viewers. We are able to analyze where the sources of oppression are coming from.

Well, let's talk about Augusto Boal who came from the Favelas himself, in Brazil, and dealt with oppression by saying. 'Ok, let's let the people, let's let the non-actors act, let's let the anonymous of Brazil talk back to the dominating, to people who are oppressing, repressing and dominating, and show their reality', so we get more into the form of Street Theatre. And I found that Romania has a third way, and I saw it in *The Clowns*<sup>6</sup>. If you want my opinion the most easily exportable play that I've seen in the last two days is in fact *The Clowns*. In fact that author lives in France now, so it's a little bit like I am talking about Eugène Ionesco who has become a world figure. But why? What I am saying here? What is happening is that at the end of *The Clowns* you have a fusion between the three clowns who entered despite that opening scene... in fact I would like to ask the director, I mean the author: did you write the opening scene as frightening as it was staged?

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<sup>6</sup> Dana Rufolo is referring to *Angajare de clovn (Old Clown wanted)* by Matei Vișniec, staged in 2018 at the National Theatre in Cluj. Director and designer: Sorin Misirianțu.

**The Author (Matei Vişniec):** Unfortunately, I came yesterday evening, and I didn't see the play. It was the last play I wrote while I was still living in Romania. I wrote it in '86 and I left Romania in '87. I moved to Paris because I couldn't work in Romania any more.

**D.R.:** I see. Well, you have your own Romanian Jacob Levy Moreno, who moved to Vienna and started working there in around 1921, and who developed Psychodrama. And it seems to me that that's the third way that Romania is reaching for, and that *The Clowns* a bit embodies that. What does your Jacob Moreno say when he does Psychodrama? He used it in the context of psychiatric patients where he worked, places like St Elizabeths Hospital in Washington DC. But towards the end of his life he applied it to healthy individuals, and people like me who have studied psychodrama go further in applying it as art therapists to developing the potential of healthy individuals. What Moreno said is that the most horrible thing in the world is to be alone. And in fact D.W. Winnicott as well, a psychologist-philosopher; he said we are never alone. A child is born with a mother; a mother and child is the first couple. We are never alone.

And *The Clowns* is the most beautiful play of the ones I've seen, despite the intensity of the others, because in the end we have three clowns. And they have come to identify with each other, they are not alone. The first one enters into an extremely *anxiogène*, anxiety-provoking, environment, so anxiety-provoking that when I saw it he (the first clown) started coughing – because I think that's in the script, because he says there is smoke in the room, but people in the audience started coughing too. And I am very allergic, and I always cough, and I didn't cough which means that there was nothing wrong with that smoke, it was just a psychological – again – contagion of fear that happened in the very beginning. And the amazing progress that that play made, your play, an honest to god Romanian play, not French in any way, went from this hugely anxious solitary lost old individual to a collectivity. So he was being mirrored by two others, and they were each mirroring each other, and you have this group.

So I think that what I feel is that Romanian theatre is finding a third way. It is not necessarily Brechtian: let's get rid of the oppression through analysis; it's not necessarily Boalian: let's get rid of the oppression by staging

M.I.S.A. type plays over and over again in back street Street Theatre type plays, but it's theatre that is beginning to explore the psychological foundation of the oppression and the oppressive effects of oppression. And that's why somebody said in the end of the last discussion (about *Master Manole*), somebody said: I didn't like the way the end happened. And the director said, from what I've understood from the translation, 'Yeah, it didn't seem to quite work.' I'll tell you why, because first of all it makes me think of *The Master Builder* by Ibsen – another image – because what happened is Manole goes into himself. He is dealing with the psychological world at the end of yesterday's production<sup>7</sup>. So he throws himself off of the tower because the psychological confusion inside of him is so great and it's so torturing that death is the only solution he can find. So we don't need the king, and we don't need all these other things. He is in his own universe in the end.

And that's why, at the end of that hour of discussion about whether or not the ending worked, the only thing people who had been in the audience challenged was the ending. And I think that is where Romanian theater is going right now. I haven't of course seen *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*<sup>8</sup> yet. I've only seen the Romanian plays up to today, so I haven't actually seen how the Romanian theatre is taking in outside influence and transforming it.

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<sup>7</sup> *Master Manole* by Lucian Blaga.

<sup>8</sup> *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* by Molière, staged at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj. Director: Mihai Măniuțiu. Set designer: Adrian Damian. Costume designer: Luiza Enescu. Choreographer: Andrea Gavriliu.

« *La France est, depuis deux siècles, la principale fenêtre vers l'universalité pour les artistes nés en Roumanie* »

*Entretien avec Matei VIȘNIEC par Iulia MARDAR<sup>1</sup>*

*An interview with Matei Vișniec by  
Iulia Mardar*

**Matei Vișniec** studied philosophy in Bucharest, he was a founding member of the *Monday Poetry Reading*, and asserted himself as a powerful writer even when his plays were prohibited during the communist regime. After 1989, he became one of the most admired Romanian contemporary playwrights. **His plays were translated in more than twenty-five languages and are still performed on stages all over the world. He lives in Paris since 1987, and belongs to both Romanian and French literature.**



**Iulia Mardar :** *Vous avez remarqué que le théâtre est le milieu où les gens ont la possibilité de devenir plus libres et cultiver leur conscience. En 2018, l'enjeu a été moins fort. On vit à l'époque de l'automatisme, en oubliant notre vraie raison de vivre ; on n'a pas encore de temps pour y réfléchir. Pourtant, les mouvements culturels sont devenus de plus en plus forts: on est au début de la saison Roumanie-France ; il semble que la culture commence à gagner de l'espace.*

*On dit : « Chaque peuple avec sa coutume. » Quelles sont les différences que vous avez remarquées entre les spectateurs roumains et français ?*

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**Matei Vişniec :** La France est le pays qui a inspiré, avec ses festivals, toute l'Europe. Je crois que la France est le pays européen qui organise le plus grand nombre de festivals avec la plus grande variété thématique. Ce phénomène est lié aussi au tourisme. Après la deuxième guerre mondiale le tourisme est devenu une industrie et on a compris très vite que la culture doit accompagner ces pèlerinages vers la mer, la montagne ou la campagne. « Ne pas aller bronzer idiot » est devenu un slogan à la fois touristique et culturel.

La France, en tant que première destination touristique au monde, est devenue vite le premier pays des festivals. Le patrimoine historique a été ainsi revalorisé. À Avignon, la cour d'honneur du Palais des Papes devient chaque année, en juillet, l'espace théâtral le plus prestigieux. Le théâtre antique d'Orange abrite un grand festival d'art lyrique, et le Palais de l'Archevêché d'Aix en Provence est devenu l'endroit mythique où se déroule le plus inventif festival d'opéra du monde. Dans la ville d'Avignon une bonne trentaine d'églises, de chapelles et de couvents ont été reconvertis en salles de spectacle. Ce « mariage » entre patrimoine et créativité artistique a un impact économique important. On dénombre en France environ 2500 festivals chaque année, toutes les disciplines confondus (musique contemporaine, théâtre, opéra, danse, cirque, marionnettes, littérature, etc.). Un public éduqué, formé, avide de nouvelles expériences culturelles se déplace pour assister à ces spectacle et dépense des sommes importantes pour avoir accès, pendant les périodes de vacances, à ce corolaire culturel. C'est peut-être ici la différence entre le public roumain et le public français lorsqu'on parle de festivals. Le public français dépense plus pour la culture.

**I. M. :** *Vous avez été présent aussi au Festival International de théâtre à Sibiu ; aux Rencontres Internationales de Cluj et à d'autres autres événements, en liant la Roumanie et la France. Comment voyez-vous ces rencontres devenues assez fréquentes ? Sont-elles une méthode pour consolider le public autour d'un dialogue ayant un dénominateur commun ?*

**M. V. :** Ce sont des festivals qui commencent à conférer une identité culturelle à toutes ces villes. Il y a une compétition culturelle aujourd'hui en Europe. Une ville qui n'investit pas dans la culture risque de perdre sa « visibilité ». Une ville qui n'organise pas des pèlerinages artistiques et culturels se marginalise économiquement.

Les festivals de théâtre sont aussi des occasions pour relancer le débat citoyen. À Avignon, chaque année, est organisé un « atelier de la pensée » où on parle de la démocratie, du rôle de la culture, de l'immigration... Le théâtre est par excellence un lieu de socialisation, mais aussi une *agora* où le débat public peut gagner en profondeur. Le public apprécie lorsque chaque année un festival propose aussi un thème central de débat. C'est le cas à Cluj et à Sibiu. L'actualité est toujours dominée par un dilemme, une inquiétude, un doute... Débattre après un spectacle, où dans le cadre d'un festival, c'est une manière de poser différemment les questions et surtout écouter la voix des artistes, des écrivains, des créateurs... Dans un monde où les responsables politiques perdent parfois très vite leur autorité morale, la voix de l'artiste vient combler un vide. Mais n'oublions pas non plus que le mot festival implique quelque chose de « festif », il s'agit d'une fête. Quoi de plus noble, de plus enrichissant qu'une « fête de la culture » ou « une fête des idées » ?

**I. M. :** *Avignon, Sibiu, Paris, Cluj. La Roumanie et la France. Ensemble plus que jamais grâce à la culture et aux gens qui la promeuvent. Avez-vous remarqué des changements après les retrouvailles entre les Roumains et les Français ?*

**M. V. :** La saison France-Roumanie qui a pour début le 27 novembre 2018 est, tout d'abord, une chance pour la culture roumaine de devenir plus visible en France et en Europe. La France est, depuis deux siècles, la principale fenêtre vers l'universalité pour les artistes nés en Roumanie et qui ont eu l'envie de « parler au monde ». Cette saison croisée se propose ouvertement de dépasser les clichés, ce qui est très important pour la Roumanie. Les clichés ont la vie dure, ils s'installent à la longue et parfois deviennent de fausses informations, découragent toute démarche d'approfondissement d'un pays, d'un peuple... Il y a de nombreux clichés concernant les Français, la France ou la ville de Paris, mais ce sont plutôt des clichés à connotation positive. La Roumanie souffre, malheureusement, à cause de nombreux clichés à connotation négative. Or, voici l'occasion de se débarrasser un peu de ces clichés qui sont forcément réducteurs et injustes.

**I. M. :** *Vous avez consacré le début d'un roman pour expliquer le caractère cérémonial de la vie. Les jours de festival deviennent une prolongation, une mise-en-scène de la cérémonie. Sans vouloir, la vie naît le spectacle qui doit naturellement soutenir et enrichir la vie. Comment peut-on concentrer l'essence de cette cérémonie-mosaïque dans l'œuvre artistique ?*



**M. V. :** J'ai toujours considéré que le théâtre et la littérature nous aident à comprendre l'homme et surtout ses contradictions. C'est pour cela que j'écris, pour sonder les mystères de l'âme humaine. Aucune discipline, ni les sciences sociales, ni les autres démarches qui se focalisent sur l'homme et la société n'arrivent à forer plus profondément dans l'abysse de l'âme humaine que la poésie, le théâtre et la musique... Oui, pour moi le théâtre est une cérémonie de la connaissance de l'homme. Et l'émotion que cette cérémonie dégage devient source de langage. C'est grâce à ces réverbérations émotionnelles que nous comprenons, parfois, plus sur nous-mêmes, nous comprenons des choses que les manuels de psychologie ou les traités de philosophie ne peuvent pas expliquer...

**I. M. :** *Cette année est passée comme un vertige : charmante, avec de grandes fêtes, mais aussi réactive, avec de nouvelles questions qui s'imposent dans la société. La jeune génération vient de faire entendre sa voix, en luttant pour ses valeurs, pour l'authenticité dans l'art et la culture. Pour finir avec un sujet à méditer, quelle est la recommandation que vous avez pour cette jeune génération ? Pensez-vous qu'on ait un combat à mener ou qu'on ait simplement besoin de trouver un terrain d'entente ?*

**M. V. :** Oui, je pense que la jeune génération a un combat terrible à mener. Tout d'abord, elle devra résoudre tous les problèmes que les générations précédentes ont créés ou aggravés... Ce ne sera pas facile. Le monde entre dans une époque de déconfiture, de déroute. Les idéologies n'apportent plus de réponses, la théorie du progrès par la science et la technique n'est plus crédible. En plus, il faut réinventer la démocratie, sauver la planète, préserver la paix, combattre le terrorisme, corriger les dérives du libéralisme économique... Un énorme chantier s'ouvre pour une jeunesse dont le capitalisme et la société de consommation n'ont pas su préparer l'avenir. Je suis inquiet pour ce qui va se passer dans les décennies à venir. Et la culture ne pourra pas résoudre tous ces problèmes... C'est comme si, nous, les adultes, nous vous disions : et maintenant c'est à vous, les jeunes, de prendre le volant... Le problème c'est que les freins de la voiture sont bloqués, le volant ne tourne plus et à l'horizon on voit un mur...

**I. M. :** *Je vous remercie de m'avoir accordé ces quelques moments. Nous essayerons de garder notre optimisme... autant que possible.*

*“We Do Not Export a Product with the Stamp ‘Romania’”*

*An interview with Mihai MĂNIUȚIU by Andreea LUPU<sup>1</sup>*

**Mihai Măniuțiu** is a Romanian theatre director, academic and writer. He is Professor of Drama at „Babes-Bolyai” University of Cluj, Romania, and Distinguished Professor of Drama at University of California, Irvine, USA. Currently, he is Artistic & Executive Director of the Cluj National Theatre, Romania.

Since 1978, he has staged over one hundred theatre, dance, and opera productions in Romania and abroad. His productions toured in the UK, Belgium, France, Italy, Croatia, Turkey, Canada, Egypt, Austria, Hungary, Finland, Serbia, Brazil, and South Korea. His directorial accolades include: Best Director Award and Best Dramaturgy Award (Ancient Theatre Festival of Merida, Spain, 2008); Best Theatre Production of the Year (UNITER Gala Awards, 1993, 2005, 2018); Best Director of the Year (UNITER Gala Awards, 1998, 2002, 2003); Best Director of the Year (International Association of Theatre Critics, Romanian Branch, 1991, 2005).

He has published several volumes of fiction and poems, two volumes of theatre theory and a collection of essays on Shakespeare, *The Golden Round*, in which he explores the theme of power in Shakespeare’s plays. To date, four monographic studies have been dedicated to his work as a director: *The Trilogy of the Double* (Bucharest: Unitext, 1997), *MĂNIUȚIU. Theatre Images* by Cipriana Petre-Mateescu (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2002), *Dancing on Ruins* by Dan C. Mihăilescu (Cluj: Idea Design & Print, 2006), and *Măniuțiu. The Ever Changing Space* by Cristina Modreanu (Cluj: bybliotek, 2010), and a volume of critical essays by Mircea Morariu: *Mihai Măniuțiu. Essential Visions* (Cluj: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2008).



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**Andreea Lupu:** *Mr. Mihai Măniuțiu, as you have a wide directorial experience in and outside Romania, and as your theatre performances have been so often invited to international festivals, I would like to discuss with you about the ways in which Romanian theatre is perceived abroad. To begin with, I'd like to know your opinion about the extent to which theatre performances are influenced by the culture of origin.*

**Mihai Măniuțiu:** Obviously, they are totally influenced. They come from the Romanian theatrical culture and, of course, from a fusion of everything that happens in the world. The soil, however, is always the Romanian directing school which has very particular and very strong characteristics. This is what distinguishes us from the others, and it could keep doing so if our school continues to be as strong.

**A.L.:** *How are these particularities perceived over the borders?*

**M.M.:** It is very difficult to say because every performance can be perceived differently. Performances directed by Purcărete, or Măniuțiu, or Tompa Gabor, Dabija, Cărbunariu will never be perceived in similar ways. There is no common denominator. We do not export a product with the stamp "Romania". There is a certain spirit that maybe unifies the ways in which the Romanian directors think, but there is no recipe. It is impossible for me to answer this question. All of them are individual artists and when they are chosen to participate in different festivals or tours, they are chosen precisely because of their uniqueness. Not for what they have in common with one another.

**A.L.:** *In this case, we can agree that there is no such thing as a common, recognizable language in all Romanian performances...*

**M.M.:** You mean whether they are identifiable in the sense that someone could come and say "A! This is a performance from Romania!?" No, there are not identifiable as such. It's the same for other countries like USA or Great Britain. I wouldn't know where a performance is from unless I recognized the language or unless I checked beforehand. It's all about the uniqueness of the artist. If we could identify the stamp of the country on a theatrical representation, it would mean we're talking about "country mannerism", which, of course, doesn't exist. Maybe only in the case of folklore.

**A.L.:** *So the influences always circulate.*

**M.M.:** You mean that in the air there are thousands of things and you never know what air you're breathing? If this is what you mean, then yes, in the air there is a whole lot of things, you never know what air you are breathing and, obviously, one can be influenced by important artists who come from totally different areas. There are many Romanian artists who were rather influenced by Pina Bausch than by Liviu Ciulei, or rather by Pippo Delbono than by Pintilie, it can happen. But this depends on the artist's internal alchemy. We cannot analyze them based on something like “country mannerism” or “generational mannerism”. When I was talking about the Romanian directing school, what I meant was that it's a school focused on the prominence of the director, concentrated mainly on an original reinterpretation of the text, the remaking of the text inside of a performance. The director has the power to recreate the text for the stage, not to serve it, not to be in his shadow, but to be a co-creator of the stage text.

**A.L.:** *Did you notice major differences between the American or British theatre school compared to the Romanian one?*

**M.M.:** Of course. With few exceptions, the American directing school is focused on realism and naturalism, and on a post-Stanislavski system for the actor's training. Here, the actors are given a set of abilities which helps them survive professionally in television, advertising, series, film, and only afterwards in theatre.

**A.L.:** *Which is not the case with the Romanian acting school...*

**M.M.:** Exactly. One of the main differences is that the Romanian actor is not trained for musical or film.

**A.L.:** *At the beginning, you said that a “country mannerism” would be impossible. Is it the same case for the audience?*

**M.M.:** The audience is very different from one place to the other. A generalization would be extremely difficult. However, what is obvious is that the foreign audience can enjoy much more easily long and very long

performances, whereas the Romanian spectators prefer the shorter ones. Beyond this obvious remark, there is a wide territory of discussion.

*A.L.: Did you have any particular experience abroad that made you feel like you really are in a different country?*

**M.M.:** I didn't experience any kind of rejection because usually the people who selected the performances were aware of what they took and where they were supposed to present them, it's a job after all. As long as the people who select the performances know how to do their job well, you will always find the right performance in the right place. I've usually been selected to participate in festivals and a festival's audience is really international, open and prepared. I had only pleasant experiences. For example, *Electra*, which I directed, enjoyed real success everywhere, even if it came in different shapes and forms. At the Merida International Festival, it won the best performance prize, but the success we had at Bogota was delirious: for almost 25 minutes, the audience refused to leave the theatre hall, they were throwing their hats on the stage and asked for certain musical moments to be repeated. In Croatia the success came under the form of a deep respect – we enjoyed the applause of the audience and afterwards, the performance got invited to another festival. It was rather a normal reaction, than a delirious one. In South Korea, the audience attended the discussions after the show. We had to stop after 45 minutes because we were exhausted, otherwise I'm sure they would have stayed for a much longer time, maybe even until morning. As I've already mentioned, the positive experiences I had with *Electra* were due to the fact that the performance has been invited in the right place, and thus obtained the right reaction.

*A.L.: What about your experiences abroad as a director? Did you face any challenges or obstacles?*

**M.M.:** Well, I am a hired director, I have to do my job. Usually, the secret is to win the actors, to make them trust you. It's only after you won them, that you can bring your artistic vision to life. The rest depends on the gods... not on me or on the company.

*A.L.: Thank you for your time, Mr. Măniuțiu. I hope Romanian theatre will keep on surprising the theatre lovers from abroad with unique artists and artworks.*

*“I Want to Become a Better Person, Not Only a Better Artist”*

*An interview with Andrei ȘERBAN by Eugenia SARVARI<sup>1</sup>*

**Andrei Șerban** was born in Bucharest in 1943. In 1969, after graduating (in Radu Penciulescu’s directing class), he received a scholarship at La MaMa Theatre in New York, followed by an astonishing international career in theater and opera. He worked in more than forty countries. In the USA, he was associated with Robert Brustein’s American Repertory Theatre Company and worked in many famous theatres and Operas in New York, Seattle and Los Angeles. Back to Romania after 1989, he was the artistic and executive director of the National Theatre in Bucharest between 1990 and 1993, but his international career continued. His *Fragments of a Greek Trilogy – Medea*, at „La MaMa”, 1972; *Electra*, at the Sainte-Chapelle, in Paris, 1973; *The Trojan Women*, at „La MaMa”, 1974, reunited in a trilogy at „La MaMa” (1974) and, then, in 1990 at the National Theatre in Bucharest, are considered the most original staging of the Greek tragedy at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Between 1992 and 2018 he was Professor at Columbia University, New York. Many volumes were dedicated to his work as a stage director. He published the autobiographical volume *O biografie* (2007, Polirom).



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**Eugenia Sarvari:** *You left Romania in 1969, with a “suitcase containing a few personal belongings, enough for three months” and you landed in New York, waking up in a “cultural melting pot” – the words are yours and can be found in your autobiographical book, O biografie (A Biography) – and then you became a stage director on five continents. How made you up your way in this enormous world?*

**Andrei Şerban:** I believed in the law of accident. Also the journey itself interested me more than the destination. It did not matter where I was as long as I can be free. To search and discover different Americas, landscapes for the imagination, was a blessing. I was very fortunate to find remarkable wiser people who helped me grow and open my mind and enrich my vision, teach me to become more generous and tolerant, less pretentious.

**E. S.:** *The coupé show Arden of Faversham/Ubu roi from „La MaMa” marked not only your American debut, but also the meeting with Peter Brook and the invitation at the International Centre for Theatre Research in Paris. What did this meeting mean to you?*

**A. Ş.:** I look at the notes I took almost half a century ago, at the time when I started working with Brook’s International Center in Paris (and then in Iran) and I am fascinated to see that the same things concerned me then as today: I wrote in my notes: “I want to become a better person, not only a better artist”. Another note: “Inspired by the example of Brook, from now on I will try to be different, like Peter is always different in every situation, fresh, questioning, searching, he is so unpredictably alive.” Brook opened my interest for this fundamental question: what do I want? This came as a surprise to me, and it did not come from my head. It was simply the realization of what I am. What I am as an artist also as a human being, after half a century, I am still trying to discover.

**E. S.:** *From Persepolis to South America, from Tokyo to Los Angeles, or Sank Petersburg, you made theatrical travels for many lives. How were your performances and workshops received in so many different horizons?*

**A. Ş.:** Traveling in so many places, meeting people from so many cultures opened my appetite to understand more, to see not so much the differences between us, but what connects us all, the same fears, the same desires, the same aspirations. I wish to understand more still. But theatre was for me the best and most direct medium to build a bridge for connections and relationships beyond language. Theatre can create this universal sound that vibrates and spreads hope and opposes the negativity in the world today, that is so un-necessary.

**E. S.:** *Are Western students / actors, more involved, with more imagination, different from those in Romania? Are there fundamental differences between theatre in the West /America and Romanian theatre? Between the work atmosphere there and here?*

**A. Ş.:** The American students used to be fearless and take risks. But now with the “me too” movement things get more confused. Students are asked to report any sign of misconduct from teachers and colleagues alike. Out of protection for so many wrongdoings in the past, there is also a tendency to restrain creativity and create suspicion. In an acting class one can sense a certain censorship and artificiality. That is provoked by a new Puritanism that is the very old American tradition. Today in universities the attitude is changing from one extreme to the other: before too much permissiveness, now exaggerated political correctness! Europe is catching up slowly the same problems!

**E. S.:** *How is Romanian theatre seen in the world?*

**A. Ş.:** It is not very well known.

**E. S.:** *Are your Romanian roots emerging, showing themselves in a certain way in your creation, in theatre and/or opera?*

**A.Ş.:** Yes, they are present, but these roots appear naturally without me being conscious. The roots define me and I am glad when they appear to surface. I am actually proud of my roots, they give me energy, make me stronger. But I am not trying to exploit or manipulate this aspect for political cliché propaganda or nationalism.



*E. S.: What were your expectations when you got back to Romania in 1990?*

*A. Ş.: Hoping naively to transform the National Theatre in a vibrant and fresh organism and accepting the position of general manager in order to lead that institution towards the future. After three years I gave up. I was naive to think the impossible!*

*E. S.: What was, for you, the meaning from Sarah Kane, at your return back to the country in 2006, at the invitation of Ion Vartic, the director of National Theatre in Cluj, and a new Seagull, the fourth, staged last year at unteatru, in Bucharest?*

*A. Ş.: I simply love to surprise myself by doing such opposite texts, written by Sara Kane and Chekhov. One should never make it easy for oneself. Sarah Kane is an impossibly difficult writer to stage and Chekhov is equally difficult. I love challenges. Why should anything be easy?*

*E. S.: Why a different kind of theatre school is needed, a theatre school invented through the foundation of Andrei Şerban Traveling Academy?*

*A. Ş.: We all need to go back to school. We have very little education at the emotional level. Theatre deals with emotions and we know very little in that department. Young people are given a very poor training these days. I feel responsible to help them and after a quarter of century teaching at Columbia in NY, I feel that I have something to offer to the young generation of actors in my own country.*

*E. S.: Your creations of the last period "make visible the invisible". They show us human suffering, but they also have a very strong political accent – and, by saying that, I think of The Good Man from Szechwan, Much Ado About Nothing from „Bulandra” Theatre, The Merry Widow from the National Romanian Opera in Bucharest, Richard III from Radnóti Miklós Színház in Budapest, or even the last Seagull from Unteatru. Is this a direction that you wish to give further on to your work?*

**A. Ş.:** I want to stay away from giving a direction, I am not here to give any messages to anyone, I work in order to experience together with actors and audience the joy and pain of being alive. Any true creation is free from interpretation. Each one of us can choose what we want from the stage. Each one thinks differently. But if we feel for a second the same, then it's wonderful. But one has to refrain from teaching others what to feel and think.

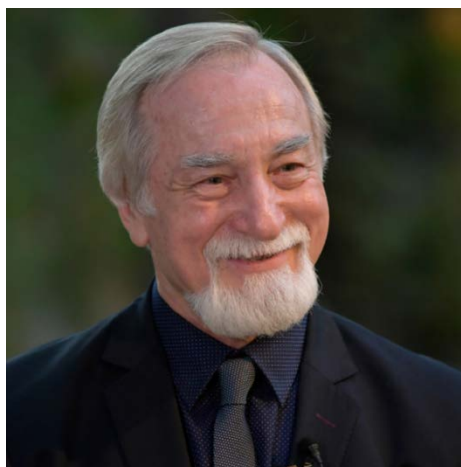
**E. S.:** *Where is Andrei Şerban home, the only Romanian stage director from the Larousse?*

**A. Ş.:** I don't know where is home at this moment. The world is so unsettled, so dangerous, so much frustration and negativity. Home cannot be found in a country, or a building, there is no island where one can find peace. Outside one finds only chaos. But there is a home inside each one of us. And for me the only way to look for home is in the heart.



*“I Simply Find Joy in Speaking, Writing and Working.”*

*An interview with Alexa VISARION by Ilaria NICA<sup>1</sup>*



The prolific activity of Mr. Alexa Visarion may be inspiring and disarming at the same time; his path in the creative world stands as a reminder that barriers of any kind are to be overcome by hard work and by allowing oneself to develop as freely as possible.

As theatre and film director he's known especially for *Ahead of the Silence* (1978), *Luna verde* (2010) and *Năpasta* (1982), but has directed seven films and written a number of scripts. During his life-long career he directed over 100 plays in Romanian theatres and abroad. In 1985, he directed Stark Young's translation of Anton Chekhov's play, *Uncle Vanya*, at the Actors Theatre of Louisville (Mainstage) in Louisville, Kentucky.

Here follows the brief presentation of a complete artist, whose discourse, as he allows to be shown, is a mix of incisive thought, candor and a certain type of guilelessness, something that is to be borne in mind while reading this interview about his rich international experience.

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*Ilaria Nica: Dear Mr. Alexa Visarion, could you tell us something about your international experience before 1989? How difficult was it for you to go abroad?*

**Alexa Visarion:** I left the country for the first time after having staged a show at Târgu-Mureș, *The Prosecutor*, which had quite an echo in Romania. Me and the stage designer, Vittorio Holtier, were sent into a research trip to England in 1972; we stayed in London and Stratford, where we've seen the English theatre and returned home after two weeks. The second time we left after having staged *Uncle Vanya* at Cluj-Napoca. There was a scholarship offered by Italy, the Strehler scholarship, and I was the one proposed for receiving it – I went to Milan, I met Giorgio Strehler, took part to his rehearsals. In the meanwhile, the Giulești Theatre, where I was employed, was on a tour in Italy with two shows by Dinu Cernescu, *Meșterul Manole (Master Manole)* and *Măsură pentru Măsură (Measure for Measure)*, and at this occasion I presented a show as well, *Năpasta (The Curse)*. This happened in 74.

I returned to Romania and then followed a few years of travelling with the show *Năpasta*, from 1976 to 89. We have staged it in Germany, Switzerland, Italy, in Florence, where I was seen and analyzed in an eulogistic article written by the greatest critic of that time, Paolo Emilio Poesio, who said he has seen three exemplary Romanian shows: *Bădăranii (The Hooligans)*, directed by Sică Alexandrescu, *King Lear*, by Radu Penciulescu, and this *Năpasta* I have staged, again with Vittorio Holtier as a stage designer, and the actors Florin Zamfirescu (Ion the Fool), Dorina Lazăr (Anca), Corneliu Dumitraș (Dragomir), and Gelu Nițu (Gheorghe).

Then came a delegation from Russia, there was this festival held between the socialist countries, where each country would stage plays from the other countries. At the Moscow Art Theatre came a director, a creative director so to say, the renowned Oleg Efremov, who said he wouldn't agree with a director sent by the Romanian Government and that he'd prefer to choose one. So they sent to Bucharest the famous critic Anatoli Smelyansky, who saw a number of shows, met with me, saw the way I staged *O Noapte Furtunoasă (A Stormy Night)*, this happened in 79, and he invited me to Moscow, to work at MHAT. By luck, I was the only director invited on this renowned stage. The Romanian state did not allow me to go, they wanted

Horea Popescu to be sent to Moscow, as he was from the National Theatre, and the pretext was that I was busy. Then a letter was sent from the Russians saying "we will stage the show when he will be available, until then we will stage no Romanian play". In the end, I was allowed to leave for Moscow, staged *O Noapte Furtunoasă*, it was highly appreciated and awarded. I then got invited to the Galeria Theatre in Poland, it happened the same way, my shows were seen and evaluated in Bucharest and *Năpasta* was selected to be staged at their theatre.

*I. N.: Regarding your experience in the United States, how did you manage to leave for America and what did you do there?*

*A. V.:* I have been invited to Hungary, at their National Theatre, to stage *Woyzeck* on the stage from Pest and *Năpasta* in Buda, but I could not carry out this agreement, as a lady from America, Edith Markson, the vice-president of the Ford Foundation, came on a tour and saw a number of Romanian performances and chose in the end one Romanian director, as well as 6 other directors from Eastern Europe to meet the American theatre. This was happening in March 1982. I was chosen after Mrs. Markson had seen *Năpasta* and *O Noapte Furtunoasă*; she immediately said that she would like to invite me to America on a study and research program. I stayed in the States for a month, where I met relevant artists. I met Sam Shepard, the dramatist, when his *True West* premiered in San Francisco; I met Lanford Wilson as well. Afterwards, the Americans sent Marshall W. Mason to Romania, who at that point was the director of Circle Repertory Theatre in New York. He came, he saw *O Noapte Furtunoasă*, he said that it is an extraordinary play and he invited me to stage it at his theatre. I was not allowed to do so, as they said that this is a play to which a good translation cannot be granted, which was partly true, and also because the play would miss a part of, how should I put it, the antipatriotic misery structure, as Mrs. Suzana Gâdea said, which should not be brought to America. I carried on with the conversations with Mr. Mason. I was going to do a play by an American dramatist, Bishop, but did not manage to carry it out, as, after a show in Moscow, Robert Corrigan came to Romania. He was the dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at the University of

Texas at Dallas, where there was a famous theatre department. Tadashi Suzuki, Herbert Blau had been working there. And after Mr. Corrigan had seen my two shows, he wrote a laudatory article in *The Synthesis* about my work and offered me a Fulbright scholarship. Even though I could only benefit of this scholarship three years after the last one, such as the one received in 81, the research scholarship, the American Government found a way and I managed to leave for the States after just two years. For the Romanian people the Fulbright scholarship was an agreement between the Romanian state and the U.S. known as a family scholarship. I was not allowed to leave, but through a strategy made by Mr. Corrigan and the Fulbright team, I left for Canada, stayed there for two weeks and then left for America. So I had finally received my scholarship, but not in Romania, because the Romanian state wanted another fellow director to be sent, I do not know his name, I only know that he was refused by the Americans. Then, thanks to the Romanian ambassador at Washington, Mircea Malița, a deal was made and I was allowed to receive my first Fulbright scholarship, for theatre. After three months the Romanian Embassy announced me that I was supposed to return to my country, as the visa was not granted for 10 months, the way it was supposed to be, but for only 3 months. At that point, Mrs. Merrie Blocker from the State Department intervened, this was happening in 1983, and she said that the agreements signed by both parts must be respected, so if the scholarship had been granted, it had to be deemed as valid. This way, I was granted another three months in the States. At that time I was receiving complaints from home because of the fact that I was not going back to Romania. My wife was recovering from thyroid cancer, I had two kids, and my brother-in-law, who was an Associate Professor at the French Department at the University of Bucharest, started to be in trouble because of me not returning home, even though I was legally out of the country, even though my visa had expired. The American Government did an extraordinary thing then. At my request, they split the scholarship in two and I was allowed to go back to Romania with another 6 months of scholarship left and one linking month.

I received a second Fulbright scholarship as well, this one on film, so I would return to America for three months per year from 83 to 88, which was very convenient to me, since I was able to spend time with my family. The

Americans made a gesture of great nobility, changing the structure of the scholarship, and so I was able to work on *Richard III* with the students from the Theatre Department in Milwaukee, a show that has been seen by Herbert Blau, by Richard Schechner, by great names from the academic theatre world, and at their recommendation, my film was seen too, *Înghițitorul de săbii* (*The Sword Swallower*), made in Romania in 1981, which premiered at Bucharest and also had some problems with its screening, so they offered me this second Fulbright scholarship on film.

I ended my theatre scholarship program in Milwaukee, at the New York University, where I held courses and a workshop, and in Dallas. The film scholarship program was placed at the California Institute of the Arts, where there was a private institute, the last dream of Walt Disney. There I worked as a Professor and I held the course *Sense and Image*. I received a number of invitations to candidate for directing jobs or to become the department manager at some universities, but since I had a visa that was only available for three months, the documents could not be validated, so I could not postulate for the positions. But when I went back home, I would go on tour around Europe with *Năpasta*, which was a favorite because it only needed, in order to be staged, including the crew, a total of 10 people and it had no political implications. We would travel by bus, sometimes sleep in it and only get accommodation in the countries where we were supposed to play.

*I. N.: What happened after the fall of the communist regime in Romania?*

*A. V.:* After '89 I received two American programs for continuing my work, done from 1981 to 1988, each one month long, one of which was a program on management, and the other on information regarding the new voice in American drama. I have been invited to Louisville in Kentucky, where I worked *Uncle Vanya* in 84, and *Richard II* ten years after, presented at the Kentucky Shakespeare Festival. So that is about it. I wrote articles and staged plays in Sweden, plays by Chekov, Büchner, Shakespeare, I staged *D-ale Carnavalului* (*The Carnival Scenes*) in Reykjavik. I had the opportunity to meet celebrities, I met Anthony Quinn in New York, we had a talk, he saw my films and sent the actors, Albulescu, George Constantin, Rebengiu, congratulations



and the program of *Zorba the Greek*, the Broadway show made by Cacoyannis. Afterwards, I have been on tour with my film *Ana* (2014), which had its preview at Thessaloniki and premiered at the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York. Some of my films were seen at MoMA as well. I had a meeting with the Film Department Chief, after having seen Scorsese's *The Aviator*, we talked and he wanted to see my films, this happened in 2001-2003.

*I. N.: What do you think was most important to your development as an artist?*

**A. V.:** There was a time in my student years when there was a certain type of relaxation, and the great directors of the Romanian theatre from then, Ciulei, Pintilie, Penciulescu, Moisescu, Esrig, managed to set us in a climate where the value did count. During that time, the Romanian theatre was known all around Europe. I can tell you that Liviu Ciulei was invited in the West to talk about theatre management, without him being a party member, but rather coming from a bourgeois background. Despite all of the troubles and the terrible censorship, art, I mean real art, especially theatre, but also the novel and the poetry, had moments of great quality, which counted for my development and for the development of my generation too, meaning Andrei Șerban, Ivan Helmer, Aureliu Manea, then I, Cătălina Buzoianu, Petrică Ionescu, Dan Micu, Iulian Vișa, so there was a massive group of mature artists, who shed light on the paths younger artists would take.

Europe and America were interested in what was happening in Romania, the contacts were very important, I have met great personalities and attended premieres, and all of these, on one side, made it possible for certain values to grow stronger within all of us who had this opportunity, to meet people and become known, and on the other side, it strengthened the dignity and the confidence in art. I have worked in theatre, in film, I have held courses both in and outside Romania, I worked with both students and professionals. What I can say is that the bounds that were built then still exist.

I am now in Iași (Iassy) and I have talked to the students about Bergman, there are 100 years since his birth, and I have told them how important it was that the great screenplays had been translated and we were thus able to study them in a publication of film research. And I mean screenplays by Bergman,

"I SIMPLY FIND JOY IN SPEAKING, WRITING AND WORKING."

Buñuel, Zeffirelli, Fellini, Tarkovsky. I had a meeting with Bergman and our talk somehow opened my eyes towards a way that was mine, but it mattered more through him. It was also very important that I studied his work as a theatre director, that I have seen his shows. I can say that God helped me to have the necessary connections for the natural development of an artist, from my youth until now, close to old age. Yet again I must say that everything depends on a happening that is not only happening, it depends on us whether we take ourselves seriously and it also depends on luck, if you make this luck to be part of your work, and artistic work does not mean drudgery, it is rather a type of work which creates a certain type of excitement, of restlessness, and puts you in a rather solitary state.

I have also written a lot, I have written for many Romanian publications, this was really important. I have released a book last year and another one not a long time ago, because this type of work keeps me alert and interested and makes me want to research and to explore. I became visible thanks to Caragiale, Shakespeare and Chekhov. I simply find joy in speaking, writing and working.



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

***Cristian RUSU and Ștefana POP-CURȘEU<sup>1</sup>***

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>3</sup> Terms in which Gropius describes his total theatrical project in 1927.

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

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

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

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<sup>4</sup> Sava I., *Teatralitatea teatrului*, Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1981.

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

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

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

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

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



find ready-built theatres made after the scale-models and samples of the workhouses around the «Viennese Burgtheater», shrunken to meet Oriental standards.”<sup>7</sup>

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

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

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

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

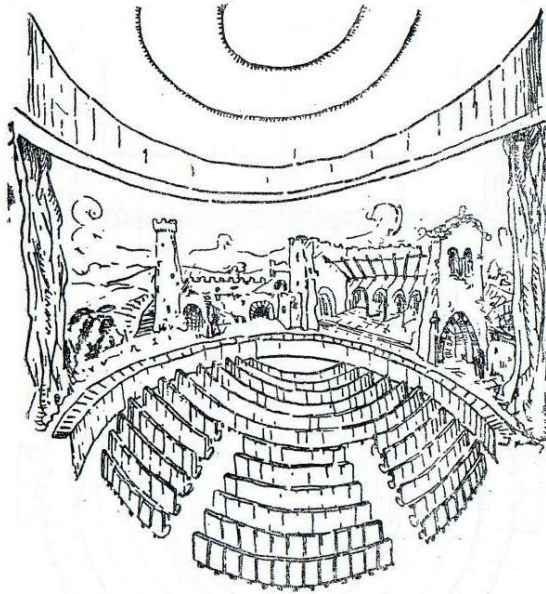
<sup>8</sup> Sava I., *Teatrul Rotund /The Round Theatre*, p. 355.

<sup>9</sup> Sava I., p. 355. A clear irony to the eclectic style of the 1900; the Viennese style of the architecture company Helmer & Fellner.

A DIALOGUE ON THE ROMANIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE PROJECT OF TOTAL THEATRE:  
ION SAVA AND THE ROUND THEATRE (1944)

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

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



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

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

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<sup>10</sup> Sava I., p. 357.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>11</sup> Sava I., p. 362.

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

<sup>13</sup> Sava I., p. 359. In French in original: “*la figure géométrique de la sociabilité*”.

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

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

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<sup>14</sup> See Joseph S., (edit.), *Actor and Architect*.

<sup>15</sup> See Villiers A., *Le Théâtre en rond*, Librairie théâtrale, Paris, 1958.

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

<sup>17</sup> Sava I., p. 360.

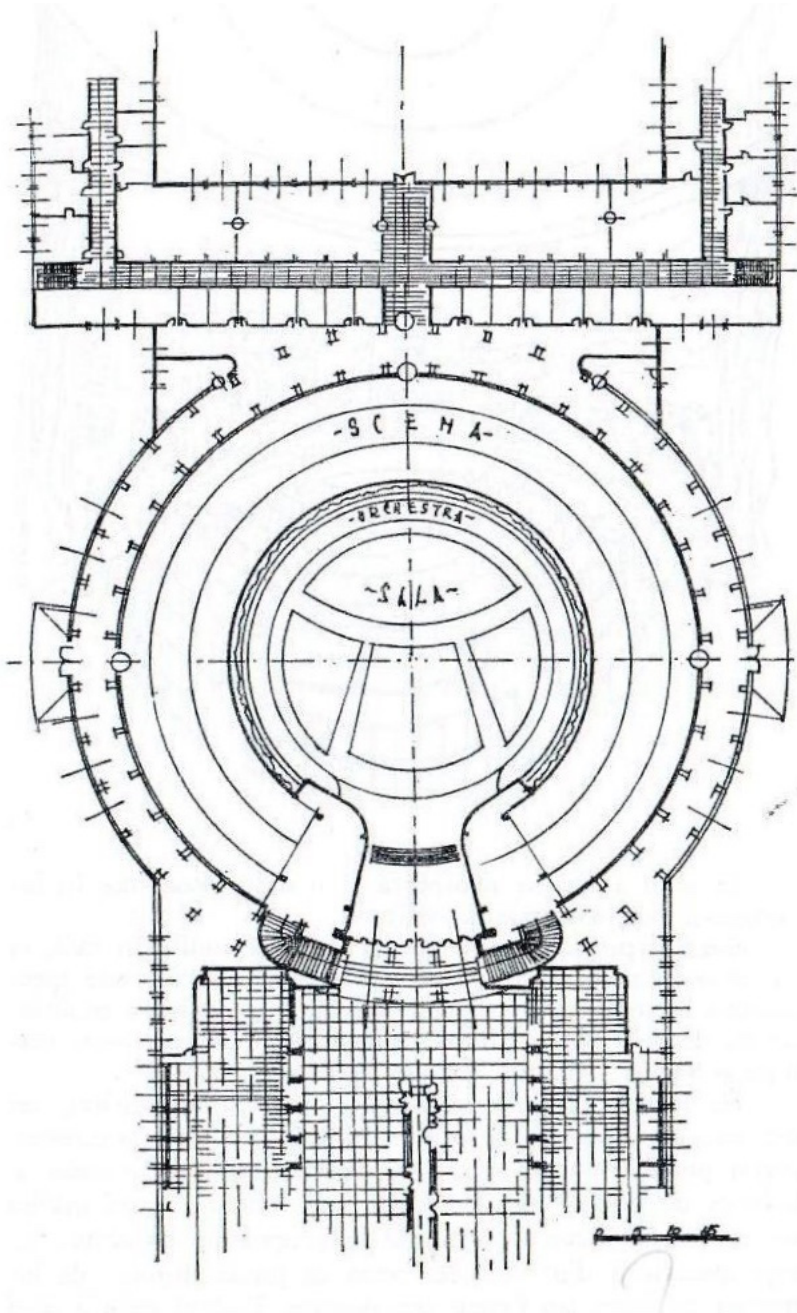


Fig. 2: Ion Sava, Teatrul Rotund/ The Round Theatre, plan (1944)

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>18</sup> Sava I., p. 362.

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

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

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<sup>19</sup> Even the illusion of 3D is a by-product of this need to go beyond conventional frontality.

<sup>20</sup> *Vsevolod Meyerhold*, Mihai Eminescu National Theatre, Timișoara, 2012., p. 130-134.

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

## *The Courage to Avoid “Safety Nets” in Theatre Costume Design*

*An Interview with LUCIAN BROSCĂȚEAN by  
TRENT M. SANDERS<sup>1</sup>*

Through the years, Lucian has participated, with his *fashion/art projects*, at various national and international events: Romanian Fashion Week, Mercedes-Benz Berlin Fashion Week, International Fashion Showcase at London Fashion Week, MQ Vienna Fashion Week...

He won several awards including: ‘Special Mention’ at the International Fashion Showcase London Fashion Week, Arts of Fashion ‘Wendy Jim and YKK’ Awards at MOMA San Francisco, Beau Monde Magazine’s ‘Crystal Globe’ for Best Romanian Designer, 3 times nominee for ‘ELLE Style Awards Romania’ Best Designer Category, 3<sup>rd</sup> place in the Fashion Design category and 42<sup>nd</sup> place in the general ‘Top 100 Cool Brands’ made by Forbes Romania.



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<sup>1</sup> U.S.A. Fulbright Scholar and Playwright, University of Tennessee – Knoxville, Babe-Bolyai University, Faculty of Theatre and Film



**Trent M. Sanders:** *So then, when you were working with the festival, The International Meetings in Cluj, this was your first time, right?*

**Lucian Broscăţean:** Yes, I was going to this festival just as a spectator, you know, at different plays and performances and spectacles, but this year I collaborated with Andrei Măjeri. I had my first professional approach in theater because I was the costume designer for *Meşterul Manole*.

**T. M. S.:** *Did Andrei approach you?*

**L. B.:** Yes.

**T. M. S.:** *How did you know him, did you have a relationship with him from before?*

**L. B.:** Actually a friend of ours, who is also a Director, she introduced us a year and a half ago, and afterwards we started to speak about different approaches in theatre. I was all the time, and I am, fascinated by theatre and movements and different theories related to theatre studies.

Growing up in Sibiu, I was a passionate theatre spectator. Some of my most formative experiences were with watching Mr. Măniuţiu's *Jewish Trilogy*, which he staged in Sibiu seventeen or eighteen years ago.

Coming back to your question, Andrei was the one who approached me and invited me to be one of his team members for *Meşterul Manole*. He himself was approached by Mr. Măniuţiu, who proposed the play for this very special centennial year.

**T. M. S.:** *That's very interesting for me because when I listen to you speak about theatre – I'm new here in Cluj – I just assume that your involvement with the National Theatre was longstanding.*

**L. B.:** I am actually a great supporter of the National Theatre and of the Hungarian Theatre and all of the independent theatres in Cluj, but I've not been so much involved (on the inside) until now. I've been on the other side, you know, watching and enjoying.

**T. M. S.:** *Why were you chosen?*

**L. B.:** By Andrei?

**T. M. S.:** Yes.

**L. B.:** Well actually, he saw my work, as I showed him my portfolio. I told him the story related to one of the biggest theatre costume designers that we have in Romania. She's been working since the 1970s in theatre, Doina Levintza. She was the one who discovered me while I was still in high school. Ever since she worked with me, it has come true what she said to me at first, "Your theatrical approach to fashion will definitely lead you someday to designing costumes." Recently I met her and she said, "You remember what I told you the first time that I awarded you in Bucharest?" I was certain that at some point I would go further in theatre because until now all my fashion shows that I worked on had a theatrical approach. I had fashion shows for Berlin Fashion Week and fashion exhibitions at London Fashion Week, which were inspired by theatre theories, for example, by Brecht and Mamet, you know. I think for me theatre theory was a kind of intellectual framework in which I could develop concepts related to clothing. I think this was what triggered Andrei to decide to propose this project with me.

**T. M. S.:** *Within the show Master Manole, the movements in my mind resembles the very regimented performance that is required in a fashion show. The movements seem so specific in Manole – basically the movements are big, the movements are developed to fill an entire space. You literally have this whole church in the background. The movements had to be large, larger than this world, if you will. So then, did the theme "Visions" pique your interest at all when you heard about The International Meetings in Cluj?*



**Fig. 1:** Lucian Broscățean during the exhibition of the costumes he designed for *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj, *The International Meetings in Cluj*, 8th edition, October 2018

**L. B.:** Well, actually yes, because in the creative field there has been a lot of talk about the lack of visions in the last couple of years.

**T. M. S.:** *In the theatre?*

**L. B.:** In the theatre, in arts, in fashion. The organizers chose a very good theme because I think the critics that came here and also the public were very much interested in seeing visions: Are there new visions nowadays? How are the visions attached to a certain school of thought? How is *dogma* affecting visions? How are the visions developing for the younger audience or for the younger playwrights or directors?

Andrei is a young theatre director. I think he has great talent and I am very much inspired by his vision.

**T. M. S.:** *How would you define Andrei's vision, if you had to summarize it?*

**L. B.:** Transgressive, modern, complex, and with an extraordinary depth to it. For me he is *very* meticulous in his way of mapping everything – it's all the time a very creative process. We worked together for six months, and in those six months I discovered the man with a vision which inspires me. Of course it's polarizing because he tries to avoid the safety nets.

**T. M. S.:** *Define, maybe concretely, what a safety net would be?*

**L. B.:** Yes, a safety net would be to do a performance with all the clichés and every aspect that would definitely lead you to a *good* performance, not to a *brilliant* performance. A safety net would not be a mediocre performance, but it would use all the clichés and all the formulas in order to say something about a certain subject. Andrei avoids these safety nets and he knows that he will be criticized or deconstructed by certain critics, but I think he also likes that. He likes to polarize views.

Andrei also took me out from my comfort zone. What I wanted to say earlier is that the second reason why he chose me for the project is that all my fashion shows and all my fashion art projects were very much interested by spirituality and by Blaga's approach to spirituality.

I think Andrei was very much interested in how I can develop certain aspects of orthodox or Christian church identity. In my fashion shows I very much developed certain orthodox iconography, but in a *very* conceptual and abstract way. If I would have done costumes that were, for example, dark and minimal, *very* safe, it would not have been so polarizing. The costumes created much debate. Some of the critics saw them as attached to the whole directing vision. Others saw them as Avant-garde. Others wrote that they're brilliant. Others associated them with cartoon characters – so it was very different, it was not a very safe kind of approach. We knew from the get-go that due to the theme and due to the way we interpret it, *Manole* would also be about controversy and about different interpretations of it.

**T. M. S.:** *Along the lines of interpretation, how did you, as you were preparing for this festival, interpret the theme, "Visions"?*

**L. B.:** Well actually, as I said before, I'm very much interested in discovering new visions, whether it is a new playwright, or whether it is a new contemporary artist, I think it is interesting and refreshing to find visions.

One of my favorite social critics once said in the Martin Scorsese documentary, "There is nothing new because everything is soaked in nostalgia." I really meditated on what Fran Lebowitz said, and I find it very interesting because it can be applied also to the creative fields of course. If nostalgia is soaking everything, then you can't get new visions. They are the old visions, which are just recycled then up-cycled in a metaphorical way. But to find new visions, one has to be transgressive and destructive, not have a checklist such as: I have to make a performance which has to get to the audience, which has to be popular, which has to have beautiful costumes. I think it's also about risks, things that can really teach you something about doing a creative project. I'm all the time talking about the creative process because for me working at this particular theatre production was not about only fashion, it was also about movement.

The stage design was done by Mihai Păcurar, who himself has a very specific vision. He is all the time searching for new materials and new types of interpreting old symbolism or archaism. For example, here he worked with digital printed structures, which I also used for the costumes, and with lighting design, and he tried to interpret in a very postmodern way an archaic theme, which in most of the interpretations was more tied to Tarkovsky's *Andrei Rublev* than to a *very* modern aesthetic.

I think both of them are transgressive and within the whole *International Meetings* I really liked the way that they've chosen the spectacles that they presented. Each was questioning in a way this idea of vision. It's a concept that has to be present in critical thinking. What can be visionary? What can be a vision? What can be a new vision? How can I have a new vision? It's very interesting, all this creative work which recycles and up-cycles ideas.



**Fig. 2:** The exhibition of the costumes Lucian Broscățean designed for *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj, *The International Meetings in Cluj*, 8th edition, October 2018

**T. M. S.:** *I find fascinating the need to think about creating if you want to create. You can't just create, can you? So that would be the critique within "Visions." You speak about the thing that is absent. But in speaking about the thing that is absent there are so many questions: Why was it ever lost? Was it ever there in the first place? And in speaking about vision, will we actually have something new come about?*

*Let's think about the costume design now specifically. You've already mentioned some words like "disruptive, transgressive, polarizing, meticulous" for Andrei's vision, and then within your own costume design critics are saying "abstract, Avant-garde, cartoon, or brilliant," so what did you hope to accomplish in your costume design?*

**L. B.:** First of all I wanted to say a story about how I interpret this very misogynistic orthodox tale because I wanted to have a very feminist approach to costumes, but in a subtle way. I didn't want it to become an on-stage protest about misogyny, but I wanted it to underline the fact that through costumes one can speak about very specific issues regarding contemporary culture.

Andrei from the get-go wanted to deconstruct this whole myth regarding *Manole* and how he made a human sacrifice, namely a woman, who is his own wife in order to arrive at the big accomplishment that was an Orthodox church. It's such a brilliant metaphor for nowadays because of the whole "#MeToo" movement. Within this new feminist context, the play was interpreted and was transformed into a spectacle. That's why all the women characters in the play are very tough and strong, even for example the two women that look like warriors in a way.

**T. M. S.:** *Was it your decision to give them guns?*

**L. B.:** No, actually it was Andrei's decision, but I modified the costumes so at first glance you can't see the guns. They are hidden beneath the layers of leather skirts.

After having this thought in mind about how to do the walling of the character, we wanted to do it in a metaphorical way. If you remember the moment of the spectacle in which the two characters Manole and his shadow remain only with the item of clothing and Mira vanishes, you can't know if it speaks about a true sacrifice or a symbolic one.

Another important aspect in creating the costumes were the cultural references. During the festival I had also a display at one of the exhibition places with all the cultural elements that were incorporated within the costumes. It's not only about creating the garment. For me, the creation has all

these layers of meanings because I also made references to my past collections. It’s interesting that some of the critics saw the costumes as cartoon characters or different blockbusters – which is fine, it’s their own interpretation.

If you see my collages with my references, you’ll see for example some of the elements I used ten or twelve years ago in different projects. For example, the hoods and orthodox inspired items or the symbolism I used in many collections – I tried to incorporate them in a fresh way.

I didn’t want *Manole* to become a fashion show. In some moments grotesque elements were needed. For example some of the characters had a grotesque element to them because that’s how we wanted to interpret them, but in no way did I want to make yet another fashion show. I wanted them to be costumes and to be an extension of the actors’ personality. I worked closely with Andrei Măjeri, Mihai Păcurar, the coreographer Sinko Ferenc and the actors, trying to understand what they need, how they move, what they want to say. Of course, I don’t know if these things can be seen, if they are visible, but for me it was very important.



**Fig. 3:** Dragoș Bârlea, Elena Ivanca, Irina Wintze, Adriana Băilescu, in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj





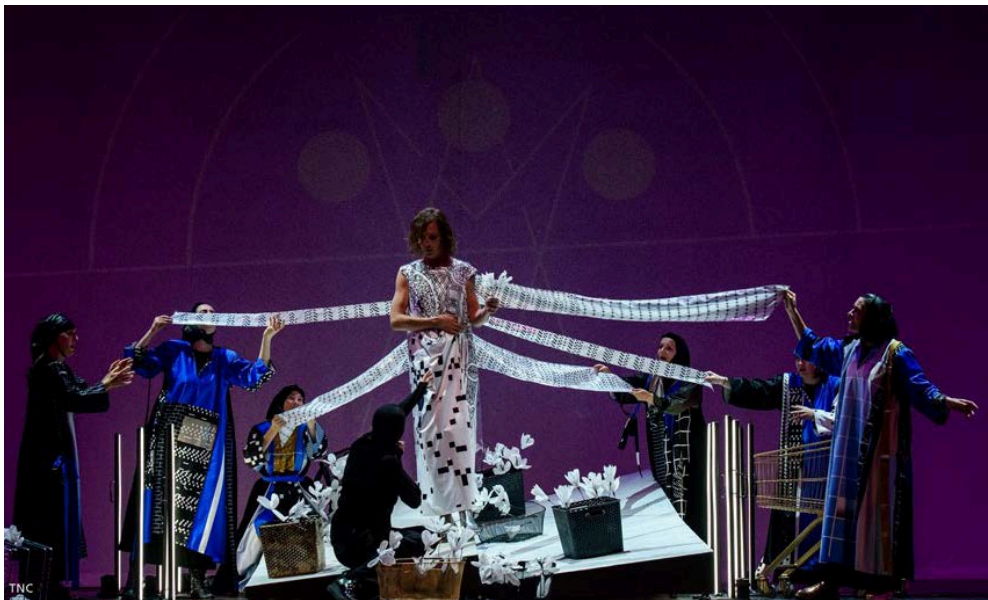
**Fig. 4:** Romina Merei as Mira and Sorin Leoveanu as Manole in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj

**T. M. S.:** *And this is something that I want to probe a little bit because your medium is the image, and the image cannot speak for itself: it needs an interpreter, and it needs an informed interpreter.*

*What’s fascinating about your image specifically, but I think that this maybe extends into the realm of postmodern art, your image is highly technical, and your image is stemming from a very rich tradition. As you are expressing this to me, the tradition is your own vision for fashion. That’s fascinating because as we are discussing vision, you’re expressing to me what is an outgrowth of your own vision of theatre, since your fashion as you are describing it really draws a lot of its energy and vitality from your own understanding of theatre theory.*

*For you as a designer apart from this interview where you can explain yourself and put it all out there, are there any performance elements you can think of that would even allow you to communicate this vision for the costume in a way where these critics’ evaluations of “abstract, Avant-garde, cartoon”, in a way where there criticisms are a little bit more channeled.*

*I guess what I’m saying is can you even provide an interpretive structure for the audience member to view the costume?*



**Fig. 5:** The archangel scene in *Master Manole* at National Theatre in Cluj

**L. B.:** It's *very* interesting what you ask me because I find that most of the time the ambiguity of the imagery that I'm doing is misleading. It's not specific, it doesn't take you to a certain place, and that's why the theatre critics and spectators that I was exposed to, who didn't know my work in fashion, interpreted it in a way that they either liked it or they disliked it. In this way, my costumes are misleading because I all the time try to maintain a certain ambiguity to what I do.

I think I learned a lot from reading about theatrical theory, and also from dance theory of the twentieth century, even from models of interpreting movement. Mr. Gaga / Ohad Naharin from Israel is a big influence in what I do. I think it's interesting that I began with theatre theory in order to understand the relationship between body and clothing. Now, I'm coming in a way back to theatre theory and to the practice of it by doing costumes. It's all a very complicated journey.

# **PERFORMANCE AND BOOK REVIEWS**



## *Acteurs roumains en France*

**Book review: Anca Costa-Foru. *Actori români – societari la Comedia Franceză* [Romanian Actors – members of the Comédie Française's Company]. Bucharest: Fundația Culturală "Camil Petrescu", 2006.**



Un des champs les plus importants qui contient des échos de la culture roumaine à l'étranger, c'est sans aucun doute le théâtre qui, malheureusement, reste moins connu que la littérature et les arts plastiques et visuels ou que la musique. En effet, si l'on a consacré des milliers de pages aux écrivains roumains qui ont écrit dans des langues de grande circulation internationale

(Tzara, Cioran, Ionesco), ou aux artistes qui se sont imposés sur la scène du monde (Brâncuși, Brauner, Enescu), les acteurs et metteurs en scène qui ont déroulé une partie de leur carrière à l'étranger méritent à coup sûr des recherches plus approfondies.

Le livre d'Anca Costa-Foru, *Actori români – societari la Comedia Franceză (Acteurs roumains – sociétaires de la Comédie-Française)*, publié par la « Fundația culturală Camil Petrescu » en 2006, relève de cet effort de connaissance de l'impact du théâtre roumain sur la scène la plus importante de France. Au fond, le livre est constitué de quatre biographies artistiques retracées dans le détail : Edouard de Max (1869-1924), Maria Ventura (1886-1954), Élisabeth Nizan (1896-1969) et Jean Yonnel (1891-1968).

Avant d'en venir à ces biographies, le livre recompose un cadre historique d'une grande importance, à savoir les échanges théâtraux franco-roumains du 19<sup>ème</sup> siècle. Il s'agit à la fois de décrire les tournées des troupes françaises en Roumanie, qui ont répandu des modes de faire du théâtre et des goûts spécifiques, ainsi que de présenter les études et expériences de certains actrices et acteurs roumains à Paris, tels Ștefan Velleșcu, Alexandru Davila, Aristizza Romanescu et Grigore Manolescu, qui se sont formés à la grande tradition théâtrale française, classique, et moins classique. Ces échanges ont constitué le terreau fertile qui a permis l'émergence des grandes carrières internationales des quatre figures principales du livre d'Anca Costa-Foru.

Il faudrait, à ce point, remarquer un paradoxe, qui se fait jour dans divers domaines de la création, c'est-à-dire que les quatre acteurs ont été confrontés à un choix culturel et linguistique significatif : en s'orientant vers la France et la scène française, ils ont pratiquement coupé leurs racines roumaines. Comme pour les écrivains, par exemple, il semble que la carrière internationale suivie n'a pu se bâtir qu'en « abandonnant » la Roumanie. Il y a cependant des nuances. Si Élisabeth Nizan, fille du philologue Lazăr Șăineanu, est Roumaine seulement par sa naissance à Bucarest en 1896, étant naturalisée Française depuis l'âge de 8 ans, les autres présentent des cas à part. Jean Yonnel a développé toute sa carrière en France et cette carrière reste, aujourd'hui encore, impressionnante : 3655 apparitions sur la scène de la Comédie-Française, en 85 personnages dramatiques. Par contre, Edouard

de Max a gardé certaines relations artistiques avec son pays d'origine, car, pendant des séjours plus ou moins brefs, il a joué dans des spectacles. Par exemple, en 1898, il a paru sur la scène du Théâtre National de Bucarest, dans *Hamlet*, *Britannicus*, *Ruy Blas*. En 1904, il a fait une grande tournée internationale, qui a inclus la Roumanie aussi.

Maria Ventura représente un cas spécial, car elle a joué à la fois en France et en Roumanie, menant une carrière parallèle brillante. Sa première formation d'actrice s'est faite en Roumanie, car elle vient d'une famille d'artistes de la scène (le père est auteur dramatique, la mère actrice) et entreprend des études au Conservatoire de Bucarest. Son début date de 1901 sur la scène du Théâtre National et son succès s'est poursuivi par des études à Paris. Avant la Première Guerre, elle a joué à Paris, notamment à l'Odéon sous la direction du grand rénovateur du théâtre, André Antoine. Pendant la guerre, elle a joué en Roumanie, retrouvant sa langue maternelle. Depuis 1919, elle a été engagée à la Comédie-Française, mais sans oublier sa Roumanie natale, où elle a joué constamment, en roumain, entre 1925-1936. Elle a eu un arrangement avec la direction de la Comédie-Française qui lui a permis de revenir chaque été à Bucarest, pendant quelques semaines, afin de se produire sur la scène du Théâtre National ou, à partir de 1929, de monter des spectacles avec la compagnie privée que l'actrice elle-même a créée et qui portait son nom.

L'intérêt du livre de Costa-Foru vient aussi du fait que l'auteure n'isole pas les acteurs étudiés, mais les présente dans une sorte de réseau, dans leurs relations complexes avec les contemporains. De plus, elle analyse les rapports que ces quatre acteurs roumains ont entretenus entre eux (par exemple, Jean Yonnel a été appuyé et entraîné pour sa solide carrière par Edouard de Max, qui était déjà une étoile au moment de l'arrivée de son jeune compatriote à Paris). Pour compléter le panorama, Anca Costa-Foru inclut à la fin de son livre quelques biographies de gens de théâtre roumains qui ont eu du succès en France, sans jouer sur la scène de la Comédie-Française : Alice Cocéa, Élvire Popesco, Alexandre Mihalesco, Samson Fainsilber et Génica Athanasiou. Ce qu'il faut souligner, c'est que cette liste n'est pas du tout exhaustive et qu'elle pourrait être continuée par d'autres noms...



Anca Costa-Foru ne se borne pas à fournir des informations factuelles ; elle fait aussi une analyse très bonne du style de jeu des acteurs qu'elle étudie, en corroborant tous les documents qu'elle peut réunir : images photographiques, comptes rendus de spectacles parus dans la presse, lettres et textes autobiographiques, témoignages, etc. De cette manière, elle réussit à restituer le frisson vivant que l'énergie du jeu scénique de Ventura, de Max, Nizan et Yonnel faisait ressentir aux spectateurs. Costa-Foru note même des détails qui peuvent sembler marginaux, mais qui ont un poids important dans l'architecture de ces personnalités. Ainsi, la passion d'Edouard de Max pour la poésie et la récitation de poésie : il a récité des vers de poètes parnassiens et symbolistes, mais il a voué un vrai culte à Baudelaire, en tant que poète le plus important de la modernité.

Le livre d'Anca Costa-Foru se distingue par l'excellence et la solidité de la documentation, faite notamment à la Bibliothèque de l'Arsenal et dans les archives de la Comédie-Française. De nombreuses images d'une grande valeur documentaire soutiennent un texte écrit avec minutie, précision et souplesse. Ces images aident les lecteurs à se faire une idée des rôles joués par les acteurs roumains à l'étranger, des échos de leur talent auprès du public, ainsi que des métamorphoses des pratiques théâtrales sur plus d'un demi-siècle d'évolution mouvante et surprenante. Au fond, le monde du théâtre fait voir, dans la même mesure que les autres champs culturels, la vocation des Roumains à être profondément européens par la création artistique.

**Ioan POP-CURȘEU**

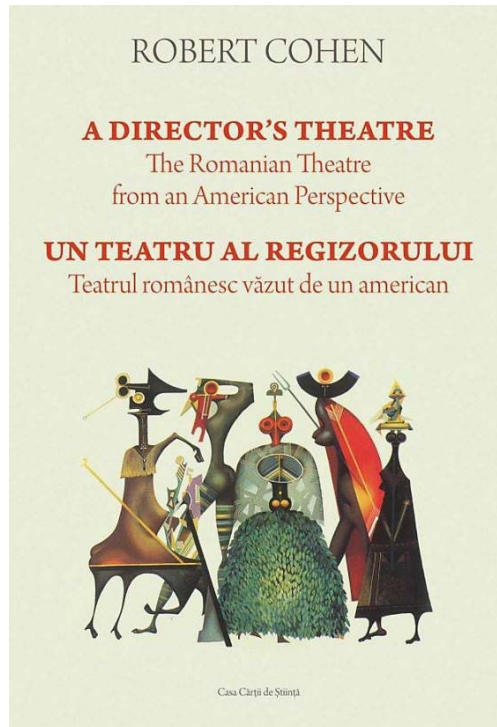
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## *A Love Letter to Theatre*

**Book review: Robert Cohen. *A Director's Theatre. The Romanian Theatre from an American Perspective*. Translated by Carmen Borbély and Anca Măniuțiu. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, 2017.**



Familiar to Romanian readers primarily as a renowned Acting professor (at UC Irvine), theatre theoretician (two of his works were partially translated to Romanian, *Acting Power* under the title *Puterea interpretării scenice*, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2007 and *More Power to You*, as *Eseuri despre Teatru*, Casa Cărții

de Știință, 2012), playwright (his plays *Machiavelli: The Art of Terror* and *Bzzap!* were translated to Romanian, published and staged at the National Theatre in Cluj in 2009 and 2016, respectively), and theatre director (his stagings of Brian Reynold's *Railroad* and *Blue Shade* were presented at Romanian theatre festivals in 2006 and 2007), Robert Cohen has prepared, in *A Director's Theatre*, another surprise for Romanian theatre specialists.

Consisting of a series of texts and interviews initially published in *Plays International* (London), *Alternatives théâtrales* (Liège), *Apostrof* (Cluj-Napoca), as well as letters and a transcript of his speech at the Professor Honoris Causa Ceremony (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2009), this bilingual, English-Romanian volume, with a foreword by Anca Măniuțiu, manages to both represent an insightful and professional perspective on the Romanian stage "which is rapidly gaining recognition as the most exciting theatre in the Western hemisphere today" (p. 67) and bring forth an "unplanned" portrait of its author, "Robert Cohen – the enthusiastic spectator". From his first encounters with Romanian theatre, seeing Andrei Șerban's *Fragments of a Trilogy* in New York (1975), "a turning point in my own artistic life" (p. 48), a production that "completely changed my career, showing me a completely new way to think of theatre" (p. 55), to contemporary incursions onto the Romanian stage (detailed reports from 2006 to 2011, reviewing performances seen in Sibiu, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca), the author assumes and successfully delivers a "double", juxtaposing role: on the one hand, the genuine spectator, excited and looking forward to the experience offered by the performance he is about to see, by the play whose "final repository is the minds and memories of its audiences" (p. 7) and, on the other hand, the specialist whose knowledge of theatre compels him to keep a certain professional distance, observe, evaluate, criticize if necessary ("Cute as it is at the opening, it has nowhere to go after the first twenty minutes, and the performance is two hours long", p. 94), refrain from uninformed commentary ("But other than noting that the production seemed bright, intense, amusing, and evocative, I can say little else with any authority", p. 81) and, first and foremost, to remain equidistant, fair to the production team and the theatergoers alike.

Perhaps due to its dated entries ("Sibiu, 2006", "Bucharest, 2008" etc.), or perhaps as a result of Cohen's accessible, affectionate writing style (he is unquestionably a storyteller!), *A Director's Theatre* leaves the impression of

an intimate diary and we, the readers, are invited to partake in the narrator's theatrical journey, to rejoice and wonder together with him at the fascinating metamorphoses of the theatre stage. "Lovely", "extraordinary", "provocative", "marvelous", "striking", "unforgettable", "lively", "breathtakingly performed" are just some of the attributes Robert Cohen gives Theatre when he considers it at its best. Restlessly, unconditionally immersed in the fictional world on stage and willing to accept its aesthetic proposal with an open mind, the author never hides his genuine enthusiasm. On the contrary, it represents a *sine qua non* condition of all encounters with artistic endeavors, the fundamental trait of a complete "theatrical experience" (p. 7).

Why a "director's theatre", one may wonder? The response rests, first and foremost, in the very purpose of the book. It is a radiograph of a theatrical quest to become familiar with Eastern European theatre, in particular Romanian theatre. It began with Andrei Şerban's "revolutionary" *Fragments of a Trilogy*, which "opened completely new ways for me to approach my directorial work" (p. 96), and continues to the present day, "avidly" seeking out "Eastern European productions" (p. 99) and desiring to become better acquainted with their approach to theatre, with "what the Germans call a *Regietheater*— a theatre of the director" (p. 100).

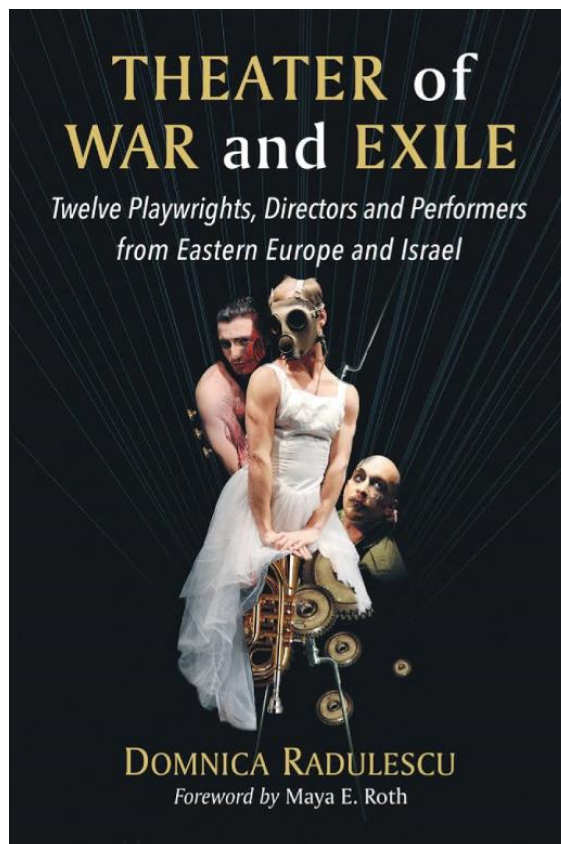
I consider Robert Cohen's book yet another one of his successful theatre textbooks, albeit an unintentional one, a useful tool for all theatre specialists, directors, actors and critics alike, as its clear viewpoint belongs to a professional who has managed to beautifully master and combine all these perspectives into a single, lucid voice. Anca Măniuţiu is right to observe in her foreword that "Cohen is open to *what he sees*, bracing himself for the sensorial, intellectual and emotional impact of the performance he witnesses" (pp. 7-8), and if the position of "Theatre Ambassador" is ever created, I have no doubt it should be modeled on Professor Robert Cohen's work ethic.

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*Theatre Within and Against Postmodernist Aesthetic*

**Book review: Rădulescu, Domnica. *Theatre of War and Exile: Twelve Playwrights, Directors and Performers from Eastern Europe and Israel*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2015.**



*Theatre of War and Exile* (hereafter, *Theatre*) asks the counter-intuitive question not of what theatre says about war and its aftermath (a philosophical and political question) but how theatre says (an aesthetic and performance

question). It probes with a surgeon's scalpel and artist's flair into the ontological shortcomings of and seeming absurdity in writing about theatre – which comes and goes before one's eyes like an explosion. Without pretense and with the resilience vested within its post-modern framework, *Theatre* recaptures both the fragile memories of these manifold traumas and the theatre's daring aesthetics which create a space-time for these memories to harbor.

Fulbright scholar, novelist, literary critic, and playwright Domnica Rădulescu has written a scholastically daring and ethically rich comparative study of theatre emerging from Israel and in and outside the Balkans – on writers living in exile and through wartime. The driving-force of *Theatre* is her interest in the “politics of aesthetics” (8). This interest stems from her rich (if not speculative) philosophical claim regarding the malleability of a creative artist's psychological ontology based upon the premise – wartime and exilic experiences profoundly shape the aesthetics of theatre makers' creations. It changes the way they think and how they create. She reasons that these traumatic experiences “cause an ontological mutation in our psyche and in our relation to time and space” (13). The ontological mutation manifests itself, in a word, through the aesthetics of fracture and fragmentation (191). More to the point, Rădulescu's years of studying Balkan theatre in conjunction with her own experience as an émigré to the United States in 1983 not only inform her aesthetic theory but also her methodology. Her desire “to speak from a place of experience and embodiment” theoretically paves a path for her to get closer to her study's object: the creative collision of the artist's being and their theatrical aesthetic. *Theatre's* intention is three-fold: define the ontological mutation (Part 1), define the aesthetics of the ontological mutation (Part 2), and identify the aesthetics' means to heal fractured communities (Part 3). One can hear the classic apologia for theatre's relevance.

In terms of scholastic and theoretical discourse, Rădulescu comfortably positions *Theatre* within and against postmodernist aesthetic, gleaning much support from and debating with theorists and their theories, such as Mikhail Bakhtin (the carnivalesque), Jean Baudrillard (the simulation), Edward Said (exile), Bertolt Brecht (alienation), and Erik Ehn (genocide). Her study of live theatre uniquely positions her argument for the real in opposition to the post-

modern world view of simulacra, of which Beaudrillard is a fountainhead. If part one is a manifesto describing the particular Balkan aesthetics with respect to its ontological genesis, part two acts as this aesthetics' diatribe against the vanity of Horace's ode, "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," by asserting the theatre's real presence, its peculiar form of political theatre after the vision of Brecht (95). Part three follows in that it argues that true presence can lead to true healing of individuals, communities, and nations, thus theatre's relevance to the world.

Rădulescu's thesis emerges from the existential need latent within the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to fashion spaces for public memory and history-making, public spaces for communities to create remembrances of recent atrocities. In a few words, her thesis is that the "conspicuous aesthetics" arising out of theatre in the Balkans uses the carnivalesque, pastiche, and fractured narrative forms (1) because the playwrights'/theatre makers' psyches as a result of war and exile have undergone ontological transformation and (2) this ontological transformation uniquely enables these artists to create aesthetic forms that "through alchemic processes of transformation...have a restorative potential" (14). A bold thesis, to say the least.

In keeping her focus on the real, not only *Theatre's* thesis but also its form challenge Baudrillard's and others' prescriptions of reality. This proved to fortify and weaken *Theatre's* thesis. Rădulescu organizes *Theatre* into five parts: Introduction, Parts 1-3, and Conclusion. In Parts 1-3, she writes multiple performance studies on a range of authors who fit under the auspice of the part's theme, whether it be "exile as ontological mutation," "theatre of war and genocide and theatre dystopias," or "performance as memory keeper and promoter of peace" (37; 94; 163). Within each part, she includes a range of genres from political theatre history, memoir, performance/textual analysis, to interview, and more. While these multifaceted approaches at times poignantly describe the Balkan artist's being and his/her theatre's aesthetics, other instances, as in Part 1 (66-77) in which is the insertion of memoir and the analysis of her own novel *Train to Trieste* (which is neither a play nor theatre), obfuscate the theatre of war and exile at which she ultimately aims. Yet, it would be remiss not to mention a moment of her journalistic-scholastic



brilliance during her interview with Marcy Arlin (173-184), which breaks as much as it does confirm one of the major premises of her study, itching one of the uncomfortable scratches one has in reading these interviews, since the artists rarely answer her research question with such New York directness. Rădulescu asks (in all of her interviews):

**“DR:** Do you connect fractured or fragmented theatrical form, non-linear structures and carnivalesque aesthetics to the theater and productions dealing with war, oppression or displacement?

**MA:** Sometimes, but not necessarily.”

Arlin’s response stands in as a symbol for the critique one has upon arriving at the end of her book: Has Rădulescu’s theoretical frame adequately hosted the vast and eclectic network of theatre makers *Theatre* represents? The answer is: sometimes, but not necessarily. Rădulescu relies too heavily on the theoreticians above, when her work as well as her own interests advantageously position her to conduct the same study with part of the main purpose being to advance the postmodernist aesthetic theories as formulated by Bakhtin, Baudrillard, and others filtered through “Balkan flair” with a more pronounced feminist critique. Towards the end of *Theatre*, in Part 3, she briefly identifies “the intersection between feminist theatre aesthetics and postmodernist aesthetics” and goes on to mention their use of autobiography and other non-traditional forms of knowledge-making – which if emphasized to a greater extent, would reorient rather than disorient her readers (scholars, theatre makers, and laypersons), forming a rather beautiful argument about a “conspicuous aesthetics,” its Balkan, feminist, and postmodernist embodiment. If the feminist critique were more evident, *Theatre* could tout itself as an outstanding piece of scholarship and a pioneer for a new genre of feminist literature.

**Trent SANDERS**

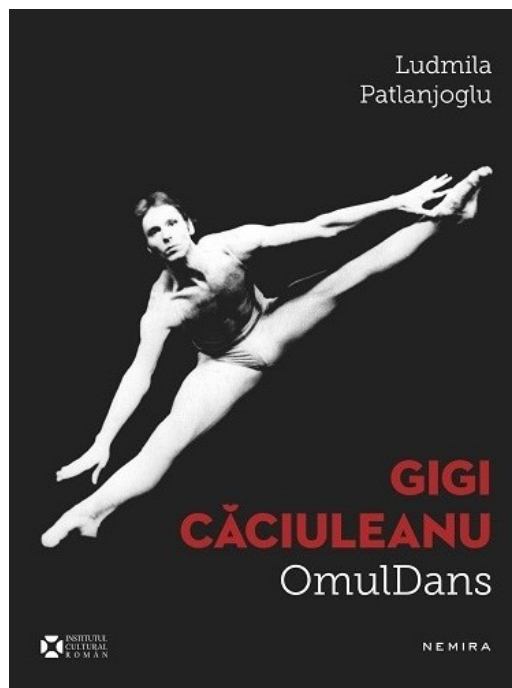
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*Gigi Căciuleanu: To dance, or not to be...  
Je suis quelqu'un qui danse!*

**Book review: Ludmila Patlanjoglu. *Gigi Căciuleanu – Omul Dans* [*Gigi Căciuleanu – Dance Man*]. Editura Institutului Cultural Român în colaborare cu Editura Nemira, editat cu sprijinul JTI și al Fundației Art Production, 2017.**



It is not an easy thing to embark upon such an ambitious undertaking as to assemble an account of Gigi Căciuleanu's universe. And as I refer to the scope of Ludmila Patlanjoglu's venture by such a vast term, and not life or

career, my choice of words is, not by chance, intimidated by the richness of Căciuleanu's artistic persona that has, from the outset, singled itself as singular in the world of dance and art altogether. I think it would befit Deleuze's idea of *agencement* to view the concept behind this book as a multilayered, multifaceted assemblage of images, narratives, voices and gestures. The underlying structure of the book walks us through a complex weaving that works best in this almost cinematic orchestration of voices and gazes meant to seize something of the aura that surrounds the complex and variegated artistic but also very modest, generous, and noble personality of Gigi Căciuleanu.

Following Patlanjoglu's introduction to Gigi Căciuleanu's career (his early years of training and success in Romania and his further success abroad both as a dancer and choreographer, from his founding the school of contemporary dance in Nancy, to founding the Gigi Căciuleanu Dance Company in Paris and his time as artistic director of the El Banch Chilean National Ballet), the unfolding of the book consists of an exquisite montage of images, memories, gestures and affects that brings together memorable and pivotal moments and encounters that guided and shaped Căciuleanu's life and career. As Gigi Căciuleanu recalls his seminal encounters and his work with his teacher and mentor Miriam Răducanu, or his partners and friends, Ruxandra Racovitza and Dan Mastacan, his fated collaborations with Pina Bausch, Pierre Cardin, Maya Plisetskaya, the contrapuntal blending of the voices describing – in their turn – Gigi Căciuleanu draws a bigger picture that is never repetitive. While interspersed with Gigi's drawings and poems, and beautifully complimented by photographs of his performances (including his most recent choreographies), the book yields a warm and emotional narrative that the reader witnesses in its making across time and space. Patlanjoglu's ambition in this volume seems rather to set up the stage where Gigi Căciuleanu's persona and art unfold before a reader turned into audience, as if the narrative was itself a performance sculpting in time, right before our eyes. The images and voices are constantly shifting, intercutting and intertwining like a kaleidoscope that catches and renders in a flash what Walter Benjamin would call a dialectical image, a (hi)story that cannot be grasped at any point. Just like a kaleidoscope, this book creates an overall

narrative that constantly eludes us; its images are already past and yet always in the future. Despite that, its images and multiple threads do not displace one another, but rather meet up in their own dance.

"I am a difficult choreographer," admits Gigi Căciuleanu, difficult for himself and for the others; for himself because he is not trying to fit a genre and treats each performance as a world in itself. One has to unlearn each time everything they have learned in order to reinvent something new, explains Gigi Căciuleanu, going on to say that to him it is very difficult not to be in a constant quest for self-renewal. And it is here where lies also the difficulty he presents for the others, since he cannot be placed in any category, he is neither classical, nor modern, nor contemporary, while he is all these at the same time.

Describing the choreography Gigi created for her, Maya Plisetskaya calls it a choreography that is not contemporary, but rather a choreography of the future, while Rodion Shchedrin praises Gigi's exceptional musicality, and Pina Bausch describes him as a rebel, a volcano bursting with energy, an immense talent touched by genius. Recalling Gigi Căciuleanu, her student, Miriam Răducanu remembers being impressed by the elaborate thought process underlying his gestures and movements. Gigi, she says, was considering very carefully the meaning he wanted his dance to convey. To Căciuleanu, dancing is a way of thinking what we see and, at the same time, of thinking by seeing. Just like with the language that preexists the subject in Lacan's view, for Căciuleanu any dance, gesture, or line (hence his obsession for drawing and poetry that, in his view, act like a decanter for the language behind dancing) precedes the subject, announces the subject, produces the subject and is reunited with the subject in a single movement. To him dancers are a world apart, a geography they all belong to, regardless of race or language. Dance is a common ground that opens up the possibility of a common language, but also the imperative of constantly challenging their limits. Which explains how these two aspects are connected when Gigi Căciuleanu holds that the democratization of art is achieved solely by raising the bar, not by lowering it. The need to continuously reinvent his language has constituted a constant preoccupation for Căciuleanu, and also one of the reasons that prompted the global success he has had. That and the fact that

he kept being himself and has never considered 'doing like' anybody else, or trying any trend, no matter how popular. And, across the world, the critics are ecstatic, praising him for his "perfect originality," "utter original imagination," "strong personality combining humour and pure sensibility," the "purely visual fascination" of his dancing, his "refined intellect" and vast cultural background, unusual and stimulating innovative talent infusing the modern dance with a "new spirit". Each time Gigi is performing on stage, "a miracle is achieved" writes one critic, while another comments his unique style that draws both on classical ballet as well as on modern dance. "Everything in what he creates both as choreographer and dancer is surprising in a constantly renewing manner. Although there are many who already try to copy him – says one critic – he is impossible to copy since he is not copying anybody at all."

The final sections of the book bring together Gigi Căciuleanu's insightful meditations on the art of dancing, teaching, and choreographing. Each new performance he works on is a blank page filled in by the movements, gestures and trajectories of his Dance Actors, just like his poems fill in a blank page word by word, line by line in their own choreography and geography of the world around us. His driving force is the ability to create an art capable to reach a most varied public, an art meant to touch and stir the emotions of people, both on and off stage, dancers and audience at once. Gigi Căciuleanu cannot but go on... *faire du Gigi*.

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## *Waiting for... Rambuku*

**Performance review: National Theatre „Mihai Eminescu” – Timișoara: *Rambuku* by Jon Fosse, translation: Daria Ioan, adaptation: Anca Măniuțiu, stage and artistic director: Mihai Măniuțiu, set design: Adrian Damian, choreography: Andrea Gavrilu, original music: Mihai Dobre, light design: Lucian Moga, photo credits: Teatrul Național „Mihai Eminescu” – Timișoara<sup>1</sup>.**

There was once an anecdote told by a teacher to his students of an empty jar in which he first put three golf balls until the jar was full. Then he asked the students if anything else fitted in. They said no. Then he poured in little stones that filled the empty spaces between the golf balls. Then he asked the students again if the jar was full. The students said yes. Then he took sand and poured in some, until the jar was completely full. Then he asked the students if there was anything else to fill the jar with. The students said no. The sand in the jar had filled all the possible empty spaces between all those irregular pieces of matter. There was no way the teacher could fit anything else in there other than by taking something out. Then he took the cup of coffee he had sitting on his desk and poured its content inside the jar. Not only had the coffee found its way between all that matter in different shapes but it also had surrounded the sand, the stones and the golf balls, giving it all another shade of dark.

The idea behind this experiment was that no matter what you fill your life with – family, a house, roles played by golf balls, your job, a vacation – signaled by the stones, and the small things we do every day – the sand, there is always room for a cup of coffee with a friend. The attention should fall here on the coffee, more specifically on its liquid state. The way it comprises

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<sup>1</sup> *Rambuku* was distinguished with the Award for the Best Performance in Romania, given by the jury of The Romanian Association of Theatre Artists in 2018.

and the way it disseminates. Like music; a superior form of spreading meaning which pierces through your skin and by the octave, it makes even more room under your skin, it takes you places you never know existed inside you. And it fills them with expectation. The way water (or coffee) would fill an already full jar, music flows through the theatre hall, from the speakers directly to your skull filling it. This is what *Rambuku* feels like in its first seconds.

Packed with spectators, props, carpets and chairs, the theatre is swallowed whole by music. It wraps all the souls in the room, the stage expands and it feels like everyone is travelling to a single direction: The Wailing Wall. Music is topographical. The cry is one of hope and detachment from all that is earthly and perishable. Then movement begins with singular shakes at first, which then become ritualistic and extremely convincible in extrapolating dynamics into expression. They sketch the prelude of a world incarcerated by the ability or inability to manifest specific ways of expression. Each movement becomes a statement played on the verses in Hebrew, sang from deep within, an eloquence which accompanies every statement that spreads its shadows onto the Wall.



Musicality and fluidity are used by Jon Fosse in his writing by creating a text which avoids punctuation. The director Mihai Măniuțiu embraces this important aspect and masterly relies on it for the staged version of *Rambuku*. While adapting the original text for the stage, Anca Măniuțiu depicts the artistic vanishing point by passing capital letters or full stops. This unlocks the door to opportunity for the multiplication of body movement, of speech and of countless hermeneutical resonances. The image is that of mirrors facing each other creating the illusion of the same framework which multiplies endlessly. Hence the mystifying swirl of movement unleashed by the main dancer, played wonderfully by choreographer Andrea Gavrilu, who plants the seed of expectation and urges to hermeneutical exercise. With its exquisite equilibrium, this androgynous appearance raises questions and depicts this persona who seems to hold the key to the happiness of the two characters on one hand, and on the other, it dictates the flow of the performance. Like a mystic choir conductor, it spreads the energy on precise channels in order to throw all other dancers to the same rhythm, which articulates its universality. As if music, environment and all other components of this world of colossal implications begin with its very moves.

Directorial intention catches fire when speech emerges. Still there remains the question whether we attend a theatre of sensorial exaggeration to achieve the peaks of expression or we stand to acknowledge the senses that come to submerge the craters left when speech and all other senses fail. But do they fail? If you judge by the tone the female character takes, we can almost see the edges of lamentation: a constant cry that seemingly fails to impress the male character, asking him boldly to follow. In fact, both Him (played by Ion Rizea) and Her (Claudia Ieremia) are designed in contrast with the dancing group which, in total synchronized shifts, and wearing the same make up, assure the non-verbal side of the story which we later learn it is anything but silent through its solidity. Statically, the main characters start communicating which comes more as a need for communication that seems to be the only thing they share. They address each other, She fluidly, He in syncopes, expressing wishes, convinced of their dreadful condition and stating resolutions for their near future at present tense. Yet they speak of a beautiful place, a place like no other, the place at the end of their journey. Still, her tone is the opposite of vivacious and his reaction somber.





Actually, the more you focus on them, the more you realize that both Him and Her act the exact opposite of how they appear; He is the silent one, lacking expression or energy to invest in the outside world, absent-minded and introvert. Yet he is fully dressed, umbrella in hand, ready to give a reaction to the external stimuli, stately looking in the eyes of what awaits them, almost looking afraid. She on the other hand, the extrovert, seems to know all the details of their journey, acknowledges there *is* a journey to go through, yet she utters her conviction on the verge of madness, undisturbed and to herself, half naked, out of a bath tub where she sits still with her hair wet and her running mascara. She seems to be reiterating the same sentences and urges her male partner to utter the same words, over and over again, as if she held the only key to enunciation Elysium. She acts like a nervous teacher that is too eager to get her answers that she fails in waiting for her student to discover the key at his own pace. She asks her counterpart to

## WAITING FOR... RAMBUKU

repeat after her, words at first, then a whole sentence, yet she is always the one finishing the utterance for him. She gives opportunities only to take them back by avoiding the thinking. Her precarious state contrasts also with what she says about the place where their journey leads them, however, her strong inducement keeps her going towards the answer of all questions, the ideal state of pleasure, love and all that is good – Rambuku. She is sure to know how to handle Rambuku. At this state of the play, She even tells Him how they are to act once they reach their destination. She is even looking for palpable arguments to convince Him of her beliefs... out of a giant yellow globe where you guess She has been contained, book in hand, by her own eloquence. They don't seem to be reaching the same Rambuku. He would be reaching the one that is imposed by the image she creates, should he choose to accept her version of it. We do not find out in the end who had accepted whose Rambuku. But it did have the same effect on their bodies, i.e. corpses.





The appearance is grim. It calls for stiffness and stringency. But body movement speaks volumes. We can literally refer to the dancing characters as human props. Him and Her get to watch this hypnotizing dance without understanding how it's done but taking it as a pattern to try and follow on their way to their dear Rambuku. Not sure if out of her bold belief, the fact that she repeats its name approximately 345 times or she is delusional, but at a certain moment when silence masters the scene, Rambuku personifies.

What follows is what is expected; she paces the same steps the Vision makes with no trace or sound, and, without asking questions they transcend. The wait to get to Rambuku is over. But Godot never arrived either. As the water drips on stage the lights grow dim and the questions arise. There are no palm trees, nor flowers growing from the grey walls. Their presence induces the diminishing scale one assumes in prayer. The equality against the wall is fierce. Still, the walls are mobile; in fact the walls are the most versatile of all the objects in the set design, including the main characters.

The walls are moving on stage not as a coincidence but as a promise to protect and keep crib to those who need safety but stand tall for those who lean upon it. Also, intentional are the lights that come almost thoroughly from above the walls, they shift focus and playfully light the wait to absolution. Imposing and minimalist, the lights are sprayed enough to tower the stage – blackened by the grim – grey ground and stiff – scooped silence.

Which is better: to stand your ground, be a silent observer and face reality or act like a loud speaker which, through reiteration, hopes to give extra significance to her own imagination? Which one is waiting in awe and which one is frightened? Which one is right? Or better yet, who is delusional? What does it take to fill an already full jar? Is there anything after Rambuku?... there were no more students to say yes.

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