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**Theatre and Performing Arts in Eastern Europe:
New Perspectives**

**STUDIA
UNIVERSITATIS BABEŞ-BOLYAI
DRAMATICA**

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ARTICLES AND STUDIES

Un courant d'Est venu à l'Ouest via l'adaptateur scénique *Virgil Tănase*

Ondine PLESANU¹

Abstract: The article *An Eastern current coming to the West, through Virgil Tănase's stage adaptations* addresses the influences of two literary and theatrical cultures from the East (Romania and Russia) on the work of Virgil Tănase as a stage adapter in France. By scrutinizing the way in which the great Russian authors from the 19th century to the present day through the Soviet era establish themselves as a frame of reference for Tănase's work as a stage adapter and by addressing the way in which this comes to fruition, within the stage adaptations created in France by the Franco-Romanian writer (often performed abroad too), a dreamlike aesthetic born in Romania in the 1960s, the study will show that Virgil Tănase, also known as a translator, managed to create a scenic poetics in which the words are at the service of the melody just as the scenography is at the service of the theatrical metaphor. By highlighting the ontological scope of the character and especially the actor, the stage adaptations developed by Tănase from canonical works of Eastern and Western literature finally converge towards a common goal, representative of his writer's gesture: all aim to awaken in spectators their freedom to think and create, to revive each person's faith in the fulfilment of their vocation, like the Proustian narrator of the novel *In Search of Lost Time*.

Keywords: adaptation for stage, theatrical metaphor, aesthetic onirism, Eastern Block, translation, Virgil Tănase, Dostoïevski, Proust.

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Introduction

Virgil Tănase face parte din categoria intelectualilor [...] entre-deux, după o formulă pe care o invocă frecvent George Banu cu privire la sine. Român și francez, om de teatru și om de litere, clasic și foarte contemporan prin aerul pe care îl degajă scriitura sa, ludic și, când e cazul, sobru, realist și veritabil visător, Virgil Tănase este [...] un "caz" încă nerezolvat – spre șansa lui! – al culturii române...²

Virgil Tănase, personnalité culturelle à l'activité prolifique a été nommé, en France, « officier des arts et des lettres depuis 1986³ ». Traducteur et romancier, Tănase est aussi diplômé de l'Université nationale d'art théâtral et cinématographique Ion Luca Caragiale (à Bucarest), où il a suivi une classe de mise en scène de 1970 à 1974⁴. Une dizaine d'années plus tard, il fut d'ailleurs récompensé par le prix de dramaturgie de l'Académie roumaine⁵. L'activité théâtrale de Virgil Tănase est donc reconnue par la profession. Pourtant, à ce jour, son travail de metteur en scène a souvent été éclipsé des recherches scientifiques portant sur lui et son œuvre. En effet, ces dernières se sont axées principalement sur sa production littéraire en tant qu'écrivain roumain d'expression française⁶, étayant son esthétique onirique construite en opposition au réalisme socialiste, cet « art de propagande et rétrograde esthétiquement » pour citer Nicolae Bârna⁷. Certes, certaines des

² Nous traduisons : « Virgil Tănase fait partie de la catégorie des intellectuels [...] *entre-deux*, d'après une formule qu'invoquait fréquemment George Banu en parlant de lui-même. Roumain et Français, homme de théâtre et homme de lettres, classique et très contemporain par la fraîcheur qui se dégage de son écriture, ludique et, quand la situation l'exige, sobre, réaliste et véritable rêveur, Virgil Tănase est [...] un 'cas' encore non résolu – par chance pour lui! – de la culture roumaine... » Ces mots de Călin Ciobotari sont cités dans Virgil Tănase, *Adaptări teatrale. Balzac, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Cehov, Gorki, Proust* (Iasi: Junimea, 2023), quatrième de couverture.

³ « Virgil Tănase » Théâtre online, page consultée le 10 mars 2024, Virgil Tănase | THEATREonline.

⁴ « Dossier de presse du *Petit Prince* au Lucernaire », *Théâtre contemporain*, page consultée le 07 mars 2024, f-ada-57fb8741058a5.pdf (theatre-contemporain.net).

⁵ « Virgil Tănase », Théâtre online.

⁶ Marina Mureșanu Ionescu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase », *Revue Roumaine d'Études Francophones*, no. 8 (2016): 141-150.

⁷ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase », *Caiete critice*, no. 10, (2013): 65.

pièces de Virgil Tănase ont été étudiées ; Alina Crihană, par exemple, s'est penchée sur *Fiarele*, une « comédie féroce » qu'il a écrite et mise en scène, une « farce tragique », « satirique » et « dystopique » pour reprendre les termes de l'auteur, autour de la situation sociale post-totalitaire de la Roumanie⁸. Or là encore, le corpus pris pour étude est une œuvre originale de Tănase, dont le sujet est directement en lien avec la période de la dictature roumaine. En outre, Alina Crihană, parmi d'autres chercheurs, a aussi analysé la manière dont la littérature de Tănase prend en charge une mémoire historique de sa terre d'origine⁹ ; néanmoins on omet souvent de préciser que Virgil Tănase s'est également nourri de la culture russe depuis le plus jeune âge.

À l'issue de cet état de l'art, il ressort que le travail d'adaptation scénique mené par Tănase – depuis plusieurs décennies maintenant – est un champ qui reste à explorer, tout comme les liens qui relient le metteur en scène franco-roumain au(x) théâtre(s) russe(s). C'est pourquoi, à l'occasion de la parution récente de ses adaptations théâtrales (en 2023), regroupées dans le livre *Adaptări teatrale. Balzac, Dostoievski, Tolstoi, Cehov, Gorki, Proust*¹⁰ écrit en roumain et pas encore traduit en français, le temps est venu de consacrer une étude aux adaptations de Virgil Tănase, tout en tenant compte du rapport étroit qui le relie à l'art théâtral russe.

Dans cet article, il s'agira ainsi d'analyser en quoi le parcours de Tănase en tant qu'écrivain de la diaspora roumaine naturalisé français et influencé par l'art russe, a déterminé son esthétique d'adaptateur scénique. La première partie de cette étude sera consacrée à l'influence des figures emblématiques de la littérature, du cinéma et du théâtre russe, depuis le XIXe siècle jusqu'à nos jours, sur le travail d'adaptateur scénique de Virgil Tănase. La partie suivante traitera de l'importation d'une pensée esthétique roumaine dans la conception de l'adaptation dramaturgique par Virgil Tănase. Enfin, la dernière partie sera axée sur la réécriture de ses adaptations françaises pour un public de l'Est.

⁸ Alina Crihană, « (Post?)totalitarism, absurd și antiutopie în *Fiarele* de Virgil Tănase », *Caiete critice*, no. 10, (2013): 74-79.

⁹ Alina Crihană, « La vie comme un 'roman' ou les mémoires d'un exilé 'atypique' : Virgil Tănase – *Un, deux, trois, la mort !* », *Diasporas Circulations, migrations, histoire*, no. 22 (2013): 54-66.

¹⁰ Virgil Tănase, *Adaptări teatrale*.

1. Le modèle de l'art russe pour le metteur en scène Virgil Tănase

Les origines d'une proximité avec la culture russe

La culture russe exerce un certain pouvoir d'attraction sur Virgil Tănase et pour preuve, dans son ouvrage *Adaptări teatrale*, parmi les cinq pièces de théâtre qu'il a retranscrites d'après ses propres mises en scène (représentées en France), trois d'entre elles, soit plus de la moitié, proviennent de textes d'auteurs russes : *Crime et châtement* de Fiodor Dostoïevski, *Anna Karénine* de Léon Tolstoï et enfin *Anton Tchekhov et Maxime Gorki... On rentre et on boit du thé*¹¹, d'après la correspondance de Tchekhov avec Gorki. Cet attachement de Virgil Tănase aux œuvres canoniques russes vient probablement de son enfance, étant donné qu'il est né en 1945 à Galați, au temps où la Roumaine faisait partie du Bloc de l'Est. En effet, le 3 août 1948, la Grande Assemblée nationale a adopté le Décret no. 175¹² concernant la réforme de l'enseignement qui rendait la langue russe obligatoire dès la quatrième classe élémentaire. Cette obligation est d'ailleurs restée valable jusqu'en 1963-1964, en témoigne Laura M. Herța¹³. Tănase a donc acquis les bases de la langue russe dès le plus jeune âge¹⁴ et s'est sans doute familiarisé très tôt avec les grands noms de la littérature russe, celle-ci étant alors plus simple d'accès que celles venues d'Occident¹⁵. Par ailleurs, Tănase a baigné

¹¹ Didier Long metteur en lecture, *Anton Tchekhov et Maxime Gorki... On rentre et on boit du thé* par Virgil Tănase, Collégiale Saint-Sauveur, Grignan, le 11 juillet 2010. Cette lecture a été présentée lors du 15^{ème} festival de la correspondance de Grignan en 2010. Programme-2010.pdf (grignan-festivalcorrespondance.com)

¹² « Décret n° 175/1948 », Lege [5], consulté le 11 mai 2024, Décret n° 175/1948 pour la réforme de l'éducation - Lege5.ro.

¹³ Laura M. Herța, « Les relations inter-communistes dans la période 1960-1965. La désoviétisation en Roumanie », *Synergies Roumanie* no. 11 (2016): 30.

¹⁴ Rappelons que Virgil Tănase traduit de nombreuses pièces de théâtre du russe, le plus souvent vers le français comme pour son spectacle *Le Cadavre vivant* de Tolstoï joué au Lucernaire en 1991, ou pour son spectacle *La mouette* de Tchekhov joué au Lucernaire en 2000.

¹⁵ Voir « Interview de Virgil Tănase », SaintExupéry TV (youtube), consultée le 12 mai 2024, Interview de Virgil Tănase - partie 1/2 (youtube.com), Dans cette vidéo, lorsqu'on lui pose la question « À quand remonte votre rencontre avec Saint-Exupéry ? », Tănase se remémore sa joie lorsqu'il a découvert un livre de Saint-Exupéry dans la bibliothèque de son père, pointant la difficulté de trouver des œuvres littéraires françaises dans la ville de province où il a vécu adolescent (voir : 0 min 42 sec-1min 31 sec).

dans un environnement qui accordait un grand « espace [...] aux productions soviétiques dans la presse, la radio et la télévision¹⁶ », comme l'a rappelé Laura M. Herța, ce qui n'a fait qu'attiser sa curiosité pour le cinéma soviétique et développer son goût pour la mélancolie des œuvres russes.

Parmi les quelques personnalités des années 1960 qui se sont démarquées alors que Tănase était adolescent, le *Larousse* cite Mikhaïl Kalatozov¹⁷, le réalisateur de *Quand passent les cigognes*, film dans lequel s'est illustrée l'actrice Tatiana Samoïlova¹⁸ pour laquelle Tănase nous a confié, lors d'un entretien, avoir beaucoup d'admiration¹⁹. Or si Virgil Tănase est aussi émerveillé par cette vedette du dégel russe (1953-1964), c'est probablement parce que son talent a été reconnu mondialement dans un contexte de production encore fébrile, témoignant ainsi du fait que la censure n'empêche pas l'art d'éclorre dans toute sa splendeur comme l'avaient montré déjà Dostoïevski, Tchekhov ou encore Tolstoï, trois écrivains russes que Tănase affectionne particulièrement :

Quand j'étais jeune et que je n'avais aucune expérience de la vie, je me plaignais beaucoup de la censure. Puis, je me suis aperçu que la censure dont j'ai été « victime » en Roumanie n'était pas plus dure ni plus pernicieuse que celle de la Russie du XIXe siècle qui n'avait pas empêché Dostoïevski, Tolstoï ou Tchekhov d'écrire et de publier leur littérature.²⁰

¹⁶ Laura M. Herța, « Les relations inter-communistes dans la période 1960-1965 ».

¹⁷ « Le cinéma soviétique », *Larousse*, page consultée le 11 mai 2023, https://www.larousse.fr/encyclopedie/divers/le_cin%C3%A9ma_sovi%C3%A9tique/187271#:~:text=Le%20r%C3%A9gime%20sovi%C3%A9tique%20a%20accord%C3%A9,fait%20le%20tour%20du%20monde.

¹⁸ Joël Chapron, « Tatiana Samoïlova (1934-2014), inoubliable interprète de 'Quand passent les cigognes' », *Le monde*, dernière mise à jour le 6 mai 2014, https://www.lemonde.fr/disparitions/article/2014/05/06/tatiana-samoilova-1934-2014-inoubliable-interprete-de-quand-passent-les-cigognes_4412443_3382.html. Chapron rappelle que Tatiana Samoïlova a renoncé à rentrer dans la troupe du Bolchoï pour se consacrer à une carrière dans le théâtre et qu'elle a gagné, grâce à son interprétation d'Anna Karénine, la seule palme d'or soviétique.

¹⁹ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase au sujet de l'adaptation scénique de *À la Recherche du temps perdu* », 27 juillet 2022.

²⁰ Nathalie Jugerman, « Entretien avec Virgil Tanase », *Madinin'art, critiques culturelles de Martinique*, page consultée le 11 mai 2024, <https://www.madinin-art.net/crime-et-chatiment/>

La grandeur des œuvres russes du XIXe siècle à une époque touchée par la censure trouve ainsi son écho dans les productions des grands cinéastes du cinéma soviétique qui ont osé prendre des libertés artistiques.

Dans le domaine du théâtre, une autre personnalité artistique de l'époque soviétique a aussi retenu l'attention de Virgil Tănase : le dramaturge soviétique Leonid Zorin, avec sa pièce *Mélodie de Varsovie*²¹ choisie par Tănase pour son premier spectacle avec sa compagnie TADA fondée en 1989. Si les productions culturelles russes depuis le XIXe siècle jusqu'à nos jours, de la littérature au théâtre, en passant par le cinéma, ont ainsi influencé, concrètement, la production de Tănase – dans le choix des textes dramaturgiques qu'il a mis en scène et des textes divers qu'il a adaptés au théâtre – sa double expérience de spectateur et de directeur d'acteurs auprès de comédiens possédant une culture tantôt de l'Est, tantôt de l'Ouest, lui a aussi permis d'acquérir un regard critique quant aux différences des pratiques théâtrales dans ces diverses parties du monde.

La direction d'acteur dans le « théâtre oriental » et « occidental », selon Tănase

En effet, Tănase, metteur en scène établi en France depuis 1977 et dont les racines roumaines sont profondes, a une capacité accrue de saisir les différences entre la culture française et russe au regard des institutions théâtrales de chacun de ces deux pays. Au cours de notre échange, Tănase a ainsi relevé le fait qu'en France il n'y a pas la même culture des troupes de théâtres qu'en Russie et que, mises à part quelques exceptions dont fait partie la Comédie-Française, les théâtres ne possèdent pas leurs acteurs permanents. Or pour Tănase qui a souligné au cours du même entretien l'importance que revêt pour lui la « starification » des comédiens²², il paraît évident que l'organisation en troupe, familiarisant le spectateur avec les comédiens tout en faisant de ceux-ci les représentants prestigieux d'une maison théâtrale, est à

²¹ « Dossier de présentation Compagnie TADA », consulté le 10 mai 2024, Microsoft Word - TADA Spectacles.doc (artproduction.mc). La pièce *Mélodie de Varsovie* a été montée partout dans le monde, à Londres et au Canada entre autres. Voir : A Warsaw Melody - Arcola Theatre à Londres en avril 2012, Warsaw Melody - Persephone Theatre au Canada en 1988.

²² Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

un modèle à suivre. Ce désir de fidélité entre acteurs et metteurs en scène se reflète d'ailleurs dans l'éthique de travail de Tănase, par des collaborations artistiques de longue date – David Legras, comédien depuis plus de vingt ans dans l'adaptation du roman *À la recherche du temps perdu* par Tănase²³ pourra en témoigner. Par ailleurs, Tănase nous a également fait part des différences qu'il a pu observer entre les interprètes de l'Est (russes et roumains) et les interprètes français, déplorant une persistance du texto-centrisme en France quand à l'inverse, les interprètes du « théâtre oriental » selon ses termes, privilégient la « mélodie » du texte :

En France, la tradition théâtrale a été tuée par le texte, on a du mal à comprendre cela mais c'est la mélodie qui donne le sens. Le pauvre auteur dramatique imagine des situations, où il y a des conflits, des intentions et il doit laisser une trace. Quelle trace peut-il laisser dans la civilisation occidentale ? Que l'écrit. Mais dans le théâtre oriental c'est les déplacements, on note les déplacements. Donc quand je lis le texte avec les comédiens, on essaie de trouver cette mélodie, quelle est l'intention derrière.²⁴

Cette citation induit chez Tănase une approche du théâtre qui, privilégiant les intentions sous-tendues par le texte, fait la part belle à l'interprétation dont le rôle est, d'une certaine manière, de faire oublier le texte en lui-même pour mettre en relief ses différents espaces et niveaux, les idées diverses qui s'en dégagent, les parenthèses qui y sont développées. Or cette approche dramaturgique vient directement de l'onirisme structural, mouvement esthétique roumain dont le chef de file fut Dumitru Tsepeneag²⁵ ; c'est pourquoi il importe d'explicitier la manière dont Virgil Tănase a importé cette esthétique littéraire au sein de son travail d'adaptateur scénique, à la lumière de ses spectacles *À la recherche du temps perdu* et *Le Petit Prince*²⁶.

²³ Virgil Tănase metteur en scène, *À la recherche du temps perdu* d'après Proust, Théâtre du Bourg Neuf, Avignon, 2002.

²⁴ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

²⁵ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

²⁶ Virgil Tănase metteur en scène, *Le Petit Prince* d'après Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, Théâtre Michel, Paris, première le 20 mars, 2006.

2. L'influence d'un courant onirique de l'Est chez l'adaptateur scénique, en France

Tout d'abord, il faut rappeler que le courant littéraire onirique auquel a appartenu Tănase traduit aussi « la récusation de toute idéologie (soit-elle religieuse, socialiste, communiste ou littéraire)²⁷ » tel que l'a souligné Georgiana Lungu-Badea. Pour sa part, Virgil Tănase résume l'onirisme en ces termes :

le seul courant littéraire dans le sens traditionnel du terme qui a existé dans les pays de l'Est après la Seconde Guerre mondiale. [...] La théorie était la suivante : le rêve est le symptôme de quelque chose qu'on ne connaît pas, dont nous ignorons les mécanismes. Il n'en reste pas moins que le rêve est « réel », il existe pour celui qui rêve, signe concret (puisqu'on peut se le rappeler) de quelque chose qui se passe dans notre conscience même si nous sommes incapables de comprendre. [...] On assemblait les images qui nous venaient à l'esprit, sans essayer de les interpréter, mais par ces images qui sont les symptômes réels de ces choses qui échappent à la raison, on donnait la sensation de la complexité de l'homme.²⁸

L'onirisme mettait donc l'accent sur ce qui échappe à la raison en assemblant des images selon le modèle du kaléidoscope de manière à lire une même réalité sous divers angles à la fois, jouant ainsi, tel que l'a noté Nicolae Bârna, sur la « simultanéité des images²⁹ ». Retranscrit sur scène, cet aspect se traduit chez Tănase par des « métaphores théâtrales » comme c'est le cas par exemple dans son adaptation de *Crime et châtiment*³⁰ où l'on peut lire le descriptif suivant dans le dossier du spectacle :

²⁷ Georgiana Lungu-Badea, « Enjeux, résistances et dérives identitaires déterritorialisées. Étude de cas: Tsepeneag, Tanase, Visniec », *Études Interdisciplinaires en Sciences humaines*, no. 2 (2015): 202.

²⁸ Nathalie Jungerman, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

²⁹ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

³⁰ Virgil Tănase metteur en scène, *Crime et châtiment* par Fiodor Dostoïevski, Théâtre du Lucernaire, Paris, première le 22 janvier 2014.

La mise en scène compte justement sur le jeu du comédien pour nouer les éléments du spectacle (des images scéniques et des déplacements jusqu'aux sons en passant par la lumière, le décor et les costumes) pour obtenir ces « métaphores théâtrales » qui nous permettent d'accéder là où le langage courant, énonciatif, est inopérant.³¹

Au vu de l'importance du procédé métaphorique aux yeux de Tănase, il n'est pas étonnant que l'écriture proustienne, où cette figure de style omniprésente est utilisée avec une acuité remarquable, l'ait séduit.



Fig. 1 : David Legras dans le rôle du narrateur de *À la recherche du temps perdu*, adapté et mis en scène par Tănase au Théâtre de la Contrescarpe, à Paris.

Pot de fleurs qui représentera la synesthésie provoquée par la madeleine.

Sur la commode : foulard qui évoquera Gilberte et Albertine.

Chariot qui grince et avance seul sur scène.

© Fabienne Rappeneau

³¹ « Dossier de présentation de *Crime et Châtiment* », consulté le 12 mai, https://www.icr.ro/uploads/files/dosar-de-presafranceza_1.pdf

Outre l'assemblage des images, la littérature onirique se caractérisait également par le recours au leitmotiv, comme l'explique à nouveau Bârna :

La chronologie interne de la fiction n'était pas linéaire et irréversible, mais plutôt circulaire, en tout cas réversible, soit, en un mot, suspendue, pour permettre l'effet de simultanéité généralisée. En même temps, surtout dans les ouvrages en prose, l'onirisme pratiquait une méthode de construction du type « musical », en faisant recours aux procédés du « thème à variations » et aux « leitmotive ». ³²

Compte tenu de cette « chronologie interne de la fiction [...], [...] circulaire » au fondement de l'esthétique onirique, l'attrait exercé par le roman *À la recherche du temps perdu* de Proust sur Tănase semble s'imposer naturellement, puisque le narrateur proustien ne cesse précisément de remettre en question ses impressions premières. De même, le procédé du leitmotiv intervient dans le fameux extrait du « Dessine-moi un mouton » issu du *Petit Prince* de Saint-Exupéry, conte que Virgil Tănase a adapté et présenté dans de nombreux théâtres parisiens : au Théâtre Michel³³ et à la Comédie des Champs-Élysées³⁴ en 2006, au théâtre de la Pépinière en 2009³⁵, ainsi qu'au théâtre du Lucernaire entre 2016 et 2017³⁶ avec toujours, dans sa distribution, David Legras. En effet, le leitmotiv est au cœur de ce passage où le Petit Prince demande encore et encore à l'aviateur de lui dessiner un mouton étant donné que les esquisses successives du mouton qui lui étaient présentées ne correspondaient jamais à ce qu'il s'imaginait, jusqu'à ce que l'adulte dessine finalement une caisse fermée en disant que le mouton s'y trouve. Grâce à l'enfant, l'aviateur prendra ainsi conscience du pouvoir de l'imagination et de la créativité.

³² Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

³³ « Dossier de presse du *Petit Prince* au Théâtre Michel », consulté le 10 février 2024, Tănase.pdf (cief.org).

³⁴ « Le Petit Prince – Studio des Champs-Élysées », Théâtre online, page consultée le 07 mars 2024, Le Petit Prince - Studio des Champs-Élysées | THEATREonline.

³⁵ « *Le Petit Prince* à la Pépinière théâtre », La Succession Saint Exupéry – d'Agay, page consultée le 07 mars 2024, <https://www.antoinedesaintexupery.com/2011/03/04/le-petit-prince-a-la-pepiniere-theatre/>

³⁶ « Dossier de presse du *Petit Prince* au Lucernaire », Théâtre contemporain, page consultée le 07 mars 2024, f-ada-57fb8741058a5.pdf (theatre-contemporain.net)



Fig. 2 : Capture d'écran de la pièce *Le Petit Prince* adaptée et mise en scène par Virgil Tănase au théâtre du Lucernaire, à Paris.
Le Petit Prince (Roman Leroy) arrête de jouer à l'aviateur lorsqu'il rencontre la rose (alias Léa Letter).
Spectacle disponible sur le site de l'Harmattan.

Du *Petit Prince* de Saint-Exupéry se dégage donc du « ludique », aspect mis en exergue par Tănase dès le début de son spectacle, puisqu'en à peine deux minutes, l'adaptateur a utilisé quantité de métaphores dont celle de la rose comme représentation de l'amour avec une petite fille dont la beauté émeut le héros, ou encore celle du ballon rebondissant à terre qui soudain s'élève et devient soleil.

Par ce parti-pris d'enchaîner les métaphores sur la scène et de redéfinir le regard que chacun de nous porte sur des questions existentielles – « Qu'est-ce que l'amour ? » et « Quel est le sens de la vie ? » –, Tănase traduit scéniquement l'idée essentielle du *Petit Prince* selon lui : « l'Homme est esprit³⁷ », tout être

³⁷ Olivier Odaert et al., *La belle histoire du Petit Prince* (Paris : Gallimard, 2013), 195.

humain étant doté à la naissance de « cette force de création gratuite, candide, merveilleuse [...] qui fait d'un bout de matière morte un homme³⁸ ». Ce qui est montré au plateau ici, c'est en fait « la revendication du droit à la vie, à l'amour, à l'identité, c'est la requête de se forger une destinée et, notamment, le refus du silence, de l'attitude de vaincus », autant d'éléments défendus par le courant onirique d'après Georgiana Lungu-Badea³⁹. De fait, l'histoire du *Petit Prince* met au premier plan un personnage d'enfant allant de rencontres en rencontres et dont la naïveté offre au lecteur un regard neuf sur ses représentations habituelles de la vie et du monde.



Fig. 3 : Capture d'écran de la pièce *Le Petit Prince* adaptée et mise en scène par Virgil Tănase au théâtre du Lucernaire, à Paris.
De gauche à droite : Roman Leroy et Léa Letter.
La petite fille hisse le ballon en tirant sur une corde pour représenter le soleil.

³⁸ *La belle histoire du Petit Prince*, 199.

³⁹ Georgiana Lungu-Badea, « Enjeux, résistances et dérives identitaires déterritorialisées », 203.

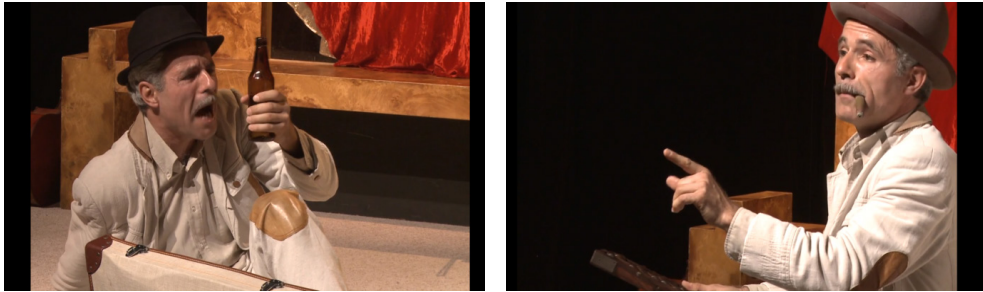


Fig 4 et 5 : Capture d'écran de la pièce *Le Petit Prince*, adaptée et mise en scène par Virgil Tănase au théâtre du Lucernaire, à Paris. De gauche à droite : David Legras dans le rôle de l'ivrogne et du business man.

Tănase a ainsi choisi de confier les rôles des divers personnages de passage qui croiseront la route du Petit Prince au même acteur : David Legras. Par conséquent, *Le Petit Prince* ainsi que le roman *À la recherche du temps perdu* apparaissent comme des œuvres littéraires formellement proches, du moins par leurs circonvolutions, de la littérature onirique. Ces deux ouvrages s'avèrent donc des terrains d'application parfaits pour déployer cette esthétique roumaine de l'onirisme sur la scène française.

Le courant onirique, comme l'a remarqué Bârna, repose sur le fait d'« utiliser, lucidement, une technique, il valorise l'artifice⁴⁰ ». Or lors de notre entretien, Virgil Tănase a justement accentué l'aspect essentiel de la technique au théâtre en déplorant une tendance, dans la mise en scène française contemporaine, à travailler sans cadre bien défini, dans une liberté totale quitte à oublier de relancer en permanence l'attention du public, dynamique pourtant essentielle pour lui :

On s'ennuie énormément dans ces spectacles modernes en France où tout est possible. Alors, il n'y a plus de jeu. Tandis que si on crée une logique, à un certain moment on casse cette logique avec une autre, pour que le spectateur se dise : « Merde, c'est vrai, c'est logique que ce soit comme ça, mais je n'y avais pas pensé ». Tout est dans ce jeu subtil ; on crée une structure s'insinuant par-dessus une autre, pour qu'elle

⁴⁰ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

apparaisse au moment où la première s'épuise, à chaque moment. Ça, ça a été étudié par la psychologie du théâtre. L'attention du spectateur dure entre 60 et 90 secondes. Toutes les 90 secondes, allez 2 minutes, il faut qu'il y ait une chose qui l'accroche.⁴¹

Ainsi, Tănase a effectué un travail technique minutieux pour guider le comédien David Legras dans son rôle de narrateur proustien au sein de l'adaptation scénique *À la Recherche du temps perdu*. D'ailleurs, dans la préface à sa propre traduction roumaine de cette adaptation, Virgil Tănase a pris soin de détailler le travail demandé à son comédien seul en scène quant à sa gestuelle, mais surtout son phrasé, précisément afin de rendre compte des différents niveaux du texte, des digressions, des parenthèses, voir des parenthèses dans des parenthèses⁴². Outre ces indications, Virgil Tănase est allé jusqu'à représenter, dans la forme écrite de son adaptation, dans son choix typographique, les différents « paliers » du texte. Les retours à la ligne récurrents après les virgules, ou encore les décalages au niveau des marges, entre les lignes, sont autant de signaux indiquant au comédien une pause, une respiration à suivre et des regroupements à faire sur le plan rythmique du récit, pour que le spectateur puisse bien distinguer les multiples couches de la narration. Par cette démarche structurelle visant à rendre l'interprétation du comédien la plus claire possible, Tănase est bel et bien parvenu, dans cette adaptation, à « cultiv[er] la capacité de suggérer le visuel⁴³ » pour citer Bârna, conformément à l'esthétique onirique.

La prose de Proust étant « à la fois poétique, musicale et picturale⁴⁴ » à l'instar de la prose onirique telle que Bârna la décrit, la parcimonie des décors dans le théâtre de Tănase favorise la liberté du public qui, elle-même, est le terreau d'une expansion créatrice des images mentales chez chaque spectateur, selon ses propres représentations. Si l'esthétique onirique de Tănase se reflète dans le jeu du comédien, elle se révèle également au sein de la scénographie. Par exemple, Tănase a inclus au beau milieu de son adaptation une musique de fado portugaise qui n'a aucun lien avec la diégèse de *La Recherche*, ni même

⁴¹ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

⁴² Virgil Tănase, *Adaptări teatrale*, 251.

⁴³ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

⁴⁴ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

aucun rapport avec la vie de Proust. Toutefois, cette musique n'a pas été sélectionnée de manière fortuite, Tănase nous ayant expliqué en entretien l'avoir choisie parce qu'un jour, de manière arbitraire, il a pensé à son spectacle de Proust alors qu'il était au Portugal⁴⁵. Par conséquent, cette musique portugaise évoque l'ubiquité et la simultanéité de la pensée : alors qu'il était en voyage dans un lieu, Tănase songeait en même temps au théâtre qu'il fera dans un autre espace-temps, son esprit était ainsi à deux endroits à la fois. Par ce choix scénographique, l'adaptateur a donc souhaité reproduire artificiellement l'origine intuitive de l'effet qu'a produit sur lui son séjour au Portugal, sans vouloir expliciter la cause de ce rapprochement apparemment incongru avec Proust. De cette façon, Tănase a remplacé la causalité « par une simple consécution⁴⁶ », selon un autre principe de l'onirisme. Or ce parti-pris, tout au long du spectacle, de relancer l'attention du public – avec les interventions du gramophone par exemple – sans donner d'explication évidente et univoque à la salle, est audacieux pour un public français et l'on peut se demander si ce public ne risque pas d'être dérouté face à ce choix, ce à quoi Tănase nous a répondu qu'il ne s'était pas posé la question : « les spectateurs se posent des questions et chacun interprète à sa façon et [...] c'est là la beauté de cette chose là, c'est que j'invite les spectateurs à découvrir des choses⁴⁷ ».

Il ressort de nos observations que l'adaptation *À la recherche du temps perdu* de Tănase met en application tous les principes de l'onirisme esthétique à commencer par l'artifice technique pour le jeu du comédien, afin de garder toujours le public en alerte. Si le texte proustien lui-même est balisé par le leitmotiv et rejette la linéarité du récit, Tănase, par sa scénographie, a engendré la simultanéité des images en provoquant des images par le son, que ce soit par le fado portugais qui suscite en chaque spectateur une réaction personnalisée, ou bien par le gramophone dont des spectateurs se sont enquis s'il s'agissait de la voix véritable de Proust, c'est-à-dire d'un son d'archive⁴⁸. Par conséquent, Tănase a réinjecté son héritage littéraire venu de l'Est et acquis dans les années 1960, au sein de sa pratique d'adaptateur scénique récente, auprès d'un public occidental.

⁴⁵ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

⁴⁶ Nicolae Bârna, « Onirisme et témoignage chez Virgil Tănase ».

⁴⁷ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

⁴⁸ Ondine Plesanu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase ».

Sur la scène du Théâtre de la Contrescarpe, à Paris, Tănase s'est ainsi servi d'une théorie esthétique qui a écloso à l'Est certes, mais qu'il applique de manière systématique à tous les auteurs qu'il choisit peu importe leur langue et leur culture. De fait, le but principal de Virgil Tănase est de servir les œuvres, non l'inverse, et d'ailleurs les critiques de ses mises en scène l'ont bien perçu, en témoigne ce propos de Tănase lui-même à l'occasion d'un entretien pour la *Revue Roumaine d'Études Francophones* :

je ne suis pas de ces metteurs en scène qui se servent des dramaturges pour s'exhiber, eux. Au contraire – et j'ai été flatté d'entendre dire que ma *Mouette* était probablement ce que Tchekhov aurait aimé voir sur scène⁴⁹ et que mon *À la recherche du temps perdu* était le spectacle que probablement Proust aurait fait si, au lieu d'écrire, il avait fait du théâtre.⁵⁰

En tant qu'adaptateur scénique, Tănase souhaite donc retransmettre le plus fidèlement possible, avec les moyens du théâtre, les œuvres qu'il porte devant le public. Cette posture de traducteur nous invite ainsi à considérer, pour finir, le rapport de Tănase à la réécriture de ses propres adaptations scéniques pour les pays de l'Est.

3. La réécriture de ses adaptations françaises pour un public de l'Est

Dans la trajectoire théâtrale de Tănase, les opérations de transfert dramaturgique depuis un pays de l'Est vers un pays de l'Ouest et inversement, ou même entre divers pays de l'Est voire de l'Ouest, ont été fort nombreuses. Le cas de la pièce *Le Mariage*⁵¹ de Gogol traduite et montée par Tănase en est un exemple parfait : Tănase l'a traduite lui-même du russe en roumain lorsqu'il a fait jouer cette pièce en Roumanie en 1976 et 1977, puis il l'a

⁴⁹ Virgil Tănase fait référence à la critique de presse de Florence Ruzé, « 'La Mouette' au Lucernaire *** », *Le Parisien*, « la Mouette » au Lucernaire *** - *Le Parisien*, consulté le 8 mai 2024. Il a d'ailleurs repris cette remarque, en gras, dans son dossier de production de *Crime et châtiement*, *dosar-de-presafranceza_1.pdf* (icr.ro), consulté le 8 mai 2024.

⁵⁰ Marina Mureșanu Ionescu, « Entretien avec Virgil Tănase », 147.

⁵¹ Virgil Tănase metteur en scène, *Le Mariage* par Nicolas Gogol, Teatrul municipal, Reșița, première en 1976. Le spectacle s'est rejoué au Teatrul Nottara de Bucarest.

traduite du russe vers le français lorsqu'il l'a fait jouer au Théâtre de la Cité Internationale en 1980⁵². Or en dehors de ses traductions, Tănase a également beaucoup joué en Russie, dans la langue française, avec sa compagnie théâtrale.

En effet, le metteur en scène explique dans le dossier de présentation du TADA que les tournées de la compagnie à l'étranger « ont prouvé largement [...] que son langage va bien-au-delà du texte et offre du plaisir même à ceux qui comprennent mal [ou] pas du tout la langue (ce fut le cas dans certaines villes russes, ce qui n'a pas du tout entamé le plaisir des spectateurs)⁵³ ». Ainsi, *Le Petit Prince* par exemple, joué en Russie en version française sous-titrée, au célèbre théâtre Na Strastnom en 2009⁵⁴, aurait reçu un accueil chaleureux du public d'après le site internet de *La Succession Saint-Exupéry*⁵⁵. Pourtant, on peut imaginer aisément que les plus jeunes spectateurs de ce spectacle « tout public » n'ont pas forcément pu suivre la traduction tout au long du spectacle, ce qui témoigne du fait que l'exigence d'une véricité dans le jeu des acteurs semble être parvenue, malgré la barrière de la langue, à toucher les petits et les grands jusque dans ce pays de l'Est, concrétisant ainsi l'esthétique de Tănase en travail d'orfèvre. Par conséquent, le théâtre de Tănase se dévoile comme étant largement imprégné des techniques des pays de l'Est, que ce soit au niveau de la relation metteur en scène-comédien, dans l'approche du texte ou encore dans le travail des acteurs ; il s'agit en somme d'un théâtre de l'identification du public au personnage, grâce à la métaphore théâtrale.

Nous concluons donc cet article par ces mots du metteur en scène Virgil Tănase lui-même, lesquels unissent à la fois sa vision esthétique onirique d'origine roumaine et son amour pour les grands auteurs, français en l'occurrence :

⁵² « Virgil Tănase », *Seine & Danube, revue de L'Association des Traducteurs de Littérature Roumaine (ATLR) (Blog)*, page consultée le 12 mai 2024, http://seine-et-danube.over-blog.com/pages/Virgil_Tnase-4865659.html

⁵³ « Dossier de présentation Compagnie TADA ».

⁵⁴ « Malenkii Print fête ses 50 ans en Russie », consulté le 09 mai 2024, Malenkii Print fête ses 50 ans en Russie | Antoine de Saint Exupéry (antoinedesaintexupery.com)

⁵⁵ « Malenkii Print fête ses 50 ans en Russie ».

Tout n'est pas perdu puisqu'il suffit de toucher les pages d'un livre pour enfants, d'effleurer les cheveux d'une poupée de son, de retrouver un petit goût de madeleine trempée dans une infusion de thé, ou de tilleul..., puisqu'il suffit d'une musique foraine ou simplement d'un bout de rêve pour ressusciter le Petit prince qui aussitôt s'invite dans notre vie adulte et nous demande de lui dessiner un mouton.⁵⁶

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⁵⁶ Texte que nous a gracieusement partagé Virgil Tănase à l'occasion de notre entretien.

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The Beginnings of Stage Directing in the Romanian Theatre. A Historical View¹

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

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

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

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Introduction

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

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

Historical Context

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

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

nationalist themes³, in the press and in the theatre. Right from the start, the text became the pretext for a heated “confrontation” between the main voices of the Romanian theatre school, leading shortly to an irreconcilable split between the revered actor C. I. Nottara, honorary company member of the National Theatre, and the “pro-French” manager, A. Davila.

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

Old vs. New School

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Davila's Influence

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

⁵ I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [*Romanian Theatre IV*], 115.

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

⁷ C. Nottara, *Amintiri* [*Memories*], 92.

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

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



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

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

Aesthetic Interventions

The first aesthetic aspects upon which Davila energetically intervened as director of the National Theatre were the suitability of the sets prepared for the new premieres and the homogeneity of the troupe, conceived as an ensemble with no poster stars and no weak links. Massoff records how, taking over the rehearsals for *Manasse*, “he went to the workshops to check the sets, costumes, props”⁹. During his tenure the director apparently followed the same ritual for each new production in the repertoire. Davila brought on the Romanian stage the scenography revolution of Realism: each play must have its setting, contextualized and realized as truthfully as possible¹⁰. Therefore, for the first time in the history of the local theatre, significant amounts of money were allocated for the purchase of furniture and set design.

For *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, a comedy of manners whose premiere took place in the autumn of 1905, the props and costumes were made after prints from England¹¹. On this occasion, Davila acquired half of a Louis XV set, together with another, modern, furniture set, mahogany imitation, a Louis XV solid walnut table and a pedestal table; the cutlery used to serve the meal on stage was made of genuine alpaca. For the military play *The Blackout* by Franz Beyerlein, whose action takes place in an Alsatian garrison, the costumes were ordered from the Baruch House in Berlin¹². Davila personally visited the workshops to ensure the quality of the decor and the accuracy of its creation. The leading role was played by an actor from the old generation, Petre Sturdza:

⁹ I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV [Romanian Theatre IV]*, 108.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁶ I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV*, 133.

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

Many other testimonies about the demands of Verism on stage, which Davila vigilantly defended, are contained in the numerous memoirs of actors from his time, some humorous, like a scene of the passionate kiss, insistently rehearsed until the sensation of reality was achieved¹⁸, others gravely serious, true lessons in theatre. In her first major role, Lucia Sturdza Bulandra confided her fears to the director:

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁹ Lucia Sturdza Bulandra, *Amintiri... amintiri* [*Memories... Memories...*], 26-27.

²⁰ I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [*Romanian Theatre IV*], 131.

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

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

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

²¹ I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [Romanian Theatre IV], 126.

²² I. Massoff, *Teatru românesc IV* [Romanian Theatre IV], 114.

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

Davila and the French Realism School

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

It was in this period that his ideas about show production and staging were more firmly shaped. Antoine's influence on Alexandru Davila's theatrical vision is probably indirect, primarily manifesting as a pan-European trend of reforming the stage towards verisimilitude. The school of scenic realism was founded around the same time by Konstantin Stanislavski in Russia and Otto Brams in Germany. However, the year spent in Paris brought Davila, a *voyeur* of famous theatres, particularly close to Antoine's method. At that time André Antoine, the founder of *Théâtre Libre* in Montmartre, the rebel who had dismantled the thematic censorship practiced in the name of morality at the end of the century in France, was now absorbed into the mainstream and started to gain popularity among the traditional audience of Parisian grand stages. Promoted by Émile Zola, for whom he staged several texts, while known in wide artistic circles as a representative of eclectic modernism, Antoine initially aimed (at *Théâtre Libre*) to put an end to the superficial rhetoric of boulevard theatres, that had spread across the Haussmannian metropolis – through his naturalistic productions, with bleeding chunks of meat hanging above the ramp, with their display of immorality, cruelty, and “unadorned” poverty. He thus revealed another Paris – one of dishonour and crime – teeming in the darkness of poor neighbourhoods²³.

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

However, in 1906, when he accepted to manage a theatre of great tradition like *Odéon*, located in the very heart of conservatism and convention, Antoine had other goals to achieve. Creating a broad audience for his de-tabooed theatre and, especially, extracting the theatrical performance from the area of easy entertainment, required an effort to adapt to the expectations of a sophisticated public, hard to move from the comfort of plush seats and lavishly decorated boxes²⁴.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Towards a New Law for Theatres

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

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

²⁵ *Rampa*, Year I, no 3-20, 1911.

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

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

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

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

²⁶ *Rampa*, Year I, no 20, 1911.

²⁷ *Rampa*, Year I, no 3, 1911.

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

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

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

An Architectural Utopia – The Theatre

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

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

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

In the same project he also elaborated on the plans for an architectural utopia – the modern theatre edifice, adapted to the new scenic reality of the 20th century²⁹. The idea of building a new theatre, matching the movement towards liberating the stage from the conventions of the past century, had troubled Davila for almost twenty years, ever since his first directorship at the National Theatre, when he invested significant sums in the modernization and equipping of the building, to the dismay of the conservative wing of the Dramatic Society.

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

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

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

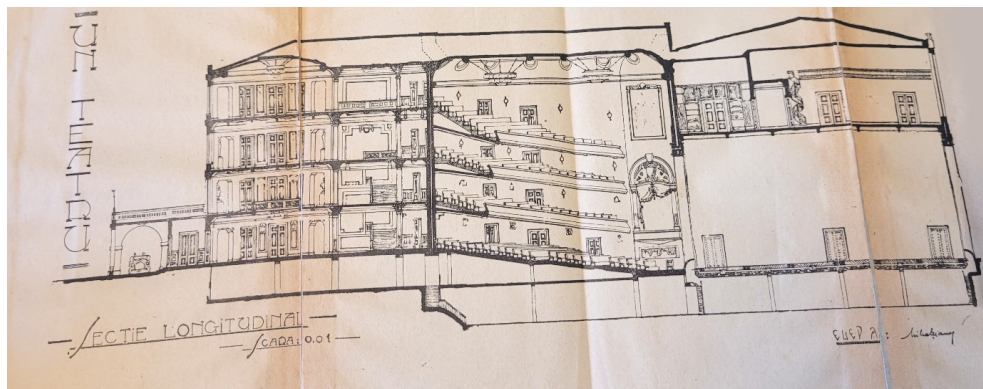


Fig. 2: The sketch of the envisioned theatre plan, created in 1925 by a young architecture student under Davila's supervision

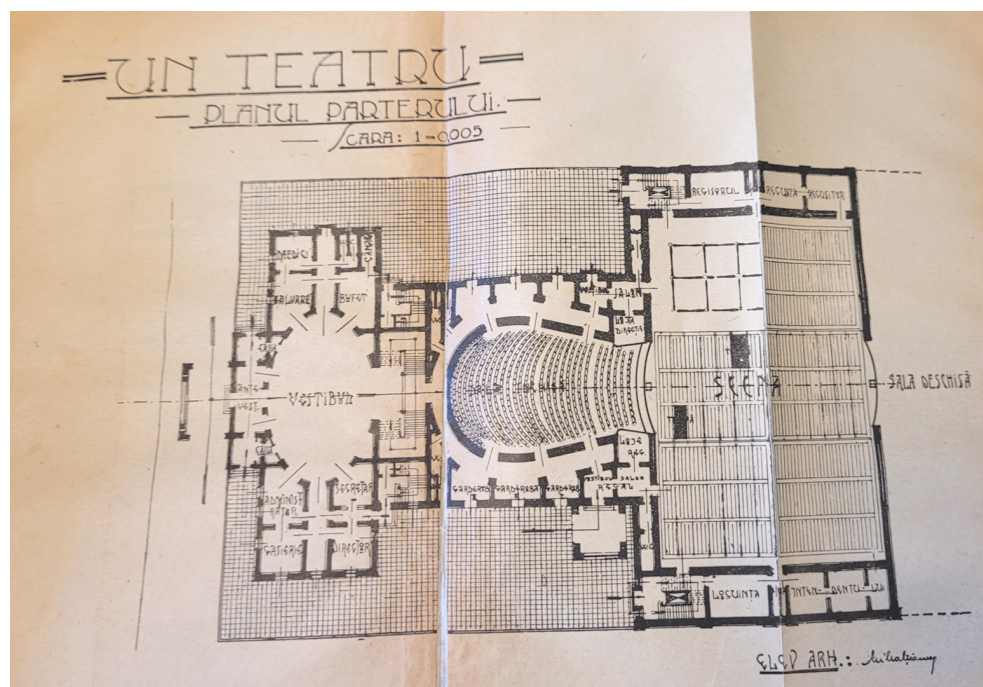


Fig. 3: Ground floor plan

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

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

Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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Horia Lovinescu, Between the “Terror of History” and Psychoanalytical Dreams

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Abstract: This paper focuses on Horia Lovinescu (1917-1983), a member of one of the most important dynasties of modern Romanian culture. Six of Horia Lovinescu’s dramas are interpreted in a close reading system, by psychoanalytical tools and by focusing on the family constellations the author imagines. These plays are related to the historical context (“the terror of history”), in order to understand how works of art are the reverberation of biographical-creative data of the greatest importance and how they echo in a paradoxical way social-political transformations. This double reading, psychological and historical, is justified by the playwright himself, through the construction of his plays and through his many allusions to psychoanalysis in his writings.

Keywords: Horia Lovinescu, psychoanalysis, historical reading, communism, dramas, artistic creation, myth.

This article is dedicated to Horia Lovinescu (1917-1983), a member of one of the most prominent dynasties of modern Romanian culture. He is the nephew of the great literary critic Eugen Lovinescu (1881-1943)², brother

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² Iulian Boldea, “Eugen Lovinescu and the Art of Portrait,” *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, Issue 1 (2011): 46-58 (https://www.researchgate.net/publication/274078365_E_Lovinescu_and_the_Art_of_Portrait, accessed March 2024); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eugen_Lovinescu (accessed March 2024).



of the essayist Vasile Lovinescu (1905-1984)³, cousin of the novelist Anton Holban (1902-1937)⁴ and of the famous political and cultural dissident Monica Lovinescu (1923-2008), Eugen's daughter⁵. Unlike all of them, who held liberal or right-wing political convictions, Horia Lovinescu seemed to be a loyalist of the communist regime in Romania, putting his work at the service of forging the "new man" and being considered one of the most important playwrights of the post-war period⁶. Moreover, a complex theatre man, Horia Lovinescu led the destiny of the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest for two decades (1964-1983), as general manager, imposing a high artistic standard on its stage productions. In what follows, I will try to read Horia Lovinescu's dramas in a close reading system, using a series of psychoanalytical tools, focusing on the family constellations he imagines, and relating them to the historical context ("the terror of history"⁷), in the belief that works of art are the reverberation of biographical-creative data of the greatest importance and that they echo in a paradoxical way social-political transformations. This psychological and historical reading is justified by the playwright himself, through the construction of his plays and through his many allusions to psychoanalysis in his writings.

³ Ovidiu Marian-Ionescu, *Vasile Lovinescu – Magna Opera. Consensus and differentiation regarding the Primordial Tradition*, PhD abstract in English, The "Lucian Blaga University in Sibiu", 2017, <https://doctorate.ulbsibiu.ro/wp-content/uploads/RezumatenglezaMarian.pdf> (accessed March 2024).

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anton_Holban (accessed March 2024).

⁵ Daniela Vizireanu, "Political Hegemony Over the Public Intellectual in Communist Romania: Monica Lovinescu and Her Misrepresented Portrayal in the Print Press," *Synthesis*, XLII (2023): 94-100

(<https://synthesis.ro/political-hegemony-over-the-public-intellectual-in-communist-romania/>); Iulia Vladimirov, "Monica Lovinescu: the Voice of Unbound Freedom," *History of Communism in Europe. Avatars of Intellectuals Under Communism*, vol. 2 (2011): 281-321; Camelia Crăciun, "Monica Lovinescu at Radio Free Europe," in *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe. A Compendium*, ed. by John Neubauer and Borbála Zsuzsanna Török (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 276-303; Ion Mihai Pacepa, *Red Horizons. Chronicles of a Communist Spy Chief* (Washington D. C.: Regnery Gateway, 1987), 34-35; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monica_Lovinescu (accessed March 2024).

⁶ Camelia Crăciun, "Monica Lovinescu at Radio Free Europe," 279-280.

⁷ Teofilo F. Ruiz, *The Terror of History. On the Uncertainties of Life in Western Civilization* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011).

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Citadela sfărâmată [*The Shattered Citadel*] (1955), Horia Lovinescu’s second play and the one that ensured his lasting success, being screened in 1957, belongs to the broad category of proletkult dramaturgy, but this is a proletkult theatre that achieves a certain aesthetic quality, beyond the constraining ideological imperatives⁸, where the great themes and obsessions of the author are already present in filigree, those that will run through his entire work, giving it a superb unity. *The Shattered Citadel* brings to the stage a multi-branched family, in whose description one glimpses a barely camouflaged transposition of biographical data. This is what the French psychoanalyst Charles Mauron called “haunting metaphors” (“*metaphores obsédantes*”), organised in a symbolic network illustrative of the author’s “personal myth”⁹.

The Dragomirescu family, belonging to the middle bourgeoisie, is caught in two key moments of history. First, in the midst of the Second World War, in the summer of 1943, when worrying news comes from the Eastern Front: the Romanian-German armies retreat from Stalingrad in the face of fierce Russian resistance. The second time, in 1948, when the Soviets and their communist cronies seized power in the country, beginning the brutal construction of the “new man” and socialism. With passionate lucidity, the playwright traces the transformation and breakdown of family structures under the pressure of socio-political change, seeking to demonstrate that the family is a mere cell, incapable of functioning autonomously outside the social organism.

In fact, the action of Horia Lovinescu’s play can be summed up very easily. One sees how brotherly love turns into indifference and then into mutual hatred. Petru, a young high school graduate in 1943, influenced by the intellectual and physical charm of his older brother Matei (a passionate

⁸ Ioana Toloargă, “Horia Lovinescu, *Citadela sfărâmată*”, in *Să nu privești înapoi. Comunism, dramaturgie, societate* [Do Not Look Back. Communism, Dramaturgy, Society], ed. Liviu Malița (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2022), 430-434.

⁹ Linda Hutcheon, *Formalism and the Freudian Aesthetic: The Example of Charles Mauron* (New York, Cambridge University Press, 1984).

thinker of ideals), will commit an extreme, Gidean gesture designed to make him feel that he is living intensely: he will join the army and go to the front, from where he will return blind. Peter blames Matei, who planted in his mind all sorts of crazy ideas, inspired by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, about “great escapes,” about being “beyond good and evil,” about the supreme reality of “the self” in the face of universal illusion, about the compulsory opposition to everything, revealing in him “contempt for people” and “foolish pride”. It is not difficult to identify in Matei a transvestite portrait of Vasile Lovinescu, the playwright’s elder brother, promoter of abysmal ideas of quasi-legendary descent, all the more so as Horia shows him working on an essay on *The magical Function of the Word*, the writing of which is always postponed because of an inexplicable existential anxiety. Self-centred, unable to open up to others, a superior parasite and an alcoholic, Matei ends up committing suicide without dragging Irina, his beloved, along with him, even though he had brought her up in the spirit of the medieval myth of Tristan and Isolde. She will be left to live on in the new reality of communism, to complete her studies in chemistry and – eventually – to return to Dan, her faithful fiancé whom she had left at the beginning of the play in favour of the mirages of Matei’s love. Anyway, Matei is the type of the eternal misfit, a desperate man who will stubbornly refuse communist utilitarianism and the absurd reduction to a useful job, a disabused and cynical person, provocative and paradoxical, envious of the happiness of others, wrapping his weaknesses in a cloud of cultural references (Pliny, Flaubert, Dostoevsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*). Finding it hard to take responsibility for the alcoholic excesses he has fallen into, Matei justifies them with an erudite reference to Baudelaire’s *Artificial Paradises*: “Whoever has had a grief to appease, a memory to evoke, a sorrow to drown, a castle in Spain to build – all have at one time invoked the mysterious god who lies concealed in the fibers of the grapevine.”¹⁰

On the other hand, Petru (Horia’s alter-ego) overcomes the trauma of blindness and finds spiritual light with the help of a simple teacher, Caterina, who comes from the country side and is installed as a “lodger” in the family’s big house. She teaches him what it means to work for others, to give of

¹⁰ Charles Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises*, trans. Stacy Diamond (Citadel Press, 1996), 5.

oneself without sparing any effort, bringing him children from school to teach them to play the piano (Petru is a talented pianist), which determines Matei's irony at the new "Orpheus" who "tames the proletarian beast's calves". Although he does not become a "communist" in the true sense of the word, Petru believes in the socio-moral value of work, in the possibilities it offers for humanisation, and is ready to make his contribution to building the new world. Nothing is left of the brothers' fraternal love, significant in the beginning of the play, without the collapse of the edifice being attributable to one of them:

MATEI: Ha-ha! You don't say... You despise me! Wise guy! Sublime master of truth! (*Petru wants to leave, Matei stops him, with a broken voice.*) Don't go, you can't pass me by as if I didn't exist. I am a man, I am your brother.

PETRU: We have nothing more in common, Matei. We speak two different languages.

MATEI: But it's not my fault that I am not like you. I'm like an actor forced to play as the author dictates. I didn't write my part. Life, circumstances, education – they wrote it. I have no responsibility. If you don't like it, if you don't like my text, what can I do? Why can't I find understanding and humanity?¹¹

The characters revolving around the two brothers effectively and expressively complete the powerful family drama woven by Horia Lovinescu, first and foremost the parents, bizarre and complex-generating figures whose mechanisms are not unrelated to the birth and progression of sibling enmity. The mother, Emilia, of simple and unsophisticated kindness, is a Christian in the true sense of the word, a peacemaker who is hurt by the eternal quarrels between Matei and Petru. With a devotion without shadows, she cares for her youngest son with a gentleness capable of soothing all wounds.

¹¹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1* [Theatre 1] (Bucharest: Ed. Eminescu, 1973), 69.

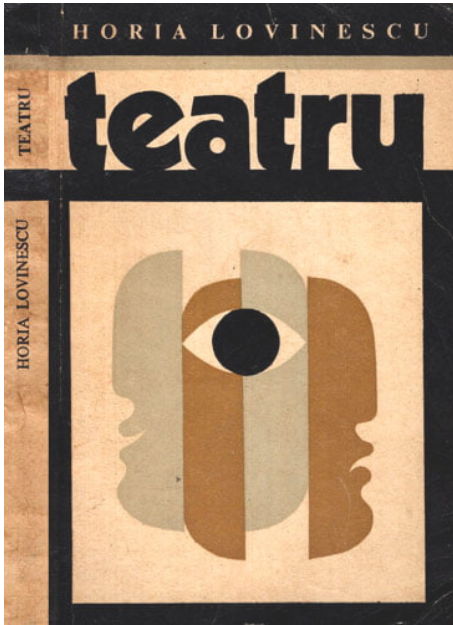


Fig 1: Edition published in 1971, Eminescu Publishing House



Fig 2: Horia Lovinescu in the 60s

Her husband, the retired lawyer Grigore, seems to be a caricatured transposition into the world of fiction of the lawyer Octav Lovinescu, father of Vasile and Horia. He considers artists to be useless beings, always staring at the moon and doing no real service to society, so he wants Petru to go to law school and dare not dream of a career as a pianist. Pious, typical, tactical, he speaks only of work, virtue, economy, honesty, invoking at every opportunity the sacrosanct idea of the honourable family, the foundation of the bourgeois state: "This is how the family should be. A citadel in the path of the waves of life."¹² In his delusion of honourability, Gregory elevates the idea of family to the Roman ethos, giving it a quasi-religious value: "From our Roman ancestors we have inherited this priceless treasure: the cult of the family."¹³ Now, this family, "solid as a citadel," will collapse before his bovine

¹² Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru* 1, 32.

¹³ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru* 1, 15.

eyes, unable to understand anything. With his ironic, cutting, venomous way of speaking, Matei describes his father extremely well, referring again to a well-known figure from the repertoire of 19th-century French literature: "A pedantic fool, with the fanaticisms of the half-wit, a sort of Mr Homais, in short, a petty bourgeois flatter than a drawing pin's head."¹⁴ In their own way, each of the two sons refuses the conformist bourgeois model proposed by their father, looking for their own ways to assert themselves in life, which are not always – Horia Lovinescu suggests – the simplest and the most risk-free.

The most prominent figure, respected by some, feared by others, is Grandmother, Emilia's mother (it seems that the Lovinescus had an obsession with grandparents, as in the novel *Grandmother Prepares to Die* by Anton Holban, cousin of Horia and Vasile Lovinescu). Mrs Dinescu, a scholar of international reputation and a doctor of physics in Paris, tries to salvage what she can from the "shattered citadel," prophesying from her first appearance – with disarming lucidity and in extremely harsh terms – the break-up of the Dragomirescu family. The grandmother has an obvious kindness for the blind Petru, which arouses Matei's envy, but she does not despise him, on the contrary she pities his weakness. Although the oldest of them all, it is Granny who adapts best to the new socio-political context, following a line of conduct outlined as early as 1943: she has always been a democrat, even defending some communist students in a national context of Germanic fervour. Untiring, she takes part in rallies, organises the new laboratories where the glory of socialist science is baked, and even strives to understand – together with Peter – the fundamental concepts of marxist political economy, which provokes Matei's sarcasm: "What a touching picture! Grandma and grandson learning marxism! The scientists are preparing the scientific apocalypse, only Grandma is studying political economy. Ha-ha, you're not part of the atomic age, Grandma. Mankind is dancing the dance of death on a tightrope. One day, there'll be a little crack and it'll all be over. We'll take a tumble into nothingness."¹⁵

¹⁴ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 16.

¹⁵ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 73.

The political dimension of Horia Lovinescu's play, easily perceptible in the portrait of the grandmother, is very complex and basically presents a nuanced apology of communism, to which even a critically-minded reader can be forced to give his/her adhesion. However, if we read things *à rebours* (and it is legitimate to do so!), *The Shattered Citadel* can also be seen as a scathing critique of the communist system, even if (or because) one of the first didascalies states, "It will be played without irony."

The Dragomirescus – with few exceptions – belong to the anti-communist part of Romanian society, because of their ideological, mental and behavioural horizon, which remains functionally unchanged throughout the play. Grigore, however, like a true, chameleonic bourgeois, defends on principle any installed political regime, abhorring change and being deeply obsequious to any authority. Once the communists are in power, he writes articles of debunking for the "wall gazette" [*gazeta de perete*], calls everybody in the house "comrade" to get used to the tone of the new times and tries to make others forget his troubled past as a member of what was then called the exploiting class.

Another branch of the Dragomirescu family embodies the "reactionary forces" in the full sense of the word. Grigore's sister Adela and her son Costică, big businessmen in the bourgeois regime, make all sorts of dubious financial combinations, live from speculation and smuggling, exchange currency and gold on the black market, but they will be exposed when they try to flee the country to Switzerland, where large bank deposits are waiting for them. Their scheme, in which they try to implicate Matei, Irina and Dan, fails thanks to the vigilance of the communist authorities. They are joined by Marie-Jeanne, Costică's wife, and her lover, the noble Găttescu, whose grandfather hanged all the peasants on his estate upside down in 1907, during the great rural revolt of that year. Marie-Jeanne, snobbish and affected, and a coterie of friends form a resistance group against communism, and their gesture is not without a certain nobility: "We have to show them that nothing can destroy a nobility earned over generations. In fact, we call ourselves the "Resistance Group". Next time I'll take Kessel's book *Nuit des Princes* with me to the flea market and read it ostentatiously there. You know, it's about the tragedy of Russian aristocrats who became chauffeurs on the streets of Paris. I'm sure the gesture will make an impression. It will be talked about."¹⁶

¹⁶ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 76.

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A play quite similar to *The Shattered Citadel* is also *The Boga Sisters* (1959), which deals with both the theme of family and the establishment of communism and the response of three women to the new social order, imposed by Soviet troops. Everything here is under an almost Sartrean-existentialist sign of choice: the characters know that in the new historical circumstances they will be forced to choose a path, which may not correspond at all to their previous expectations. The ideological polarisation into positive/negative characters is here seemingly more brutal than in *The Shattered Citadel*, though there is no lack of nuance and subtle perspective-taking. Valentina Boga, married to the civil servant Miluță Petrescu (a vaguely Caragialian name) for the simple reason of not living alone, will discover only after long procrastination that she loves Professor Mereuță, an idealist obsessed with love between people, who joins the communist movement only because he cannot continue to "defend" what he "hated" and "strike" at what he "hoped for"; even though the methods of the new masters are "disorienting" him¹⁷. Valentina's discovery comes too late, only when Mereuță is murdered in a bourgeois plot by those who want to sabotage the new communist regime, led by Radu Grecescu / Gorăscu, the husband of the youngest of the sisters, Ioana. In Radu, Horia Lovinescu succeeds in constructing an almost Nietzschean character, obsessed with war, killing, violence, as his cousin (but in a situation of not knowing this kinship), the painter Alec Gorăscu, well observes. After the war against the Germans is over, feeling useless, Radu gets involved in the fight against the new regime, together with his aunt Catinca Gorăscu, from the great local nobility, who has also raised Radu in a military way, without telling him that he is the fruit of the relationship between her nymphomaniac sister Eleonora and an administrator from their estate. Interesting for its psychoanalytic connotations is the scene in which Eleonora makes advances to Radu, who rejects them in horror at a femininity that has become plethoric and barren. Alec Gorăscu, an interesting painter with a passion for Paris, is also secretly in love with Ioana, confessing it to her only towards the end of the play, when

¹⁷ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru* [Theatre] (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1971), 140.

he also tells her of his decision to settle in the French capital, leaving behind the portrait of his beloved, one of his most vibrant works. In a dry musing, he says a memorable thing: it is no problem that the guns have been turned on the Germans, who for five hundred years have done nothing but paint badly and have occupied Paris, the only place in the world to which Alec feels truly soulfully connected. Nothing prevents him from leaving, we are given to understand, not even the insistence of party members who would like to put his art at the service of the communist revolution, such as Pavel Golea, the lover of Iulia, the third sister. A conversation with Ioana shows Alec to be totally hostile to such an enlistment, and the passage I transcribe below seems to me – read today – remarkable for its “double” writing:

IOANA: [Pavel Golea] He was of the opinion that it would be a pity for us and for you.

ALEC: I know better than he does what I need. As for my usefulness here, he’s wrong. I’m a bad citizen, and I’d be in your way.

IOANA: He said we would need art here to serve.

ALEC: What a utilitarian you’ve become! Art serves no purpose. It refines and innervates people’s sensibilities, and discredits immediate realities. If I were a political ideologue, I’d outlaw art as public enemy number one.

IOANA: How can these paradoxes amuse you, when there are so many painfully serious things?

ALEC: Serious? What?

IOANA: Suffering, hope... death... people... (*Smiling.*) As Golea would say, you’re an incurable individualist.¹⁸

Golea and Iulia are a couple worth keeping our attention. Helped by the woman-doctor, the illegalist communist worker always revolves around her after the so-called “Liberation”. Having given herself body and soul to her new life, Iulia helps to control the typhus epidemic in the county, just as Ioana – after the death of Radu, whom she herself denounced to the communists when he was preparing to make a terrorist attack on Ghighi Mirescu, Iulia’s former boyfriend from her youth – consoles herself by carrying out “literacy”

¹⁸ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru*, 142.

campaigns in the villages. Valentina is no stranger to the tide of history either, preparing to adopt a child to console her for the failure of her marriage to Miluță and the death of Mereuță.

Quite remarkably conceived in terms of the relationships between characters, Horia Lovinescu's play – despite frequent moments of ideological dryness – remains readable even today through its vigorous dialogue and moments of inner tension. Direct and indirect allusions to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* (1901) link Lovinescu's text to the great tradition of universal drama. The play opens with a discussion about Chekhov between Ioana and Mereuță. He has lent the girl a book and wants to know what she thinks, though he is annoyed when Ioana reveals that she has guessed: the book had been given to her as a reference to her and her sisters. The whole theory of happiness that Mereuță believes in is inspired by Chekhov, and this draws Pavel Golea's contempt for the articles the professor writes: "What are we putting out, Easter almanac, or Party gazette?"¹⁹ Instead of writing about universal happiness à la Chekhov, Mereuță is advised to write about the propaganda obsessions of the new political regime, i.e. "land, bread, soap, political power, heavy industry", which can only be achieved by "crushing with hatred those who resist"²⁰. And yet, Mereuță remains attached to his old ideas, clearly expressed in the initial scene with Ioana: "I think that's not what Chekhov was referring to, but a lasting, general happiness. Sometimes I sit at night and think of that world that Chekhov's Olga foresaw, and I too would like to know what kind of face those people who will come after us will have."²¹

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Moartea unui artist [The Death of an Artist] (1964) must be interpreted in relation to the historical context in which it appeared, after a decade of proletkult theatre, to whose "development" Horia Lovinescu himself had contributed with creations such as *Light from Ulmi* (1954), *The Shattered Citadel* (1955), *The Boga Sisters* (1959), etc. Lovinescu's attempt is in this sense original, because it brings to the stage a successful artist who, even though

¹⁹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru*, 143.

²⁰ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru*, 143-144.

²¹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru*, 96-97.

he lives in an era of “comrades,” owns a sumptuous villa in Snagov, close to the lake and the forest, with at least two sculpture studios, a terrace, a living room, frosted glass walls and so on. Manole Crudu lives like a bourgeois, has the interested Aglaia as his housekeeper, who tries to arrange a marriage between the sculptor and her young daughter, barely out of her teens. He travels to the Orient, exhibits in Paris, and his cosmopolitanism leaves no hint of the bleak society in which the author of the text actually lived in Romania in the 1950s and 1960s²².

Manole’s art itself – the mythical references to a seminal story of Romanian folk and theatrical culture²³ are obvious and hardly need any comment – is balanced, serene, classical, a successful art that brings the sculptor the glory of numerous critical comments, carefully collected by Cristina, Aglaia’s daughter, in several files. Crudu extols the greatness, the “creative power of man,” the “triumph of reason”²⁴, affirming the belief that has guided him all his life with strength, especially as Lovinescu shows him near death, suffering from a very serious heart disease: “And this has always been the ultimate aspiration of my art: to be awake. I never sculpted larvae and monsters. I am human. And for me, man is free and strong. (*With a defiance in which a note of despair permeates.*) Free and strong!”²⁵

Another element of originality, inevitable in any “historicist” (historicized) rereading of the play, is the subterranean references to psychoanalysis. Manole Crudu has a 30-year-old son, Vlad, who also sculpts, but the father does not like that kind of art, too marked by modern anxieties, by “literature”, by distrust in the Promethean force of the human being, and he has the courage to say it to the young man who is searching for his real self: “Psychoanalytic

²² Centa Mariana Artagea, *Horia Lovinescu, un scriitor în Infern* [Horia Lovinescu, a Writer in Hell] (Galați: Editura Fundației Universitare “Dunărea de Jos”, 2022).

²³ Mircea Eliade, “Master Manole and the Monastery of Argeș,” *Zalmoxis the Vanishing God. Comparative Studies in the Religions and Folklore of Dacia and Eastern Europe* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 164-190; Simone Reicherts-Schenk, *Die Legende von Meister Manole in der Rumänischen Dramatik: aspekte eines kreativen Schaffensprozesses am Beispiel der Dramen von Adrian Maniu, Lucian Blaga, Horia Lovinescu und Marin Sorescu* (Frankfurt-am-Main, Berlin, Bern, New York: Peter Lang, 1994).

²⁴ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 174.

²⁵ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 201.

babble has always repulsed me. The fact that the entrails are placed lower than the head does not give them depth. False depths, like false heights, make me tense. As for formal quests, Vlad, they are fruitful only when you know what you have to say. And that it's worth saying."²⁶ Although Manole is not fully aware of what is at stake, his intuition works wonders: the son refuses his father's artistic model of success because of an inferiority complex, an unrestrained "envy", which he ends up confessing in one of the harsh, frontal discussions the two have on several occasions. The son is, artistically speaking, a castrato, a "stammerer", lacking in verve, inhibited by the spectacle of his father's grandiosity, but also by his own ironic faculty, which makes him masochistically turn on himself impulses impossible to satisfy – sadistically – outside.

An Oedipal relationship – reversed, let us say – is also established between Manole and his second son, Toma, who nevertheless resembles his father in his robust confidence in life, his behavioural vigour and his manifest incompatibility with the mysteries of the abyss. Here too, however, there is a kind of generational conflict, but one of a more historical-ideological nature. The father defends with determination a still romantic model of the world, in which art is above all and even science is crushed by it, while the son, who has gone abroad to study physics, has become "less sensitive to art" because "for the thirst and formidable means of science, the universe of art has remained too small"²⁷. It is as if the new man of Soviet communism is speaking here, a proletkultist who dreams of establishing new relations between man and the world, which would be "expressed" by a new form of art, stripped of the idealizations and myths of the past, and committed only to communist ideology.

Ideologically rejected by both his sons, like "King Lear"²⁸, Manole Crudu will also enter into an "erotic" conflict with Toma, which will precipitate his final downfall. Infatuated with the teenage Cristina, in whom he sees the pure, animalistic graces of youth manifesting themselves unabashedly, and who worships the "Master" without pursuing any kind of petty interest (as

²⁶ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 172.

²⁷ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 205.

²⁸ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 205.

Aglaia suggests), Manole collapses mentally when he discovers her kissing Toma. From that moment on, he will shut himself up in his studio, surrounded only by his old nurse (and let us remember that only the heroes of Greek and Latin tragedies, or classical French tragedies of the 17th century, are accompanied by a nurse), and will create his final work, a group of statues whose characters are filled with the horror of death, an extreme feeling, a fear of the abyss, which Manole will end up accepting as an integral part of the universe of “motifs” specific to artistic creation²⁹. The group of statues horrifies Cristina, who has entered the studio at the thought that the Master was waiting for an explanation for what happened the night he surprised her with Toma, and provokes cries of admiration from Vlad, who discovers that his father is indeed a “great sculptor”, that he has produced a “panic object”, a “palpable negation”, in relation to which he himself produced only “hysterics” and “aesthetic jests”³⁰. A final artistic conversation takes place between father and son, the latter’s attitude being marked by a psychologically interesting duality. On the one hand, he is curious to find out what an artist can do after such a work and exults when he is told that he must always start from the beginning, but on the other hand he ends up confessing his old love, a love whose strength and persistence was fed, in fact, desperately, by the disinterest shown towards the children by a father totally absorbed in artistic creation. His total dedication to art also redeems Manole, helping him through a cathartic process of great complexity:

Now this fear is no longer in me, but there, on the pedestal, vain and shameless. That’s why I laughed before, because I suddenly discovered... I’m not afraid anymore. (*With exultation.*) Never have I been so free and strong as now. (*He suddenly puts his hand to his chest, with an expression of terrible pain. He almost gasps.*) It’s all right, it doesn’t mean anything. The corpse is tired. He’s asking for rest. That’s all.³¹

²⁹ Alin Ștefănuț, *Dramaturgia lui Horia Lovinescu: explorări ale abisului* [Horia Lovinescu’s Dramas. Explorations of the Abyss] (Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință, 2018).

³⁰ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 219-220.

³¹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 221.

The Death of an Artist is, broadly speaking, the story of an almost Balzac-like monomania, and I think Horia Lovinescu's play retains echoes of Balzac's *La Cousine Bette*, where the sculptor Steinbock collapses into a mediocre marriage rather than produce an astonishing masterpiece. All the characters Manole Crudu comes into contact with are touched by this monomania, when they are not affected or even destroyed by it. This is what happens with Claudia Roxan (a totally uninspired name!), Manole's lover, often deceived, whom – after an absence of four years devoted to an artistic trip to the Orient – he asks to marry, not out of love, but because he fears death, because – like Pascal – he feels an "abyss" opening up in front of him. The beautiful actress (beautiful though she is forty) refuses the marriage, but agrees to be a "charity sister" and does not leave Snagov until she realises Manole's almost senile passion for the younger Cristina.

As a psychological play and a drama of ideas, *The Death of an Artist* makes an honourable figure in the context of post-war dramaturgy, also because it renews a certain tradition of Romanian interwar theatre, represented by Camil Petrescu, Hortensia Papadat-Bengescu or Mihail Sebastian, for example. This – perhaps programmatic – inclusion in the great interwar tradition also prevents Horia Lovinescu from taking a more radical modernist stance. In the 1964 play, the major questions raised by the meaning and value of art are posed with the means of traditional drama (plot, literary architecture, conflict, characters), liberally peppered with cultural references to Shakespeare, Poe, Dostoevsky, René Huyghe.

The impression of a very moderate modernism, despite the ideological disobedience (which was nevertheless manifest in the 1960s in all sectors of Romanian literature and culture), also comes from the rather serious folkloric background of Lovinescu's plays (in *Petru Rareș*, for example, Horia Lovinescu stages a healing dance of the *călușari*)³². Even if we do not refer to the myth of Master Manole, transparent in a number of textual details (and in the theme of the sacrifice of the family on the altar of art), there are still many elements capable of supporting this hypothesis. The subject of the group of statues

³² Natalia Stancu, *Horia Lovinescu. O dramaturgie sub zodia lucidității* [Horia Lovinescu. A Dramaturgy under the Sign of Lucidity] (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1985), 134-136.

Manole is working on, and for which he proposes (ironically enough!) a collaboration with Vlad himself, who is to be the “hand” while the father is to be the “head”, is *Zburătoul* [The Flying Vampire], one of the four fundamental myths of the Romanian people, as read by George Călinescu. The character of Nanny Domnica, a simple woman, has the dramatic function of reconciling the sculptor with the idea of death. The eighty-five year old woman recites to Manole verses “of our own, of the peasants”, the first two being convincing, the other two betraying slightly an inexperienced scholarly hand (and an undeniable influence of Lucian Blaga and of his poetical play *Master Manole*³³): “Death comes to the garden, / With a glass and a candle. / Hear the bell as it sings. / Rise, rise, and listen to it.”³⁴ If here Domnica is quite credible, she becomes false when she starts speaking in Blagian parables and metaphors (“Do you know what I think, Manole? That this whole world is a wedding mystery. Darkness is wedded to light, evil to good, and always, always, unceasingly, the sun appears.”³⁵), or when she recites verses from *Miorița* about the death-wedding analogy, which are not really folkloric, marking Vasile Alecsandri’s most visible intervention in the Romanian folk ballad he transcribed and published in the 1850s. To end the drama with such a quotation is a terrible technical mistake made by Horia Lovinescu, in the sense that the whole effect of the sculptor’s death after the completion of a testamentary work is completely cancelled, deflated.

It should be pointed out that Horia Lovinescu’s play may encounter certain difficulties in staging (if one imagines an exact staging, in accordance with the playwright’s intentions), because of the static nature of the conflict, primarily psychological. Moreover, the abundance of didascalies, almost all external, marked by specific graphic processes, is likely to confuse a director. These, real novelistic insertions in the dialogical text, provide information of microscopic precision, important and interesting for the reader, who can move freely in the act of reading, speeding up or slowing down the pace depending

³³ Elena Silvia Mogoș (Terpan), “Lucian Blaga și Horia Lovinescu: jertfă și sacralizare prin artă” [Lucian Blaga and Horia Lovinescu: Sacrifice and Sacralization through Art], *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies*, issue 32, 1 (2023), 979-984.

³⁴ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 157.

³⁵ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 217.

on the circumstances, but undoubtedly sometimes embarrassing for the director who would approach Horia Lovinescu's text with the thought of staging it. The didascaly in the play's overture is illustrative in the sense of sliding towards the novel and cancelling out the theatrical effect through descriptive over-emphasis.

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Another play that involves a psychologizing interpretation, partly inspired by the myth of Master Manole, is *The Man Who Lost His Humanity*. Here, Manole is a craftsman who sacrifices everything to build the greatest edifice of all time, the Tower of the Moon: he gives up his family, his sleep, his human feelings and passions, any other artistic project. Although slaves die by the thousands, of exhaustion or hanged by the Master's grotesque (and linguistic!) double, Elonam, Manole will not make a human sacrifice to complete the vault, which is only one brick short. After the sixth collapse of the vault, despite mathematical calculations of extreme precision, Manole goes out into the world to find himself, to find his "humanity". On the site of his own home, in the heart of the forest, he finds a young hunter endowed with extraordinary strength. He lives with his mother, locked in a room and returning as a tormenting spirit at intervals. From word to word, the young man reveals to the stranger – whom he initially regarded with undisguised reluctance – that he has no other plan than to kill his father, who is guilty of leaving the family and killing his mother. He will also take action, with a sword in which he will stab himself when the father tries to disarm him, this crime being loaded with symbolic and psychoanalytical connotations.

Manole cannot be counted among the thieves, because they are honest thieves who seek "freedom" and "superhumanity," including the one who takes a sadistic pleasure in killing. To the outlaws, the master craftsman appears as an unsettling "wizard" whose dark eyes drip a strange poison. It was only when Manole met his old master, in "a room like in Rembrandt's canvases depicting philosophers"³⁶, that he learned what the "cornerstone" was, the one that would make the whole construction stand up: "the sense of humanity" and "solidarity with the human being"³⁷. These truths the very old master

³⁶ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2* [Theatre 2] (Bucharest: Editura Eminescu, 1973), 232.

³⁷ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 233.

communicates to his former disciple in a language imbued with alchemical sentences, which Manole also guesses as such (“I see the ears of the alchemist coming out”³⁸): “finis coronat opus”, “what if your rational universe is in fact alienated, and the world you consider insane has reasons that you no longer understand?”³⁹. Manole, “the man who lost his humanity,” according to the old man, is the one who extinguished the “flame” in the workers of the Tower, that’s why the “cornerstone” can’t finish the construction. The play will end in an optimistic key, although marked by Manole’s death, but not before he has gone through the “market of sins”, imagined with great scenic-visual plasticity: “The demons of sins will be played by actors wearing masks inspired by J. Bosch, Goya, Romanian folk masks, etc., in a mix devoid of any pretence of local colour.”⁴⁰

After the devilish sarabande, in which the actors are left free to “improvise,” Manole arrives in the sunless citadel, depicted in a sort of magical incantation, where he confronts his double, Elonam, who has become an apocalyptic prophet with speeches calling for the extinction of humanity, and hands him over to the executioner, whose joy is not bad when he hangs the villain on the gallows, plastically named Eleonora. Manole will regain his humanity before his death with a family of simple peasants, with whom he works the land and whose daughter, an almost nubile fourteen-year-old girl, somewhat in love with the stranger, he saves by communicating his own vital fluid...

A mythical, parabolic play, *The Man Who Lost His Humanity* still captivates nowadays with the impression of a heteroclit bazaar that it imposes on any reader. Sharply modern themes and echoes of Nietzsche sit alongside folk songs and incantations, alchemical references are juxtaposed with the quasi-comic speeches of thieves, in a variety of stylistic registers typical of some of the author’s plays. There is also no shortage of medieval clichés of macabre dance and an allegorical death cart, which reminds me of a famous painting by Pieter Bruegel the Elder. The successive tableaux of the play, with no direct connection between them other than that conferred by Manole’s return, are

³⁸ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 233.

³⁹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 233, 234.

⁴⁰ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 238.

nonetheless of an overflowing and varied theatricality, not unlike a profession of faith by the Executioner of the Sunless City, Elonam's murderer: "I stand by Eleonora and look at all the fools gathered in the square, who laugh and think themselves the center of the earth; and then I see them all playing and swinging in unseen ropes. All of them. Even the prophet. Man is a puppet pulled on strings and the world is a panorama. Do you understand?"⁴¹

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It is clear that Horia Lovinescu's play dedicated to the Moldavian prince Petru Rareș (1527-1538; 1541-1546), *The Locum Tenens*, is modelled on Delavrancea's *Evening Star* (1910), which – although considered the weakest of the trilogy of Moldavia – seems to have some features that put it above the other two⁴². There are many memorable moments in Delavrancea, such as when Petru Rareș presents himself before the people and is recognized as Stephen the Great's son and a lord (after several proofs that are rejected one by one in a subtle game of logic), the prophecies of the old woman Dolca, or the moment of the unmasking of the boyars who planned to abandon the country to the Ottomans. Delavrancea excels at unravelling carefully woven plots, only here, unlike in *Apus de soare* [Sunset], the unmasking is done through staging, double-dealing and clever baiting by the plotters: Rareș is more diplomatic than his father, who was inclined to settle matters with the sword, cutting off two or three heads and "rather shedding innocent blood". Delavrancea's play is also interesting for the prince's extra-marital relationship with Genunea, the daughter of the logothete Baloș and sister of the valiant Sandomir, a relationship full of ambiguities, sub-meanings and erotic valences. As static as *Sunset*, *Evening Star* seems stylistically less cumbersome to read, with remarkable metaphorical devices and a tension of writing that makes it more energetic, more muscular, more alive and more palpitating than anything Delavrancea has written in the field of drama. The character of Petru Rareș is patriotic, prophetic, apocalyptic, brave, speaking with a pathos that becomes slightly hallucinatory in Act V, after the loss of the throne.

⁴¹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 247.

⁴² Natalia Stancu, *Horia Lovinescu*, 90.

In Horia Lovinescu, there are many echoes of Delavrancea's cycle inspired by Stephen the Great (here, Delavrancea is in the position of a literary father, who must be challenged and overcome), primarily the theme of the plot, woven by the same traitorous boyars, Mihu and Troțușan, to whom Dumșă is added, boyars who overthrow Rareș from the throne with Turkish help at a critical moment, when the country is being squeezed by several enemy armies (Polish in the north and Tatar-Turkish in the south). It is, in fact, as in the early drama written by Delavrancea, the only core of genuinely theatrical tension in this static play, whose main interest does not even lie in the careful construction and portrayal of characters. The battle scenes, humorously punctuated by the devotion of the common soldiers to their lord, as in Barbu Ștefănescu Delavrancea, barely enliven the ensemble. Horia Lovinescu also takes from his precursor all the material relating to Petru Rareș' escape through the steep mountains towards Transylvania after the interruption of his reign, as well as his encounter with the rescuing fishermen, who disguise him as one of their own, so that he is not caught by the soldiers massed at the foot of the hills. We find the same prophetic pathos in Horia Lovinescu's as in Delavrancea's play, to such an extent that *The Locum Tenens* seems like a rewriting of *Evening Star*.

After all, *The Locum Tenens* has value, and still quite high value, as a play-portrait – and this would again be an important point of contact with Delavrancea's drama. The son and follower of Stephen the Great has here the sense of a great historical mission, that of standing up to Ottoman power in the name of the Christian cross, even at the cost of a temporary alliance with the pagans. Any betrayal seems justifiable to Rareș in the context of this ideal beyond time and historical circumstances, which led him to request the representation of the famous scene of the siege of Constantinople by the Persians in the 7th century on the wall of the monasteries he founded: a sort of reminder and warning to all the princes of Christianity! In order to accomplish his mission, this ruler from the Mușat dynasty does not back down from any compromise, sacrificing his beloved illegitimate son, Ioniță, to the Sultan's lust for revenge. This son, understanding the anti-Ottoman policy in a limited sense, had killed Ștefan Lăcustă [Stephen Locust], the lord sold to the Turks, and had attacked the citadel of Tighina with a handful of soldiers from Orhei,

arousing the anger of the pagans: he must therefore pay, and Rareș promises his death before knowing the identity of the perpetrator of the attack. The final meeting between son and father is a time of misunderstanding, with the young man spitting in his father's cheek before he dies and accusing him of selling his soul in the name of will to power.

At a first level, Rareș' mission in Moldova seems purely political, and Ioniță understands it only in this way: hence the final rift between father and son. This rupture at the heart of each family, constantly rethought and re-staged in the plays discussed in this article, refers to elements of Horia Lovinescu's biography, but has much deeper meanings in the existential and artistic realm, thematizing the difficult emancipation of the Son in relation to a Father deified and then despised, but never understood as the one who really is. Reading *The Locum Tenens* between the lines, we discover that the Moldavian voivode considers himself anointed by God, the repository of an ancient wisdom, transmitted by initiation within the Mușat dynasty. In Horia Lovinescu's play, the discussion of the Moldavian Prince with Sultan Suleiman, set in Constantinople in 1540, is based on equality, because Rareș is addressing not the worldly ruler of the Ottoman kingdom, but the "caliph", i.e. a prince invested with a primarily religious and trans-worldly dignity. Suleiman feels that for Rareș, too, the reign has a mystical function, asking him an unequivocal question: "You consider yourself the keeper of a deposit, don't you?" The answer befits the question, "Yes, Your Highness. And this deposit must float on the sea of ages. It is not mine, it belongs to my ancient land and its inhabitants. I am but a rafter, who, while he lives, must direct this cargo to the future." Suleiman continues to speak to Rareș in the same deeply religious tone, with references to Hermetic symbolism: "At great depths, beneath the ruggedness of continents, the watery veils meet. Day and night form a whole. (*He looks longingly at Rareș.*) That's why the Caliph understands you."⁴³ Read correctly, this scene, crucial for understanding the motivations guiding Rareș's politics, reveals Vasile Lovinescu's profound influence on his younger brother. This influence is also repeatedly seen in *The Locum Tenens*. It is known

⁴³ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 341.

that Vasile Lovinescu was also very concerned with the era of Petru Rareș and in particular with the interpretation of the “alchemical” symbolism of the monasteries the Prince founded. In good esoteric spirit, Horia – as his brother Vasile – makes of the Moldavian ruler a first-class initiate, “keeper” of a “deposit” of mysteries that must reach his descendants. Rareș, as he himself confesses in his long monologue after the loss of the throne, has also been involved in the magical arts, the arcana of which he has mastered: “I’m not saying, I’ve done a little astrology, I know I live under a purple star, and I know other things, but that’s another story. But as for alchemy, ha-ha, all the alchemists you pay big money for are rogues who are leading you around by the nose, pardon the expression. Lead can turn to gold, that’s no lie, Magnum Opus exists, but first you have to discover the philosopher’s stone in yourself, as Roșca says.”⁴⁴

Roșca is therefore the one who taught Rareș the main truth of the Hermetic art, namely that the transmutation of lead into gold never happens without a transformation of the self. Moreover, the philosopher’s stone is in man, not outside him, the gold discovered in the alchemical process being spiritual. But – to return to the question in the play – who is this Roșca? A cousin of the Prince himself and metropolitan of Moldavia, Grigorie Roșca, the author of the iconographic programmes of the monasteries from Bukovina, sometimes appears as a hesychast monk imbued with the spirit of God, and sometimes as a skilful political adviser, a “sophist”, who does not forget to remind Rareș that “Christ also bears the sword”⁴⁵. Roșca also plays the role of the great pontiff, the transmitter of the crown, addressing the former fisherman with the title of “locum tenens”. Is it the lieutenant of Stephen the Great, by whose tomb does Rareș receive his right to rule? It would seem so, but the discussion with Suleiman makes things clear: Rareș, like all the lords from the Mușat dynasty, is a “locum tenens of the White Aurochs”, a totemic beast whose spiritual energy radiates over all things in the world.

The folkloric elements in Horia Lovinescu’s play are, of course, quite specific to his artistic manner, but they can also be considered a glimpse into

⁴⁴ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 334.

⁴⁵ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 295.

Vasile's traditionalism. In his wanderings through the mountains, Petru Rareș is recognised by the fishermen as belonging to the fishermen's guild on the basis of ritual forms connected with catching the first trout (organisation of the catch, proper gestures, silence, avoidance of contact with the women, the incantation to be said when the fish is taken out of the water, etc.). In order to awaken him from the lethargy into which the wounds received in the battles have plunged him, these fishermen also play a "healing *căluș*"⁴⁶ [ritual dance], which the play's didascalies present according to "the documentary film from the Institute of Folklore". The dancing troupe has four members, plus the "leader" and the "mute", and they perform a symbolic transfer of the illness from the feet of the wounded man to a lad in the group. The illness of supernatural origin ("you were writhing like a devil") is also magically resolved, as Rareș is snatched from the hands of the "fairies" who are making him sick. Towards the end of the play, Horia Lovinescu once again exploits the data of folk culture, staging a symbolic funeral for a young dead man, a group of women singing the tree song, following the model contained in "the Institute of Folklore's band, which must be respected to the letter"⁴⁷. The young "dead" is in fact one of the sons of Rareș, sent as a hostage to Istanbul at the hands of the Sultan. A Western emissary – at the sight of the ceremony – protests that he has seen no priest, to which he is retorted that "the ritual is older than the Church" and that the ritual "tolerates" the people, not the people tolerate it. After all, these moments in Lovinescu's play, parasitic both in relation to the unfolding of the "action" and to the portrayal of the hero's features, do nothing but illustrate a belief of his brother Vasile: "integration into folk tradition is integration into esotericism".

⁴⁶ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 336-337. Ewa Kocój, "The Romanian Ritual of Calusari Between an Obsolete Meaning and a Preserved Structure," *Anthropos*, 108, 2 (2013):565-575; Ileana Benga, Bogdan Neagota, "Căluș and Călușari. Ceremonial Syntax and Narrative Morphology in the Grammar of the Romanian Căluș," *Archaeus. Études d'histoire des religions / Studies in the History of Religions*, no XIV (2010): 197-227.

⁴⁷ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 1*, 352.

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The Game of Life and Death in the Desert of Ashes (1973), a play that at times exudes great expressive force, manages to combine, in a synthesis of great intensity, echoes of Shakespeare, Dostoevsky and Beckett, with numerous reminiscences of Judeo-Christian mythology, treated sometimes in a serious register, sometimes in a grotesque or ironic one. The mood of the play is extremely gripping, we are in a post-apocalyptic period, and of all mankind only the most famous enemy brothers of the Bible, Abel and Cain, seem to have survived, together with their jester and strange father, in whom critics have rightly seen a sort of Feodor Karamazov. The scheme of the parent-child relationship and the relationship of the sons to each other refers, to mention Charles Mauron, to a series of haunting images, defining Horia Lovinescu's creative psyche. The three, as in *The Death of an Artist*, revolve around a woman, a sixteen-year-old teenager, Ana, in whom an immense purity is combined with the raptures of the flesh and the troubled calls to the voluptuousness of love. Abel loves her like a brother and refuses to marry her in the name of an idealism of love, the old man desires her with impotent snarls and is whipped by her – on demand – with the nails intended for weaving a basket, experiencing a masochistic ecstasy that seems to have come out of Sacher-Masoch, but the one who will “have” her (in every sense of the word) will be none other than Cain.

This one returns to his father's house after being missing in the play's overture, but without the “prodigal son” behaviour that the Father expected of him. On the contrary, sour and mean, Cain is like him altogether and brings with him only the despair of a mercenary who seems to have returned from Congo, tired of all the people he has had to kill. Out of boredom, Cain will rape Ana, revealing to her the animal nature of human beings and the shameful pleasure of the senses. The woman is pregnant, and the old man kills himself in despair when he learns that it is not Abel's child (whom he still considers a mere “poor in spirit”). The wiser brother achieves a kind of reconciliation between Ana and Cain, getting the latter to accept the child and help perpetuate life, but ultimately “kills himself”, somehow forcing the ex-military man to fire the last bullet from the barrel of his gun into himself during a “let's see who's tougher” fight that he seemed to relentlessly dominate.

But the relationship between the brothers here goes beyond mere rivalry and seems to obey an almost gnostic dualistic principle. Abel is a pure and forgiving Christ, and Cain a kind of Satan whose sole purpose is to "defile" his brother, to brutalize his innocence, forcing him – since childhood – to witness all sorts of repulsive spectacles: impaling frogs, gouging out the eyes of little birds, even the sexual intercourse between the parents that he shows him through the keyhole (there's a kind of "primal scene" here, to use Freudian terminology, which explains all of Abel's horror of sex and his refusal to marry Ana).

Cain is an embodiment of the blind forces of nature, an unrestrained telluric, an anti-intellectual ("symbols have always made me nauseous, not an intellectual nausea, but a real, physiological nausea"⁴⁸), while Abel represents a principle of reason and balance, a thinker who likes to split the differences between things and find the hidden motivations of phenomena. And yet, despite the irreconcilability between the two, love is a very powerful driving force in their relationship, with Cain's love remaining virtual, subject to conditioning ("if I could have polluted you – that expression reeks of the most disgusting idealism, but it suits you – I think I would have loved you as one seldom loves one's brother"⁴⁹), whereas Abel's love is always real and finds its culmination in the ultimate sacrifice. Horia Lovinescu's play is remarkable, managing to become, one by one, lyrical, grotesque, tragic, allegorical, boring, but always maintaining a deep human vibration and a stylistic tension of a very good artistic level.

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Horia Lovinescu's dramaturgy, read with tools inspired by psychology in a close reading system, reveals fascinating connections between biographical and historical facts, and artistic creation. The theme of sibling enemies and the relationship with the father runs through it, gathering around it constellations of psychological and aesthetic meanings. We find it associated with the competition of the two brothers and the father for the love of a young maiden who is either transfigured or perverted by the struggle of the men around

⁴⁸ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 172.

⁴⁹ Horia Lovinescu, *Teatru 2*, 171.

her. The figure of the mother, of simple and sublime goodness, or totally absent, does not polarise the psychological energies of the characters and the author, leading to the over-dimensioning of a substitute maternal figure: the grandmother. In order to sublimate his traumas and obsessions, the playwright constantly refers to how the European cultural tradition has dealt with sibling enemies and symbolic parricide, from biblical myths and Greek tragedy to Dostoevsky. The cultural references both clarify and disturb the psychic energies on which they are superimposed, making the exegete's task difficult, but – however – it is clear from some “haunting metaphors” that Horia Lovinescu's work is set up as a protest against the father and as a dialogue, sometimes polemical and violent, with the writings and worldview of his elder brother, the occultist Vasile Lovinescu. Horia's work speak about self-affirmation, about artistic creation, about the dilemmas of modern man with such a personal pathos that the proletkultist form that the author has given it – constrained by the “terror of history” or opportunism – does not hinder the reading at all, on the contrary, it gives it an additional documentary and literary interest⁵⁰...

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⁵⁰ Natalia Stancu, *Horia Lovinescu*, 151-153.

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

Anca HAȚIEGAN¹ 

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

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

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

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



Fig. 1: The trial of engineer Ciulei in the interwar press: *Realitatea ilustrată* from the 30th of September 1936

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Entering the Era of Socialist Realism

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Confronting Personal Trauma

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁸ Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 135.

and his younger sister when they were insulted and attacked on the street by three members of the Black Hundreds⁹ (also against their father like the socialists), Pyotr fails to integrate into the noble but very strict society guided by these principles, feeling a great inner void. He finds no support in faith either, denying the existence of God. With a dying soul, he seeks refuge and solace in alcohol, which, given his physical frailty, equates to suicide. If Pyotr chooses a slow, euphoric death, it is because he abhors firearms and the idea of ending his life with a bullet at such a young age – although the thought haunts him.

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

¹¹ Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 135.

¹² Maxim Gorky, *The Last Ones*, 96.

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

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

Impending Disaster

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

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

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

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

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

¹⁵ Simion Alterescu, “Colectivul Teatrului Odeon prezintă: ‘Cei din urmă’ de Maxim Gorki,” *Rampa*, 37, no. 124 (March 28, 1948): 3.

¹⁶ Sorin Mladoveanu, “Cronica dramatică. Teatrul Odeon: ‘Cei din urmă’, piesă în patru acte de Maxim Gorki,” *Scânteia*, XVII, no. 1088 (April 3, 1948): 2.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusions

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

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Short Thoughts at Length on The Actor's Paradox

András HATHÁZI¹ 

Abstract: Why the actor's paradox? I would not even bother with this question if I didn't see so many acting students desperate to do well what they are given as "course material" and so much outdated, dusty, outmoded, mannered acting on stages in their home countries. And even the latter would not interest me – since they are largely kept alive by public taste and public satisfaction (of very dubious value for me) – if they were not based on the same criteria on which I base my ideas about acting. So, under the pretext of the apparent contradiction in Diderot's words, I will examine where I might have started in a different direction. At which fork in the motorway did I drive wrongly onto the motorway and go against the traffic? Because it is obvious to me: I am in the minority. Perhaps the paradox is not in the acting, but in the way we think about it.

Keywords: Actor's paradox; "given circumstances"; "what if"; "let's say..."; playing the reality; emotions; repetition; the two bits of the mind.

*Anyone can exist mechanically.
As humans, few can afford to do so.
On stage, this is even more true.*

Reading Ananyo Bhattacharya's book² reaffirmed for me some of the perspectives that shape the way I think about acting in theatre:

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² Ananyo Bhattacharya, *Neumann János – Az ember a jövőből*, translated by János Kepes (Open Books, n.d., 2023). Original title: *János Neumann – The Man from the Future*.



1. The indirect effect is more direct. The exceptions to this are the workshops in which I have just experimented. Without any end goal.
2. Understanding is not exclusively rational. Understanding is equally emotional. That is why we see the world as we have learned to see it from those we love, have loved, have been emotionally dependent on.
3. The world is unknowable. Therefore, whatever system we set up, it is valid only within itself, and can interpret so small a proportion of phenomena that, in relation to the whole, their proportion is almost nothing.
4. All points of view are valid because everything that happens has already happened and will happen.
5. There is no language that can describe what it is aimed at.

The above list is not definitive. As I am in a constant state of change, new perspectives open to me. Although it may be that only the existing ones are given different emphasis, because the way I see phenomena remains the same, but I try to approach things from a different angle. I don't know. I don't see myself to the extent that I think about myself independently. And I am not so complete that I am simultaneously myself, not myself and everything. Although I often have the feeling that if I don't rely only on my mind, I am surrounded and filled with something else, something much simpler, something lighter.

I will not explain these five starting points. If you are interested, ask me, I will be happy to discuss it with you. At least I think I feel it now, although I am bound to believe that anyone is interested. My previous writings have remained as inaudible as this one will no doubt sink into the mass of endless discussions. I am writing all this for myself.

Why the actor's paradox? I wouldn't even bother with this question if I didn't see so many acting students desperate to do well what they are given as "course material" and so much outdated, dusty, outmoded, mannered acting on stages in their home countries. And even the latter would not interest me – since they are largely kept alive by public taste and public satisfaction (of very dubious value for me) – if they were not based on the

same criteria on which I base my ideas about acting³. So, under the pretext of the apparent contradiction in Diderot's words, I will examine where I might have started in a different direction. At which fork in the motorway did I drive wrongly onto the motorway and go against the traffic? Because it is obvious to me: I am in the minority.

Diderot's actor's paradox for me is, very briefly: does the actor feel real emotions on stage, or is he just acting them out? Because if he/she really feels them, he/she cannot reproduce them. And if he/she repeats them, he/she doesn't really feel them.

And the actor has to repeat. If not at other times, then at least for the time it takes to prepare a public performance. Even if it is only in his/her head, in the sketching out of a simple plan. "I'll come in here, I'll do this here, I'll say this here. And then I'll feel this." Or not.

But what is the "real" feeling? Who can define it? And why should the actor "really" feel it? Out of honour? Because it is not proper to lie? Is the man who makes a statement about himself/herself a liar, and I pretend to believe him/her, and then he/she bows at the end and I applaud him/her?

Magician vs. comedian. Pretending vs. showing off. It's not all about acting, it's about the mind thinking about acting. And the mind is "two bits". Yes or no. Zero or one. The same principle is at work in the most complex computer. It just performs a series of decisions much faster and manages a much larger amount of data and information. In this, it is statistically immeasurably better than us humans⁴.

³ This does not mean that I do it better or see it better. It doesn't even mean I'm good at it. That's not what this text is about! I'm simply interested in how it is possible to come up with such different acting from the same point of view, based on the same expectations? Or would that be like music? The same notes are used by Bach and any cheap musician.

⁴ Moreover, the mind may not even think about acting. Rather, it seems to seek an ideology for the tastes of the thinker who uses it as a tool, to build up a whole system, to establish a series of rules (often contradictory, sometimes tending towards the mystical), ambiguous theorems called regularities. Purple mists. I do the same myself, even when I try to formulate my assumptions from my own experience. No matter how much I question the evidence, no matter how much I try to discover instead of justify, I am driven first and foremost by the question: do I like what I see or not? But this, I repeat, does not mean that the acting I have experienced (and hope to experience again) is better or worse.

But what if, instead of classical determinism, I deal with what lies outside it? In other words, I try not to talk about its opposite, not about the other pole of the Newtonian, Euclidean, Darwinian world view, because on the one hand I want to avoid repeating dualism, and on the other hand I cannot put it into words. What if I do not deny but deal with what this dualistic world cannot answer? What if I listen to my experience, and do not try to push what I experience into the Procrustean bed of learned evidence? Because I increasingly feel that my intuition, my irrationality, that something unnamable that I experience on stage, is becoming a fog before my intellect, and I am not making any progress towards understanding. Not to mention that without it, what can I say to my students?

But is that what education is? The transmission of knowledge that can be reasoned and described?

For I find that acting is outside the above dichotomy(-ies) (magician/comedian, transcendence/revelation, etc.).

But it is not only acting! The same happens with all phenomena. Each pair of opposites – apparent or not – does not describe even in the slightest degree the phenomenon itself, which it tries to capture by their joint statement. A and its opposite, minus A – note: not non-A! – no matter how much detail the human mind tries to define the phenomenon they are designed to understand, can tell us nothing about the range defined by non-A and non-minus A outside of them. Which is much larger than what can fit into the set of A and minus A. And yes, I know, defined is not the best term, but at the moment I know of no other. And even if I did, see point five above.

It may be that rationalism, which divides everything up, takes it apart, analyzes it in detail (meticulously and seemingly ever more profoundly), the mind that creates logical order out of chaos results in the actor's paradox. It separates two elements that coexist. Just as in the human body an infection of the toe affects the functioning of the heart, so the emotions that are acted and real do not exist separately but are present simultaneously in a different quality. And the more "real" we want to make the emotion on stage, the more "acted" it becomes, and vice versa: the more we act the emotion, the more real it seems.

Moreover, rationality not only separates, but juxtaposes elements that are not contradictory.

Perhaps the paradox is not in the acting, but in the way we think about it.

Yes, it would be effective to pause here now and let ourselves nod sagely in response to the above. Or to reject the previous sentences altogether, to classify them as a search for an idea, and to continue with the irreconcilable division: acted vs. lived. That is life after all: yes or no! No?

Not sure...

But if not, let's also consider Stanislavsky's statement about the magic "what if". And the (seemingly unintelligible) "given circumstances". In fact, the one that all children use when they declare at the beginning of a game that "let's say..."⁵

The same is the starting point of the theatrical performance. "Let's say" this is Verona, or this is the Serebryakov's living room. "Let's say that" you are Hedda Gabler and you are Jörgen Tesman.

But it is precisely this starting point that I interpret differently. And that's why I'm going in a completely different direction. Not better, not worse – different.

I will not think any further about the proposal. I don't infer anything from "let's say" I am Jonathan Peachum⁶. I don't attribute anything to him from what I might assume about him, about such a man, about the situations he finds himself in, and which I ultimately just assume might happen. I am not concerned with what it **must be**.

As an actor, I consider the person in me, as a director, the person appearing before me, who I know has the primary intention of being "let's say" someone who is not the self he/she thinks he/she is, or what the rest of us think he/she is⁷.

⁵ And then it consistently delivers. While never forgetting for a moment that he is now caught between two realities. The reality of everyday life, and the reality of the game. Just like in the story. Because fairy tales are not about reality, but they are not about imagination either. A fairy tale is about what **once** happened in the world between the two (reality and fiction). Like a theatre performance.

⁶ János Páva in a performance by the Csík Theatre.
<https://www.csikjatekszin.ro/hu/eloadasok/koldusopera> (17 March 2024).

⁷ Donnellan writes in his book (Original title: *The Actor and the Target*, Nick Hern Books, 2006) (Declan Donnellan: *A színész és a célpont*, Corvina, Budapest, 2021, trans. Gábor M. Koltai) in his foreword (p. 7) that **"At the moment when the actor begins to act, at that sacred moment, he says to the audience: 'Look! I am not just one thing! I am not playing myself a little bit. I am playing someone else!'"** (Declan Donnellan's emphasis.) And I've been thinking about that ever since, that we are **playing** ourselves.

I have a perception, not a concept.

I see reality as something else. Not the situation that “let’s say that” is directed at, but that this situation is now about “let’s say that”. That is, the object of my attention is not the reality of the Peachum/Peacock, but that of the man who declares himself, and who we all know is now **pretending to be** “say that” Peachum/Peacock.

The theatre has reality, not the story. I measure the “realness” of the actor’s emotions against that.⁸

In an older text of mine (*On the reality of the actor and what we see*)⁹, I make the same point, but I don’t connect it to the actor paradox. Indirectly, I ask the question: what has reality on stage? Is it the story, or the attempt to bring the story to life in the public space? Because I have the feeling that they are two completely different things. It’s not the same whether you’re looking at the reality of Verona or the reality of “let’s say this is Verona now”.

The first case (“This is Verona now!”) is the perfect breeding ground for the actor paradox. A prime example. For we are no longer concerned with “let’s say you are the Nanny”, but with “if you are the Nanny, what must you be like”? The Nanny becomes a reality, and not that you are someone who is now “let’s say you are the Nanny”. Already we are not dealing with what is (someone pretending to be the Nanny), but what should be. The Nanny. Which is not. There can’t be.

Can I play the reality of Andras Hathazi? No. In theory, I should be the most authentic person to play Andras Hathazi. But I can’t. I mean Andras

⁸ This is how I interpret it, the statement that the actor should think of himself not as an object but as a subject. For he is not thinking of Peachum/Peacock, who is not only in the singular third person, but **does not exist at all** (!), but of himself in the sense that he is now “let’s say” Peachum/Peacock. It is the self who can now, through the position of “let’s say that”, do **whatever** is possible within the framework of the game.

As if simultaneously “alienated” and “identified”. Which is possible because I am “alienated” from Peachum/Pava and “identified” with my own playing self!

The puppet theatre shows us this most precisely, most vividly. There is the role(s), the puppet, and there is the puppeteer. The one who shows and plays at the same time.

This is how I understand Gordon Craig, as far as I know and understand him...

⁹ András Hatházi, *A színész valóságáról, és arról, hogy mit látunk*, in *A semmitmondó szöveg* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană/Cluj University Press, 2021). English title: *The inexpressive text*.

Hathazi, when I play Andras Hathazi. Because as much as I would try to be Andras Hathazi, I would only be Andras Hathazi playing Andras Hathazi. Who is less than Andras Hathazi himself. Because I would only be András Hatházi's opinion of András Hatházi. I would only be a Hatházi András imagined at a given moment.¹⁰

Likewise the actor, who tries to portray the reality of the Nurse, the Nurse herself, as valid in the "reality" of Verona. He/she will never be the Nurse. He/she will always be just an actor desperately pursuing the idea of the Nurse that appears in him/her.

In the second case, on the contrary, there is no actor's paradox¹¹! Because the actor is simultaneously acting and living "real" emotions! (To stay with the example above: the actor playing the Nanny, while "acting" the emotions named by the Nanny, is living his/her own emotions, which are not always the Nanny's emotions, but are always real! How he/she can reproduce them, I will tell you below.)

For there is a reality in "let's say that this is Verona"! Because if "we say that you are now the Nanny", then you are not the Nanny, but only "we say" that you are the Nanny. Your reality is not the reality of the Nanny, it is the reality of you who "say" you are the Nanny.

¹⁰ For me, this idea is also confirmed by quantum physics, when it states that it is impossible to know at the same time how fast a given particle is moving and where it is located. Speed and location cannot be determined at the same time. If I am watching the continuous transformation of Andras Hathazi, I have no idea where Andras Hathazi is? And if I determine his location, I have no idea at all at what speed he is transforming. András Hatházi, as a "character", as a "performer", is the point, the place where András Hatházi reveals himself to me for a moment. While András Hatházi, who plays András Hatházi, is already in a completely different place.

¹¹ Make no mistake, I am not against the actor paradox, I am not trying to invalidate it. I am talking about the fact that there is an acting in which the actor's paradox has simply become obsolete. It does not exist. It is not a problem. It is not a problem! It's like Bolyai Square. Euclidean laws do not apply.

What I'm talking about is that the acting I've come to is different from what I was taught at the time. So, we should rethink all the things we say about realism, character, acting, etc. that continue to result in actors who are stuck in the grip of the actor paradox. All the while lying to themselves, to each other, to newer generations, that this is the peculiarity of their art.

So, if we “say that” I am now Andras Hathazi, then I am much closer to Andras Hathazi’s reality, because Andras Hathazi’s reality is that of the person in process.¹²

But in acting schools and theatre rehearsals we still talk primarily about emotions. We talk about “what we should feel here”. Based on what we can only assume the people on stage might feel. And the student actors and actresses try to meet these expectations. They are terrified to search for real emotion. Which “really” has no basis in reality, because we only imagine what might happen to the people we imagine.

But what happens when the actor’s goal is not emotion, but the “given circumstance”? What if, before he/she starts to feel anything purposefully, he/she first creates the “given circumstance”? For example, by starting to speak in whispers. Muffled. Just like that. Without any reason. And let the “circumstance” of your own making reflect back on you. He/she might get excited, as if he/she’s telling a secret. And then let that condition determine how he/she sees, how he/she thinks... (Or if he/she absolutely needs a trigger, he/she should be careful that unauthorized people don’t hear the secret fly that Romeo is preparing. Let’s say the audience will hear it anyway. True, they are – perhaps – not unauthorised. But we are already in the “reality”

I am talking about!) Until he/she suddenly – say – makes a fist. And then – maybe – he/she will be angry. (And the actor playing the Nanny is likely to find a reason if he/she looks for one. But not necessarily important¹³!) And so on, from shift point to shift point. And only after shift points from one emotion to another.¹⁴

¹² I discuss this “boundlessness” in more detail in my article “*Playing with Words*” (original title: *Játék a szavakkal*), in András Hatházi: *A semmitmondó szöveg*.

¹³ This note is more for film actors. Who often do not even meet their film partner, while in the editing room, the filmmakers are putting the frames together as if the actors had spent the time together!

¹⁴ Yesterday evening (14 March 2024), we were talking with our architect friends about how people show everything, everything that is stirring inside them. And how they try to hide what is obvious. It’s true that we can’t define exactly what is visible, but we can sense that it’s not what the person is showing us. (And often, very often, almost always, we go wrong here: we assume what we see to be real, we take it as reality, and we think about the situation in the light of this “fact”. Like the “reality” of Verona, the Nurse, Hedda Gabler,

Well: if the actor's task is to make his public identity credible (and it seems to me that this is a basic requirement, since only taste can say that one or another performance is not credible), then I feel that this order is very important: circumstance – emotion – thought. In other words, once I create the circumstances, I start to feel them, and the emotions I feel will influence the way I think. Whatever my task is. Whether I'm an actor, a character, myself, or someone I'm not expecting to be.

But at the moment, I see that in acting, in the actor's work, thought comes first. Acting students, actors, invent their existence and call it presence, when it is only presence in thought, in fiction¹⁵. To stay with the example above, the excitement created in thought does not produce excitement, but only a perception of excitement. What may be "exciting", but the object of that excitement is itself (the excitement is excited by the excitement), not the phenomenon to which it must be related by the events and regularities of the stage¹⁶.

Jürgen Tesman, Peachum/Peacock and every other situation and character on stage. But that situation exists only in our minds, it has nothing to do with the reality of what is going on in the other person's mind!) Based on this observation, if the actor starts to speak in a whisper, after a few seconds (and really, a few seconds are enough!) even the most skeptical spectator, who needs a well-recognised reason to "understand" every phenomenon, starts to feel what the actor feels. He/she doesn't know why, but he/she will feel it. (Because we, humans, willingly or unwillingly, take on each other's tension, joy, state.) And this state – because it is emotion, and emotion is always "real" – begins to determine the way he/she thinks. And you may just find the reason you needed before the scene. Not guessing but **finding**.

¹⁵ On March 17, 2024, during a filmmaker workshop at FreeSZFE, one of the students asked, "What is presence? When is the actor present? And what I think about this is that an actor is present when he/she doesn't know he/she is present. Presence cannot be consciously striven for. Presence cannot be "shown". Presence, as soon as we have noticed it and become aware of it, dissolves, and all we know is that we were just present. And we only hope that we will be present. I associate presence with Mihály Csíkszentmihályi's **flow** theory.

To become aware of presence is to grasp that **now**.

¹⁶ On the one hand, even today, one can often hear the advice that it is enough to think of a similar memory to feel on stage what one "should" feel; on the other hand, I know it is an exaggeration to call the phenomenon I think of as a law of presence. Yet everyone refers to it. Romeo and Juliet must love each other. It's okay if they don't love, it's enough if they just think of something similar, and they can act out their love more easily.

But here we are again where the shore breaks.

And why **should** they love each other at all?

Thought is always sterile. It always creates the same measure because it knows no measure outside itself. On the other hand, if I create the circumstance which may cause me to become excited, and then, after the feeling has been strengthened, I begin to think as a result, I see things differently. I see what the excitement allows me to see. It will not be my opinion of it, but the "blindness" it contains. I start thinking from the inside. That's what I mean when I say: the text should not be known from the outside, but from the inside.

Indeed, the actor changes not because he/she starts to feel different, but because circumstances change. Because he/she changes the circumstances. Our emotions do not come out of nowhere, even if it often seems to us that there is seemingly no reason to feel one way or the other. We don't. Our emotions have a reason. Even if they come to us independently of our consciousness, as a result of internal chemical processes. If this were not the case, then there would be no point in spiritual counselling, in exploring our past experiences. (Let's assume there is...) But the actor doesn't have to go that deep, that far! The actor is not a psychologist, the actor just feels the person. He/she observes and experiences without judgement.

For me, the goal is the "given circumstance". Emotion is only a consequence. The actor will feel. "Real" emotions. And he/she will never be completely absorbed in the emotion, because there will always be another, more important, bigger "given circumstance" that will awaken another emotion in him/her.¹⁷

And only then comes the thought, the rational.

(Although, in truth, this term "real" emotion is a misnomer. There are no true and false emotions. There are emotions. And we live them openly or try to cover them up. We hope that with another emotion. But the emotion we try to cover up does not become a "false" emotion. Because it is not an emotion. It's a pretend surface. Emotion is one: what we feel.)

The actor is not going to replicate the emotion. Because it cannot be. The actor will always replicate the "given circumstance". For example, he/she will speak in a muffled voice, in a whisper. As if he/she were telling a secret. And because of that he/she will be really tense, excited. And then he/she'll clench

¹⁷ Because it is also a matter of choice.

his fists as if in a rage. And before long, he/she'll be really angry. So, from that moment he/she takes the stage to the applause. And at the next rehearsal, at the next performance, it all starts again.

Just like in life. Because there too: even if we decide not to be angry when X or Y says or does this or that – we will still be angry. The circumstance triggers the emotion in us, the reaction to the circumstance. We cannot “produce” emotion “just for you”. But we can produce a circumstance!


The actor repeats (circumstances) and feels. There is no paradox in this. It only seems a great mystery from the outside. Moreover, the emotions are added to, magnified by the spectator. From this point of view, the actor does not have to “fully live” the emotion. He/she just starts it in the spectator, the audience does the rest.

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Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories. *The Prisons of Nafplion as Brutal Scenographies*

Athena STOURNA¹, Pablo BERZAL CRUZ²,
Ioanna LIOUTSIA³ 

Abstract: The prison sites and their timeless presence in the city of Nafplion were the starting point for two workshops for students of the University of the Peloponnese. The result of these workshops titled *Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories*, was presented in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2023 as part of the Greek student exhibition. Students of the module “Performance and space” created the site-specific performance *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* in which performers and spectators participated in a pilgrimage procession to former prison sites in Nafplion. The module “Social Theatre” was held at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. After a series of theatre workshops, the inmates and the students presented the devised performance *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* to only two spectators and the prison guards. In the present paper, the authors focus on the use of the prison – in the present and in the past – as performance space. Prisons function as the absolute dystopian places that oscillate between private and public space: from the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns’ hermetically sealed, private space to the open, public space of the historic city of Nafplion,

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where the buildings that once housed prisons are scattered throughout the city. In this type of found spaces, the spectators and the performers are *moved* both emotionally and physically. Through the brutality emitted by the real substance of the sites, the “scenographic city” reveals stories and traumas, while inviting spectators and creators to assume social and political responsibility.

Keywords: performance space, found space, public space, private space, site-specific performance, social theatre.

Nafplion, The Prison-City as Brutal Scenography

Nafplion has a long history of hosting numerous prisons within its walls, from the early 19th century until most part of the 20th century. These prisons occupied buildings and sites that have significant historical importance today, such as the Palamidi fortress⁴ (Fig.1), the Vouleftikon⁵ (Fig.2), the Bourtzi islet⁶ (Fig.3), and the fortress of Acronafplia⁷ (Fig.4), where a notorious political prison was housed until the mid-1960s. Nowadays, two prisons continue to operate just outside the city: the Judicial Prison of Nafplion and the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns.

However, despite the fact that Nafplion had been a city of prisons for almost two centuries, its inhabitants chose to ignore their presence, even though the prison buildings held a dominant place in the city. There was a lot of pain, distress, and misery hidden between the high prison walls, echoing the state’s difficult and complex history from the turbulent early days of its formation, following the Greek Revolution of 1821, to the sociopolitical crises of most part of the 20th century. Nowadays, the city has become a tourist destination, with the reputation of being “the most romantic city of Greece”. Yet, the hordes of visitors seem to ignore its troubled past.

⁴ Built on the hill that dominates Nafplion during the 2nd Venetian rule, the heavily fortified Palamidi castle was considered impregnable.

⁵ Originally built as a mosque during the 2nd Turkish occupation, the Vouleftikon (parliament building) is mainly known for housing the first Greek Parliament between 1825 and 1826.

⁶ Bourtzi is a fortress islet, initially built during the 1st Venetian occupation to protect the town’s harbour.

⁷ The rocky peninsula of Acronauplia – the oldest of Nafplion’s three castles – comprises the town’s walled settlement from prehistoric times.



Fig.1: Cross gazes: The prisoners of Palamidi receive the townsmen of Nafplion, who mount up to the fortress of Palamidi to buy little wood handmade objects from the prisoners. © Frédéric Boissonnas, 1910. David Baud-Dovy and Fred Boissonnas, *En Grèce par Monts et par Vaux* (Genève, Athènes : Fred. Boissonnas & Co [et] Const. Eleftheroudakis, 1910).

Exposing the historical, social and political meaning of these buildings and the city itself, on the one hand, and questioning the penitentiary system then and now, on the other hand, provided the starting point for two distinct workshops for undergraduate students in the Department of Performing and Digital Arts of the University of the Peloponnese.

The outcome was two distinct performances: a promenade performance in the old prisons of Nafplion, and a devised play performed by students and prisoners at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Both projects were presented in the Prague Quadrennial of Performance Design and Space 2023 as part of the Greek student exhibition, under the title *Nafplion Blues: Prison Stories*. In the present article, the authors share their experience as the workshop instructors and focus on the use of the prison – in the present and in the past – as performance space. More specifically, the authors aim to underpin how prisons oscillate between public and private space, and thus demonstrate how this oscillation shaped the qualities of each performance.



Fig. 2: The prison at Vouleftikon: the prisoners are huddled in front of the open windows, looking at the busy central Syntagma Square. « Nauplie. Ancienne église aujourd’hui prison ». Photographer and donator: Hubert Vaffier, before 1892. Collection Gallica bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France



Fig. 3: The Bourtzi islet. Nafplio, Bourtzi Castle. Photographic copy from a glass plate of Fred Boissonnas, c. 1903-1923, Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki. Source: National Historical Museum. Nafplio, Bourtzi Castle. Photographic copy from a glass plate of Fred Boissonnas, c. 1903-1923. The glass plate is at the Museum of Photography in Thessaloniki. (nhmuseum.gr)



Fig. 4: The old Venetian building (now demolished) at the top of hill, housed the political prison of Acronafplia. Unknown photographer and date taken. Source: Αργολική Αρχαική Βιβλιοθήκη Ιστορίας και Πολιτισμού (The Argolikos Archival Library of History and Culture). Οι φυλακές της Ακροναυπλίας. | ΑΡΓΟΛΙΚΗ ΑΡΧΕΙΑΚΗ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ (argolikivivliothiki.gr)

Prisons Then and Now - Oscillating Between Public and Private Space

The overlapping of an open, accessible public space and an enclosed, secluded private space within the prison site is evident in the old photographs of the prison sites of Palamidi (Fig. 1) and Vouleftikon (Fig. 2). In both photographs prisoners are connected to the outside world through their distant contact with the city's inhabitants. In the first case (Fig. 1), the prisoners of Palamidi receive the townsmen of Nafplion, who mount nearly a thousand steps up to the fortress of Palamidi to buy little wood handmade objects from the prisoners. The photographer Frédéric Boissonnas has captured the moment in which the convicts hold some long wooden sticks with their petty merchandise hanging from them. They direct them to the townsmen who stand on the rampart overlooking the prison's recreation ground. The dynamic of the photograph is shaped by the direction of the prisoners' intent looks, aiming at their visitors that are standing above them at a distance.

In the second instance (Fig. 2), the photograph shows the Vouleftikon building, then serving as a prison for sentences for petty offences. While in the foreground we see locals posing in front of the camera, in the background one can distinguish the prisoners huddled in front of the open windows, looking at the busy central Syntagma Square facing the prison building.

Through the gazes between convicts and free men crossing paths, one can detect this interpenetration of public and private space that is specific to prisons located within the city limits. These two extreme poles of confinement, on the one hand, and free circulation, on the other, collide through the everyday eye contact between convicts and passers-by, thus testifying a harsh encounter between the inaccessibility and accessibility of both space and freedom.

Indeed, a close look at the various testimonies offered by prisoners and visitors at the time when the prisons functioned in Nafplion, testified to this constant cross gaze between the lively city and the enclosed prison spaces. On the creative side, the varying proportions of publicness and privateness of each prison site were utilised in the performances, in terms of dramaturgy and audience participation. The creative teams played with these dosages and with how space may provide a politically and socially charged dramaturgy related to the sites' own histories.

Likewise, the dosages of audience presence (or absence) and their participation were related to the space's publicness or privateness. In this paper we use our empirical approach as the workshop instructors and performance creators to tackle the two distinct student projects: we will first present the project *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* that was created collaboratively by the students and the prisoners at the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, outside Nafplion. Second, we will offer an account of the promenade site-specific performance *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* that took place around the historical part of the city of Nafplion. In both projects we will address the different ways in which the specificity of space in the past and present prison sites shaped the final performances.

The Journeys of The Potato, From Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths.

The Dramaturgy of The Site and the Use of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns as Performance Space

The Agricultural Prison presents a private space *par excellence*, when the prison door is shut. However, the prisoners' everyday life is constantly under surveillance, and, therefore, the interior of the prison constitutes a public space for prisoners locked inside a private space. Due to the inaccessibility of the prison to outside visitors, the performance was presented to only one guest; the other spectators were the prison's director, and the guards, thus ensuring surveillance and control.

The performance was titled *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths* and was a spiritual journey in time and space through the story of the travels of the potato, from the Andes through Europe and finally, Greece. The reason for placing the potato at the centre of the narrative had to do with the past use of the prison site.

In fact, the Agricultural Prison is standing at the very same spot where, around 1830, the first Governor of modern Greece, Ioannis Kapodistrias, founded the new state's first Agricultural School of Tiryns (Fig. 5). Kapodistrias is known to have introduced potato cultivation in Greece as soon as he

arrived to take office, in order to feed the starving population. Some of the first cultivations of potatoes in Greece took place at the Agricultural School, and continue to be performed by the farmer-prisoners nowadays; therefore, agricultural work has been ongoing at Tiryns for almost two centuries.



Fig. 5: Historical landmarks used in continuity until the present day: the neoclassical building that was initially the governor Ioannis Kapodistrias' summer residency (ca. 1830) and later used as the headquarters of the first Agricultural School of Greece, now houses the Administration office of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Unknown photographer and date taken. Collection of the Προοδευτικός Σύλλογος Ναυπλίου «Ο Παλαμήδης» (The Nauplian *Progressive* Association, "Palamidis")

Source: Αργολική Αρχαιακή Βιβλιοθήκη Ιστορίας και Πολιτισμού (The Argolikos Archival Library of History and Culture). Αγροτικές Φυλακές Τίρυνθας | ΑΡΓΟΛΙΚΗ ΑΡΧΕΙΑΚΗ ΒΙΒΛΙΟΘΗΚΗ ΙΣΤΟΡΙΑΣ ΚΑΙ ΠΟΛΙΤΙΣΜΟΥ (argolikivivliothiki.gr)

The venue where the workshops and the performance took place was a common event area, which was reminiscent of the assembly halls of schools. The shape of the room was rectangular, with wooden benches placed against the wall and a small theatre stage. We hardly used this stage at all, except during one of our initial meetings to present some improvisations by the different groups.

Abandoning the theatre stage, we created our own theatre space, a “place” that we would all create together at the beginning of every session. By moving the wooden benches from the walls to the centre of the room we formed a – not at all strict – square shape (Fig. 6). Everything that happened – storytelling, singing, movement, games – took place within this space, created by the participants themselves. This collaborative spatial arrangement was crucial in empowering the group, cultivating trust, fostering cooperation for a common purpose and, most importantly, creating a sense of community – one that differed from the prison community, because it included students in its composition. In this direction, it is indicative to say that, at the beginning, inmates and students chose to sit on separate benches, due to an initial mutual reluctance between the two groups; however, this norm was gradually abandoned.



Fig. 6: The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns. Inmates, students, the workshop instructors and the prison’s director at the end of the performance. Photographer: the prison’s guard.

The shape created by the arrangement of the benches was a miniature of the prison building itself. Inside the shape, a “courtyard” had been created, corresponding to the enclosed courtyard of the prison – one of the common

prison areas – which allows the relatively free activity and coexistence of the inmates and their engagement in potential hobbies to take place. This idea followed the “European Compendium of good practices for theatre in prison (PICP – The prison, from penal institute to cultural place)”, which states that “The space has to be communicative and in a dialectic relationship with the identity of the place surrounding it and representing the context in which it is located otherwise it will result as a ‘foreign body’⁸”. In this way, we tried to create a *heterotopia* (the dramatic space) within another *heterotopia*, which is the prison, in the sense that Michel Foucault gives to this notion⁹. We tried, in other words, to create a real space that exists in a real society, and which is inhabited in a different way from the rest of society, while simultaneously being connected and isolated from it.

Finally, our scenic choices were inevitably affected by the various restrictions that accompany the admission of visitors to detention centres. One of these restrictions concerned entering specific types of objects inside the prison. We thus decided to have only two musical instruments (a percussion instrument and a harmonica) and to use a simple and harmless material that could run through the whole story taking different forms: this was none other than the humble but miraculous material of paper. Hence, we used colourful papers that sometimes served to create a soundscape, sometimes became boats carrying potatoes and bearing whatever name each participant had chosen, sometimes became stones in a skirmish between rival teams and sometimes became the potatoes themselves (Fig. 7). The fabrication of the boats and the modifications of paper shapes were carried out by the participants themselves. The only preparatory work for the fabrication of the paper boats on our part was to cut the A4 pages properly into squares before going to the prison, because the use of scissors was forbidden.

⁸ Associazione Carte Blanche, Fondazione Michelucci, Aufbruch Kunst Gefaengnis Stadt, London Shakespeare Workout, and Théâtre de l’Opprimé. “Compendium of Good Practices for Theatre in Prison. PICP – The Prison, from Penal Institute to Cultural Place.”, n.d., p. 12, accessed May 12, 2024, https://www.gefaengnistheater.de/koooperationsprojekte-details/the-prison-from-penal-institute-to-cultural-place.html?file=files/upload/presse/pdf/compendium_of_good_practices__output_1_%20%281%29.pdf

⁹ Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” in *Architecture-Culture 1943-1968: A Document Anthology*, ed. Joan Ockman (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 422-425.



Fig. 7: The boats transferring the potatoes from Latin America to Europe. At the centre: the workshop instructor Ioanna Lioutsia. *The Journeys of the Potato, from Andes to Tiryns: Legends and Truths*. The Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, April-July 2022. Photographer: Dina Kalogeropoulou.

In conclusion, we sought different ways to respond to as well as to draw inspiration from the conditions, the location, the architecture, and the history of the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns, both during the workshops and in the creation of our performance. Moreover, we worked with a dramaturgical material – the potato – that was at the same time an influence of the specificity of the place, and a point that could unite all the participants. Indeed, as was revealed during an ice-breaker game at our first workshop session, the students were mad about potatoes and the inmates were forced to eat them half-heartedly, every day.

Listen-Watch-Be Silent. A Pilgrimage-Procession to the Old Prison Sites

Listen-Watch-Be Silent was an inscription that was written on the walls of the political prison of Acronafplia, as was the case at other political prisons in Greece. This motto gave the title of the performance, thus reminding the total loss of individuality and constant terror experienced by the political

detainees. The performance began as lightly as a tourist visit that soon turned into a nightmarish procession, when the spectators suddenly listened the motto “Listen-Watch-Be Silent” and were forced to form a line of what could be a group of prisoners of the past. From then on, they followed the same steps of the political prisoners who would arrive at the port and would be taken up to the Acronafplia prison to begin their sentence (Fig. 8).



Fig. 8: The pilgrimage procession starting in the port of Nafplion. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.

This procession of an almost religious character, led performers and spectators to a pilgrimage in the old prison sites. The dramaturgical structure of the performance followed the four different prisons (Bourtzi, Vouleftikon, Acronafplia and Palamidi) that functioned as stations of a piece of medieval street theatre. In this type of expanded scenography¹⁰, freed from the constraints

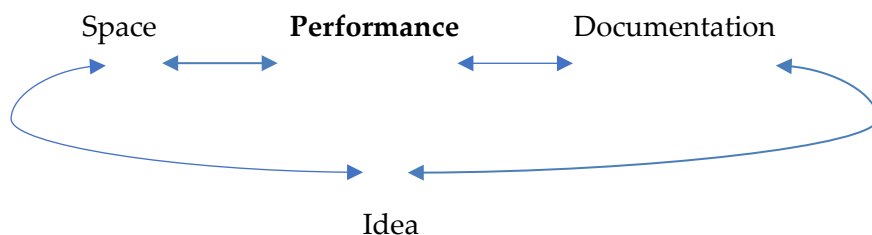
¹⁰ Jocelyn McKinney and Scott Palmer, “Introducing ‘Expanded’ Scenography,” in: *Scenography Expanded: An Introduction to Contemporary Performance Design*, ed. Jocelyn McKinney and Scott Palmer (London: New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 1-20.

of the theatrical stage, the spectators and the performers were *moved* both emotionally and physically by its “intangible affective qualities¹¹” as Rachel Hann points out.

Listen-Watch-Be Silent. Spatial Performativity in Site-Specific Performance

The participants in the *Listen-Watch-Be Silent* workshop had to work on the four buildings that had housed prisons at some point in their history. While the buildings of Palamidi, Bourtzi, and Vouleftikon still remain in the landscape of Nafplion, the old Venetian building housing the political prison at Acronafplia has been demolished and part of its grounds have been taken over by luxury hotel villas.

The work consisted of creating a site-specific performance for each building and designing an action that would guide the performers and the spectators to these buildings and give coherence to the whole set of actions. As an initial working scheme in the creative process, we proposed the following scheme to the participants:



On the one hand, the students had to explore the buildings they were going to work on to find out about their situation in the built environment of Nafplion: to understand their accessibility, their relationship to other spaces, their spatial structure, and to take a phenomenological or sensory approach to embodying the space. On the other hand, they had to study the documents (historical, literary, testimonial, iconographic, etc.) on the use of these buildings as prisons. From these two extremes, and connecting the two, they

¹¹ Rachel Hann, *Beyond scenography* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2019), 5.

had to let the ideas and concepts flow, leading them to create a site-specific performance. The approach of this scheme of work is based on well-known methods of devised or documentary theatre and on the study of spatial performativity.

Spatial performativity is the ability of space to influence our behaviour, our actions and our emotional states. In the natural environment, spatial performativity operates at a first level through sensory stimulation and is essential for navigating our way through the territory. In the built environment, performativity operates primarily through architectural mechanisms of ritualisation. The built environment can also be called the ritualised environment and plays an essential role in the process of ritualisation of the individual. In other words, our environment is not a neutral, passive space, but operates on us by imprinting patterns of behaviour; it ritualises us¹². Thus, our actions are, to a large extent, determined by the space in which they take place, they are performances in response to the space we occupy.

As mentioned above, the prison buildings that were the subject of this work were not designed and built for that use, but were fortresses, mosques, madrasas, and after that, used as parliament, hotels, restaurants, or tourist attractions. These buildings were used as prisons only for a period of time.

The existing architectural mechanisms of ritualisation in these buildings dictate a particular behaviour or ritual, and even when new uses are introduced for which the building was not designed, the spatial performativity continues to operate in the same way¹³. There are certain architectural mechanisms of ritualisation that are relatively easy to change or remove, such as those relating to symbolism, but it is more difficult to change directionality or spatial hierarchy. Therefore, new uses will be influenced by spatial performativity, and new site-specific behaviours will be generated.

Historical, literary, testimonial and iconographic sources provide data on the site-specific behaviours associated with the places we work on. Guided by the spatial performativity that has remained intact since the creation of these

¹² Catherine M. Bell, Catherine M. Bell, *Ritual Theory. Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 98-99.

¹³ David Leatherbarrow, "Architecture's Unscripted Performance," in *Performative Architecture: Beyond Instrumentality*, ed. Branko Kolarevic and Ali Malkawi (New York: Spon Press, 2005), 8.

places, by the orders that space gives to our bodies, the meaning of the movements and the emotions that arise make sense when we know a moment in their history, a moment in the history of the people who inhabited them. From here we can reinterpret these spaces, create site-specific performances that reveal their histories to the current inhabitants of the built environment.

The result of all this work was four site-specific performances that revealed a hidden character of the places and the specific experiences that the prisoners had in each of them. As a link between these performances, a procession took place through the fabric of the city that followed the steps of the prisoners from the harbour to each prison, completing the experience of being a prisoner in what is now considered Greece's most "romantic city" (Fig. 8-12).



Fig. 9: Anastasia Ladopoulou performing in front of the Bourtzi islet. Surrounded by the sea, the fortress used to be the residence of the executioner of the convicts of the prison of Palamidi. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 10: Percy Koritsidou performing at Vouleftikon. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 11: Danae Christoudi performing at Akronafplia. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.



Fig. 12: Anastasia Ladopoulou and Mary Zagkla performing in front of prison of Palamidi. *Listen-Watch-Be Silent*, 21 January, 2023. Workshop instructors: Athena Stourna and Pablo Berzal Cruz. Photographer: Pablo Berzal Cruz.

Prison Sites as Spectral and Real Places of Remembrance

Through the brutality emitted by the real substance of the prison sites, Nafplion was used in both projects as a “scenographic” city. It thus revealed its own stories and traumas, by removing the fake touristic scenery that is now covering it. The city’s touristic expansion of the last thirty years has failed to maintain an interest in its rich but controversial history. Nafplion’s historical sites of memory respond poorly to the urban remembrance of its agitated past, but also to the continuity of the sites that are still in use today. Past prisons were used as an urban topography of remembrance of human wretchedness and pointed out how the country’s penitentiary system echoes diachronically its troubled political and social history.

At the same time, the Agricultural Prison of Tiryns is one of the few prison farms that remains in operation in Greece, nowadays. Unfortunately, it is threatened to close, so that the surrounding farms may be taken over by

the State. The few inmates that remained (no newcomers were admitted anymore, when the workshops took place in 2022) participated wholeheartedly in the workshops and the final performance. As a result, the prison, as a site of social isolation, as a place of the margins forgotten by society and reclaimed for appropriation by the State itself, gained life and reclaimed its presence, through the creative collaboration between the students, the inmates and the workshop leaders.

In conclusion, we would like to refer to Dorita Hannah's notion of the "urban scenographies of the 'Real'¹⁴", with which she claims that "theatre seeks reality but also something beyond it [Lacan's Real] which can be revealed when performance collides with the familiar city, thereby defamiliarising it¹⁵". What both projects wished to explore were the brutal urban realities of the present and of the past, that are both real and spectral, tangible and intangible at the same time, and were spiritually and physically revived through performance, while inviting spectators and creators to assume social and political responsibility¹⁶.

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¹⁴ Dorita Hannah, "Navigating urban scenographies of the 'Real'," Online presentation in the Online International Event *Scenographic City: using scenography to understanding urban experience*, School of Performance and Cultural Industries, University of Leeds, January 14, 2022.

¹⁵ Dorita Hannah, e-mail message to Athena Stourna, April 8, 2024.

¹⁶ Sodja Lotker & Richard Gough, "On Scenography: Editorial", *Performance Research* 18, no. 3 (2013): 3-6.

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Dorita Hannah, e-mail message to Athena Stourna, April 8, 2024.

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**MISCELLANEA:
INTERVIEWS**

The Challenge of Being Greek in Today's European Theatre

Irene MOUNDRAKI¹

Greece, a border of both East and West, is constantly in a delicate balance trying to explore issues of identity, historicity, and orientation. Greece has the privilege – but also the great responsibility – of bearing the heritage of the ancient tragic and comic drama as the birthplace of theatre and this is at the same time an obstacle for contemporary Greek theatre as any comparison with its glorious past is always painful.

At the beginning of the 1980s in Greece, in a country re-created at all levels, the conditions for theatrical development were gradually being formed: state grants for independent groups, establishment of Municipal and Regional Theatres, abolishment of the special license for the actors, founding of university theatre departments. Moreover, Greece's entry into the European Union (with all the changes brought about) changed theatrical reality. These new conditions enabled artists and groups to dare approach theatre from new perspectives and move away from the repertory theatres, the protagonists and traditional choices; enabled new groups to be created and then to discover unconventional venues transforming them into centres of creation and research; playwrights to experiment and check their potential moving away from topics that used to be the main themes of the previous decades, such as life in the countryside, class stratification, urbanization, the pursuit of easy success that meant money and social upgrade and of course the dialogue with what is happening worldwide has been strengthened. This

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intense activity, the rise regarding artists, venues, productions and tendencies, brought on stage both classical and modern works, both Greek and non-Greek, and created the need for new, modern texts that would correspond to their era and express their reality.

By entering the 21st century the effort to dissociate contemporary dramaturgy from its national characteristics and to come along with the European reality becomes more intense while groups, theatres and plays are getting more and more numerous.

The economic crisis that theatre experienced at the end of the first decade of the century changed dramatically the conditions of creation, the terms of production and the way theatre activity existed. Within a very short period of time, we witnessed theatre activity to shrink throughout Greece while the number of productions in Athens increased at a dizzying rate, but without a corresponding audience development. In order to respond to the new situation, theatres had to change the way they were working, while the abolition of the state grants – the initiative that had changed the theatrical landscape since its creation in the 1980s – played a decisive role. Therefore, historical theatre companies stopped their activity since they could no longer survive or could bear the risk of remaining open. Moreover, under the excuse of the crisis and the economic uncertainty it brought, working conditions were completely changed, labour rights were violated and collective agreements were abolished.

The unprecedented invasion into our life of Covid-19 created real chaos in Greece as it did in other countries too. Hundreds of theatre houses closed down and hundreds of productions were cancelled. For the first time in Greece's recent history, theatre disappears from Agora, the place where it ontologically and historically belongs.

However, this most unfortunate and violent twist of everyday theatre life, this unexpected pause, forced theatre people to confront and reconsider a number of burning and longstanding problems, usually bypassed in the vortex of everyday life and the struggle for survival. Undeclared work, indifference to the representative institutions and unions, lack of an organized cultural policy plan, inadequate venues were among the hot issues that acquired "visibility".

Therefore, the beginning of the third decade of this century found theatre in Greece wounded by the financial crisis and the pandemic but also eager to make up for lost time. A vast number of productions are presented by the Independent Scene despite the severe financial problems. The number is still extremely high and one can find anything he/she wants to attend: from conventional repertory theatre, to musicals, devised, documentary theatre, puppet theatre, objects' theatre, stand-up comedies, experimental theatre. Big problems remain: the limited funding from state grants that cannot provide a safe base for productions (grants were reactivated in 2017); the artists are obliged to work in parallel in many projects, which means that quality is affected as there is no efficient time to prepare; if something goes well, then it is hard to re-create it, as artists have so many obligations; the rent of a theatre is too expensive. Also, problems in theatre education are an open wound: too many graduates from drama schools seeking to find their own way, conflict between the generations and not enough opportunities.

Along with two state houses –National Theatre and Thessaloniki's National Theatre of Northern Greece – there are all over the country 16 municipal regional theatres most of which fail to function properly with some exceptions. Major Private Institutions such as the Onassis Cultural Centre and Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Centre – where the National Opera plus the National Library are housed – play an influential part in the artistic life of the country.

The highlight of summer in Greece is of course the *Epidaurus Festival* at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus. The festival dedicated to ancient drama hosts productions of tragedy and comedy for 8 weeks that most of them afterwards tour in the rest of the country. In addition, several festivals are organized all around the country mainly focused on ancient drama while *The Athens Festival* has a very important part producing new productions on one hand and hosting internationally acclaimed productions on the other.

Extroversion is also an issue of great importance. Since the beginning of the 21st century The Athens Festival had made a great opening to contemporary creators, while several invitations to important directors to come and work in Greece with Greek artists had opened up avenues of cooperation and mobility. The big issue was – and still is – the reverse route, i.e. the export of performances and of our artists. Of course, there have always been individual

cases of artists making their way out, but there are no organized and long-term plans. It is of course worth mentioning the unique case of Theodoros Terzopoulos, an important chapter of world theatre.

The National Theatre of Greece and the Athens and Epidauros Festival have been organizing annual showcases for the promotion of Greek productions for the last two years, while the National Theatre of Greece has also launched an art residencies programme for the first time. Of course, I would be remiss not to mention important private initiatives and the mobility of certain artists who manage to break the borders of the country, either directors or playwrights.

Despite the severe problems that make theatre people uneasy and deeply worried, there is also strength and will that make them also more active, more aware and readier to claim and work for a better future.

During my research on these issues I met eleven influential Greek theatre people and we shared our thoughts and worries on the main questions regarding the present and the future of Greek theatre and its relation with the rest of Europe.

Ioli Andreadi and **Aris Asproulis** have co-authored 14 theatrical plays, which have been staged in Greece, New York, London and Bulgaria, directed by Ioli Andreadi. Last April their show *The Cenci Family*, inspired by the groundbreaking artist and thinker Antonin Artaud, was staged at the Tank Theatre in New York. Aris as director of communication in important theatre institutions has also a well-grounded view of today's theatre activity. **Alexandra K*** is an author, playwright and screenwriter based in Athens. Her play *Revolutionary Ways to clean your pool* has been translated in 6 languages and has gained the EURODRAMA award. **Yannis Kalavrianos** is a playwright, actor and director whose work is presented in Greece and abroad gaining acclaim. In his plays he always starts with a genius idea and he extends his research with a core of actors. The actors retain the archetypal status of storytellers, moving from action to narrative and seeking the active participation of the audience.

The acclaimed director **Stathis Livathinos**, former artistic director of the National Theatre of Greece is the founder of the School for Theatre Directors (2018) and he led one of the most pioneering ensembles at the Experimental Stage of the NTG (2001-2007). **Yiannis Panagopoulos** is a young and very prominent director and actor. His most recent direction is *Heatwave* a text based on short stories by Vivian Stergiou at the Onassis Stegi (2024). He is also an active member of the board of the Hellenic Actors Union.

Elli Papakonstantinou is a performance director, playwright, visual artist and cultural manager. Her most recent work *ALKESTIS* is a feminist rewriting of the Greek myth and was commissioned by the Royal Theatre of Sweden & performed by the Dramaten Ensemble/ Royal Opera of Sweden Ensemble (2022). **Thanos Papakonstantinou** is a stage director and actor and has collaborated with the most important theatre institutions of Greece but also abroad. At the moment he is on rehearsals for Euripides's *Bacchae* which will open in the beginning of August at the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, in a production by the National Theatre of Greece.

Professor Emeritus and theatre critic **Savas Patsalidis** teaches and writes constantly about contemporary theatre in the USA, Europe and Greece. He was the President of the Union of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics and the editor-in-chief of *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, the journal of the International Association of Theatre Critics. **Takis Tzamargias** teaches at the University of Athens and he is a renowned director. He has been artistic director of the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus, he is the president of the committee of the Ministry of Culture for the theatre awards for non-adult audience, and his contribution to the theatre in education field is precious.

Concerning the theatre for young audiences we discussed with the director and child psychiatric **Sofia Vgenopoulou**. Her aim and most important professional aspiration is the creation of a network of artists, educators and mental health professionals, who support powerful, high-quality, contemporary theatre for young people, who recognize the right of every young person to access to the arts, and believe in the value of cultivating empathy amongst the young members of a society.

How would you describe contemporary Greek theatrical reality in a few words?

Thanos Papakonstantinou: We constantly see a burst of spectacles in Athens. In comparison to the population, the number of performances happening around throughout the year is almost excessive. The range also is really wide: one can see from really experimental stuff, to very conformist productions of classical plays with TV stars. For sure, there is creativity, vision, fresh ideas and there surely are good and inspiring artists in all the fields of theatre-

making. Regarding the intentions, I believe that we have nothing to be jealous of what's happening in the major cities around the world. Yet there's the rub: because the country and therefore the market is relatively small, there are certain limits to the funds given to the arts. Plus, there is a notion of giving less to more people, than more to less (or even better: more to more!). This leaves us all mediocly satisfied: we cannot complain but we can barely breathe. We can do our work, but can we evolve?

Andreadi – Asproulis: There is pluralism. Contemporary theatrical practice consists in a big variety – when it comes to the themes as well as the styles. We cannot really say it has an identity at the moment, but rather that it is in the process of searching for one.

Yannis Kalavrianos: It is of great interest. All areas, however, need a supporting structure in order for interesting units to come to fruition. As in science or other arts in the country, there is a trained, hard-working and dedicated human resource, but the overall structure, from education to production and promotion, suffers, which makes Greek theatre cumbersome and almost absent from European stages. Every year we meet interesting cases that soon after seeming weak to take the next more mature step.

Savas Patsalidis: The Greek theatre has many talented artists. It has absolutely nothing to envy in terms of human potential from the rest of European theatre. What is lacking is a more beneficial and substantial assimilation of foreign loans so that at some point it can develop codes that correspond to the real life of the country. The fact that most artists, especially the younger and homeless ones, are in a hurry, this does not leave them much space to reflect more on what they do. While they have interesting and bold ideas, they don't go deeper into them. They touch upon the surface, but they don't get to the roots of their issues.

Yiannis Panagopoulos: Speaking about the Greek theatrical reality we all have to admit that the most significant characteristic of it is the large variety of spectacles that someone is able to see within a season, differentiating within a large spectrum of styles, origins and needs. Nevertheless, this characteristic can

only be justified when someone sees the wider picture. And that picture arrives through the framework that has been created for so many decades by the state, or by the oversupply of drama schools or even by the little (or almost non-existing) theatrical decentralization.



Fig. 1: *Heatwave*, text based on short stories by Vivian Stergiou / Direction: Yiannis Panagopoulos, Onassis Foundation (2024) @Pinelopi Gerasimou

Elli Papakonstantinou: Contemporary Greek theatre production is mostly text-based theatre with some cases of brilliant exceptions. The financial crisis has been ongoing since 2008 and the lack of institutional support and national policies leave small margin to fail and take risks for most artists. Seeking support for their art in the private sector, many artists have very little chances to do research.

Stathis Livathinos: Polyphonic, colourful, heterogeneous, uneven, and not always multi-layered. Showing talented people at the risk of being swallowed up by the need for recognition. Lack of education.

Takis Tzamargias: Theatre in Greece has an astonishing number of productions – performances in an unlimited variety of theatre stages. These performances are characterized by polysemy. This is theatre of multiple trends and directions in representative works of classical and world drama, stage transcriptions of renowned literary texts and contemporary approaches to ancient drama. At the same time, a new generation of writers and directors is emerging in search of its own stamp. Certainly, in many performances there is a post-modern mood and research by the directors, which in some cases is an attempt to attract young audiences.

What is the biggest challenge a Greek theatre creator has to face?

Savas Patsalidis: First of all, it's the economic factor. The money available in the theatre is minimal, so most artists occupy themselves with all sorts of jobs, which leaves them no room or time to devote themselves more systematically and deeply to their art. So, they end up with shows that most of the times do them no justice. There is also a deficit in the area of extroversion. This will help to broaden their artistic and aesthetic horizons. To do this, they need to start travelling more, participate in international projects, and have the global theatre community as their benchmark. Finally, I would add that the fact that most of them are "homeless" is a huge problem, given that companies have no fixed reference space to experiment, to test themselves. Plus, a homeless team is forced to seek financial support in order to be able to cover rent expenses and of course the fees of the collaborators. So instead of rehearsing, they are busy finding sponsors to survive.

Elli Papakonstantinou: I would definitely say that the greatest challenge an artist faces in Greece, is to find the means to produce their work. With scarce state funding, unpaid rehearsals, lack of international networking and infrastructures, Greek practitioners often struggle much to make a living and are forced to work in two or three parallel projects at the same time. Under these circumstances, experimentation, focus and research become very difficult. On top of that, as a female director, like so many other women or people of the LGBTQ+

community, I have often encountered sexual discrimination. Neo puritanism and old patriarchy meet ends and important institutions have not yet adopted percentage against gender inequality to achieve more inclusivity in their programming. Having been privileged enough to receive commissions from institutions like the Royal Theatre of Sweden, Centre G. Pompidou, The BAM (Brooklyn Academy of Music, NY), Holland & Romaeuropa Festival, I have pursued a loner's path. It is a tough one-way road for the kinds of me. Being a nonbinary feminist, who loves to "hack" the Greeks in the light of new gender and power narratives, it is almost impossible for me to produce my work without the support of European institutions. It is a great privilege too. What really bothers me is that the sector is still heavily discriminated especially when it comes to the young generation of directors.

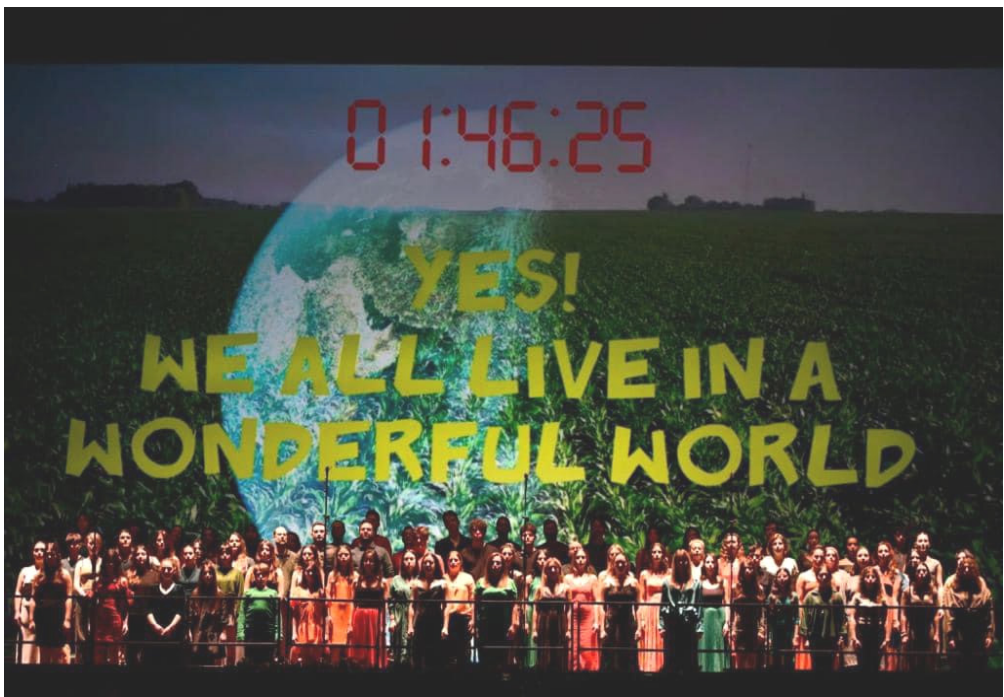


Fig. 2: *Persephone* by Dimitris Maragopoulos, Elli Papakonstantinou / Direction: Elli Papakonstantinou, Co-production: 2023 Elefsis European Capital of Culture - Megaron the Athens Concert Hall (2023) @AlexKat

Thanos Papakonstantinou: I believe that the challenges for an artist in Greece are many. There are really few institutions where one can have real high quality conditions production-wise. Budgets are usually low, high-quality venues are few, people are underpaid and because of this most of them (especially actors) have to do many things together with crazy schedules (sometimes double rehearsals plus performances) which, of course, reflects to their commitment and involvement to every work they do. Sometimes you get through and learn how to think quicker, how to be more inventive and act more spontaneously but, unfortunately, in the most cases everyone gets more easily exhausted and feels prematurely consumed. The Greek state in most cases doesn't offer much comfort (see what recently happened with the infamous decree story) and, though, is often said that "Greece's heavy industry is culture", in a daily basis, being an artist in Greece can be almost a joke.

Takis Tzamargias: The biggest challenge is trying to survive in a crowded theatrical environment that is mainly focused on the capital city with plays that, as important as they are, have to be adapted – squeezed into theatrical spaces that do not meet the requirements for stage development and plus they host two or three productions in the same venue. Also almost all private productions insist on TV actors in order to balance the budget. Government subsidies are largely exhausted in renting the venue for limited performances. Therefore, only state-owned stages allow for a stage development commensurate with the plays.

Andreadi – Asproulis: To be able to make the art he/she feels strongly about while working inside the private sector of theatre, that is run by producers who have theatre-as-entertainment at the core of their work is a big challenge.

Alexandra K*: I will answer as a playwright. To begin with, we are all empirical; there is no formal or informal institution where dramaturgy is taught, except on a seminar level. The state support in our field is literally non-existent; there are no grants, no awards, no translation funding, no residencies, no cultural strategy to promote our work abroad (anyone who states otherwise, feel free to call me). But the main thing is that the playwright has

been kicked out of theatrical practice. If we don't demand to be present during the rehearsals and work together with the director and the actors, we often see our plays for the first time at the night of the premiere. The result of this eviction is that we lose touch with the craftsmanship of the theatre and this has an impact on the quality of our works. You cannot write theatre isolated in a room. Well, you can, but you'd better not.



Fig. 3: *milk, blood* by Alexandra K* / Direction: Yannis Perlangas, Athens Epidaurus Festival (2021) @Vasia Anagnostopoulou

Stathis Livathinos: I'll answer honestly, even if it seems a bit general. The cheapness, the vulgarity, the mediocrity. These are the greatest challenges a theatre creator must avoid.

Yannis Kalavrianos: On a local level, it is the absence of organized, stable and long-term planned state support. With all the consequences that this entails from the choice of plays, actors and venues to the duration of performances or

experimentation with new works and forms. This absence, in the midst of the economic crisis and with the more attractive financial rewards of television, is slowly creating a new landscape of theatre with a more commercial orientation. At the international level a greater challenge is the unequal dialogue with other European theatres.

Yiannis Panagopoulos: You look for a way through the chaos that exists and then struggle to make your own way. I could just mention only some of the problems that we face: Underpaid (or even non-paid) rehearsals, really few and small grants, huge rent expenses, lack of infrastructures, quite often problems with the producers.

How do you feel the relationship of Greek theatre to the rest of Europe?

Stathis Livathinos: I find the relationship incomplete, as I imagine Europe would find it incomplete too if we asked about its relationship with Greek theatre. Obviously, Europe had a relationship with Greek classical drama, which is also important, but we don't have any relation either with experimental theatre or research happening in both Western and Eastern Europe. Usually when we say "Europe", subconsciously we mean the countries around Germany, but that is not the case. We really don't know about the theatre in Poland, in the Czech Republic, and as for Russia, I don't even want to mention it, even though it is one of the most advanced theatrical countries in the world, some people have made sure that we don't have access to that either, unfortunately. We have access to the festival performances but that is not enough. We also have no access to how acting, directing and theatrical discourse is developed. I think it would be good for Greek theatre to import critics for a while. To observe how critics write, if they write more ironically, more seriously. Also, when we say "relation to theatre" I would include opera as good contemporary staging of opera is always good theatre and this has to do with the nature of operatic works that have an inherent theatricality.

Savas Patsalidis: The relationship between Greek theatre and European theatre is not as close as one might expect. Or rather, I would put the issue somewhat differently. While the presence of European theatre in the theatrical life of Greece is very strong, the same is not true of the presence of Greek theatre in the European market. There is a huge imbalance, which becomes even more glaring when the subject is ancient theatre. Despite the international popularity of ancient theatre, we see an almost total absence of productions bearing the signature of Greek directors. It is as if nothing is done. The phenomenon can be explained to a certain extent if one takes into account the volume of productions that require high costs for traveling (and subsequent participation in big festivals), but also the fact that none of these productions are stored, so once they have completed their scheduled course they disappear. As a result, the foreigner has no full view of what is happening in the country and, more importantly, no idea how Greek artists are dealing with this heritage. I could add here the historically entrenched view that classical Greece is largely defined by foreigners. Thus, foreigners imitate or follow their "foreign" approaches to ancient theatre and rarely Greek ones. To improve the situation, many things need to be done in a systematic and coordinated way. E.g. more financial support from the state so that the most successful performances can travel, closer and more productive relations with European institutions, better information on international social media regarding Greece's theatre life, etc. Greek theatre has quality. What it does not have is an effective way to show it internationally. Postmodern marketing strategies.

Thanos Papakonstantinou: For the artists of my generation, I believe that there was a turning point in 2006 when the Athens and Epidaurus Festival was radically rejuvenated by its director at the time, Yorgos Loukos. We were able to see live cutting-edge spectacles in a massive festival here in Athens and, I feel, in a way, it shaped us all, me for sure. Since then, I feel, it became easier for us to have access to contemporary theatre-making. Athens was inside the map for the touring companies and, in addition, it became maybe easier for other local big institutions to reach to artists from other countries and have them to perform or even to collaborate with Greek artists. As time goes by, I believe that for the time being we are up to date with what

happens around the world and far away from the more “introvert” past decades. The fact that we are up to date as spectators, nonetheless, doesn’t compensate much the fact that Greek artists and especially Greek theatre (apart from a few examples) is very poorly connected with the rest of Europe. We have almost no presence outside our borders.



Fig. 4: *Thyestes* by Seneca / Direction: Thanos Papakonstantinou (Athens and Epidaurus Festival, 2023) @Elina Giouanli

Elli Papakonstantinou: I would say that us Greeks, we balance on two very opposite ideas about ourselves: that we belong to the centre of the Western civilization (due to our linguistic access to the ancient texts) and at the same time, that we belong to the culturally isolated periphery of Europe. In some ways, both assumptions create a disturbing pointless inferiority or superiority complex raising pointless existential questions, such as: “Are we the true “savants”, who like the Sphynx, know it all about the Greeks, or, are we a culturally Western colony that imports artistic movements rather than creates

them? There are, of course, many reasons to justify for this “mistrust” toward Europe, and a finance analyst would point out that cultural relations is also a byproduct of financial relations. So, in a nutshell, I personally find the relationship of Greek theatre to the rest of Europe problematic and having spent more than 15 years of my adult life in London and Berlin only made things worse. My work was often treated as “exotic”, “European peripheral” and “unfamiliar” by both European and Greek drama theorists. This has caused much headache, but when I defy expectations and narratives and just dive into the actual source i.e. the ancient Greeks, things get different. As a writer and director, I have always had a very special relationship to the myths and cherished immensely a playful attitude toward them. To my understanding, Europe nowadays is more than ever in search of the core humanistic values that will propel us to a better future and the Greek mythology provides a warm blanket for the cold days. So, even when we create and produce far away from the mainland cultural industries of the North, in “the periphery”, there is a genuine interest to engage with the European cultural industries that the lack of networks or infrastructures in Greece ignores.

Takis Tzamargias: The relationship of the Greek theatre with the rest of Europe has always been important and it has always managed to absorb and assimilate new systems and contemporary trends in a fruitful and creative way and to compose its own identity from the elements of the Greek reality. European data were redefined in a new reality, where the indigenous and the alien were creatively intertwined. In the last twenty years at least, this relationship has continued to be thriving and dynamic, but with a greater parity. A number of institutions and special projects realized by state theatres and festivals, as well as serious private initiatives, have contributed to this. These promote extroversion both at textual and stage level. Of course, there is more demand and interest from Europe for physical theatre since language is still a barrier to the promotion of important spoken word performances.

Andreadi – Asproulis: Greek theatre is in an open dialogue with European theatre. It is contemporary, communicative, and ambitious, it is borrowing forms, reshaping them. It is hosting performances, taking its own abroad. It is a

very creative theatre inside a very vivid market, of 2.000 different theatre shows per year, a fact that makes Athens one of the top theatrical capitals of Europe, production-wise. However, this does not lead to the creation of an identifiable identity we could call “Greek theatre”, like identities we perhaps meet in other parts of Europe.



Fig. 5.: *The Cenci Family* by Ioli Andreadi & Aris Asproulis / Direction: Ioli Andreadi, The Tank NYC (2023) @The Tank Theatre

Alexandra K*: I feel that generally theatre in Europe moves at two speeds, or rather in two different approaches: the first has playwriting at its core, while the other focuses on breaking free from the text. In Greece, both practices are represented equally, both in what we produce but also in what we import (indicatively, we “consume” many contemporary Spanish plays on one hand, and experimental German performances on the other). Regarding our own productions, I notice that the new generation leans more towards the second approach, that of shaping a rudimentary text only as a “trigger” to then construct a theatrical edifice on it. Their subject matters are in direct dialogue with the European community and its concerns, while artists from all over Europe are often included in their teams. I do feel that the presence of the local element grows weaker, and that there’s not enough attention paid to dramaturgy anymore, but I think that these are symptoms of a continent that

has become gentrified (thus, homogenized) anyway, and of an era that is terribly fragmentary and fragmented. Or I'm just a millennial getting old and maybe irrelevant.



Fig. 6: MEDEA, directed by Yannis Kalavrianos, National Theatre of Greece (2022), credits Elina Giouanli *Medea* by Bost / Direction: Yannis Kalavrianos, @Elina Giouanli

Yannis Kalavrianos: All relations, in order to be mutually fruitful and creative, must be two-way, otherwise they cease to be equal and end up in hierarchical power structures. Greek audiences, spectators and creators alike, are constantly following and keeping up to date with the evolution of theatre on the major European stages, both in terms of writing and dramaturgy, as well as in terms of form and aesthetics. Foreign-language theatre is translated and performed extensively in Greece, but the same cannot be said in reverse for Greek plays. The interest of foreign theatres, which is translated into retransmissions of Greek performances, has so far been limited to mixed theatre and dance shows or to productions not based on language. This is

always the case with the languages of the region, but I think it is high time to radically change this pattern.

Yiannis Panagopoulos: I would describe it as a relationship with some major unbalances. As spectators, here in Greece, we are so often getting in touch with a great number of performances travelling from abroad but unfortunately don't get the opportunity to visit other countries with our own creations.

What do you hope for the Greek theatre?

Thanos Papakonstantinou: I hope for better working conditions, bigger funds for the arts, connectivity with the rest of the world.

Savas Patsalidis: A more generous and systematic financial State support, greater extroversion, more critical self-awareness, and a more substantial, constructive and beneficial "re-visit" of the domestic tradition, in the light of all the changes observed nationally and internationally; and last but not least a more inquisitive, questioning "re-reading" of the concept of reality and the real. At some point Greek artists must understand that the world has become too complex and cannot be substantially grasped, interpreted in terms of the left and right. This is an oversimplified binarism, that leads nowhere. Nowadays these early dichotomies are indistinguishable and this requires that Greek theatre practitioners cultivate new, more versatile (re)presentational, performative modes and codes so that the world they create on stage meets the world off stage.

Elli Papakonstantinou: I wish that the national Institutions will become more inclusive and also that the Ministry of Culture puts together an effective strategic plan in order to support mobility and research.

Takis Tzamargias: Greek theatre has remarkable potential in all areas and I hope that it will find its stride on paths that connect with its audience so that the stage act triumphs and leaves its imprint on the consciousness of all of us.

Andreadi – Asproulis: To be able to obtain its own “seal” or identity. To be free and encouraged to educate and cultivate its audience. To be supported in more meaningful ways by both the State and the institutions and by the private market. And to open its wings abroad as an equal to the other countries.



Fig. 7: *The Boy with Two Hearts* by Hamed and Hessam Amiri / Direction: Takis Tzamargias, Theatre Alma (2023) @Aikaterini Drouka

Alexandra K*: Recently we had the pleasure of seeing Greek performances travel in Europe (note: performances, not plays yet). The showcases do bring results and it is being proven that Greek theatre indeed has something to offer abroad. I hope that our presence in the international theatrical community will continue and spread, just as I hope that our playwrights will believe more in themselves and their writing identity, so that we too can participate in this dialogue in the future.

Yannis Kalavrianos: To create its own tradition. Not to operate on a case-by-case basis, but to proceed as a whole and in dialogue, both inside and outside the country. To look at the past calmly and envision how it would like its future to be. To deal with the burning issues not with the speed or manner of television, to ignore convenience, to work on language, to seek poetry and to understand that the only way forward is through truth, sharing and commitment.

Yiannis Panagopoulos: I would definitely say faster changes towards better conditions. We all know how things should be and that's the direction we should all work for. And I am not only referring to the State support but also to the private sector that needs to make big changes as well. I would also wish that Greek performances could travel even more abroad and spread their messages to the world.

Stathis Livathinos: That it matures without growing old quickly.



Fig. 8: *King Lear* by William Shakespeare / Direction: Stathis Livathinos, Teatro Kefalinias (2023) @Elina Giounanli

What about theatre for children and youngsters? What is the situation in Greece?

Sofia Vgenopoulou: I think it is very important to state that theatre for young people should and can be an area of study, research and experimentation by accomplished artists; it can have high artistic quality and value reflecting its times, and thus be a significant part of the artistic life in a civilized society. It is also true that children's first theatrical experiences are probably their first encounter with artistic creation, with inspiration and how it becomes life on the stage. And therefore, it is our duty to take care of these first experiences, make them unforgettable for their soul and spirit, so that they can always revisit this refuge that art can be, nurture their imagination and use it to emotionally and spiritually grow. Given all this I would say that there have been significant developments in theatre for young people in the last couple of decades. Both in content, form and aesthetic approach we have managed to leave behind us at least partly certain misconceptions, fears and prejudices even about what might interest the kids, such as how we can keep them interested given that they can't concentrate for long, that we must make sure they are impressed by high tech performances, everything must be quick and "big", that bringing to the stage TV shows are definite successes and therefore the best choices, that we should avoid difficult issues and definitely choose not only happy endings but also make sure there is a clear message there reinforcing what and how they should think, and that any upsetting scene or piece of dialogue has the potential of traumatizing the young audience. I think a lot of that is being abandoned and we have become more daring, more brave I would say to choose both material and a language that reflects the reality of the young peoples' lives, their real concerns and dilemmas, and we have realized that it is important to speak the truth, to challenge them with difficult questions, respect them that they can work their way out of intricate difficulties if we give them space and time to discover their own resources. In my own experience in recent years, either funding from EU sources or the financial, ideological and infrastructural support from major cultural organizations has helped a lot in that respect because we can more easily bypass the danger of our productions becoming commodities. We can depart more safely from educational "aims" and curriculums; we can be more daring in our choices of themes and in our

artistic endeavours. Also, the major cultural organizations of the country have supported a variety of programs where kids experience themselves the joy of theatre. And parallel to this a series of very ambitious programs targeting teachers and professionals have helped educate all of them in TIE, as well as applied theatre techniques, devising, ensemble techniques, all of them very important means in order to introduce kids to the theatre, but also introduce theatre as a very valuable teaching and social cohesion vehicle.

Despite the progress that I just described however, it remains a huge problem that consistency and sustainability of these programs depend on all sorts of circumstances, usually with those of us who do this work finding ourselves often negotiating around production costs, spaces that are appropriate, accessibility, artistic recognition and proper promotion of the work – critics never write about TYP in our country. There is important work that needs to be done regarding making theatre for YP and related educational programs an important and consistently funded part of our cultural life and institutions, in a fruitful dialogue and interaction with the school system. Maybe educating even more young ambitious, talented artists about this genre will also help.

What is the responsibility of a person who does theatre for children and teenagers?

Sofia Vgenopoulou: First and foremost, I try to find stories that need to be told, stories that I care about and that as I listen to the young generation and try to enter their world, I suspect that they will also care about. This is a huge responsibility, but it does pay off. I also believe that I have to take risks, challenge my audience and trust them. No need for easy answers, messages, rosy representations of reality that is not reality in a sense. No need to underestimate them, present a false image that is then proven a lie and leads to them losing their faith in us adults. Actors are my premium material, they are these magical human beings that invent worlds by working together towards a common goal, therefore I always work with ensembles and believe that this process of almost utopian availability to one another in order to collectively write new narratives is something that is reflected in the performance and fascinates and moves kids. It is not only the content that matters, but the ethos of rehearsal and production thereafter that becomes a world that we find refuge in and maybe seek to recreate it when we leave the theatre. Of course,

all this requires an active audience, it becomes an exercise of some sort, but I think it is much needed. I have been haunted especially in recent years by the feeling of helplessness and passive abandonment that a lot of young people share and I truly believe it is a very dangerous feature of our times. As a reaction to this I seek to mobilize kids' emotion and thought process, and propel them to action, just like their heroes on stage, to become protagonists of their own lives, take the steering wheel of their own journey. I believe it is every kid's undeniable right to invent themselves and the life they want to live, so I try to make space for them to discover in theatre their own imaginative powers which is where it all starts from.



Fig. 9: *Border Lines* by Chris Cooper / Direction: Sofia Vgenopoulou, National Theatre of Greece (2023) @Karol Jarek

Having such an experience, what do you think is for and what against an artistic making theatre for young audiences?

I think it is important to say that there is no perfect situation and place to do theatre in general, and much more theatre for young audiences for all the

reasons we have already discussed. Given this we really need to create a niche of trusted and valuable partners and collaborators and really hold on to whatever values guide us, remind ourselves and reevaluate why this work is important and meaningful. We need to take responsibility, act, connect, empower each other, rather than lean towards harsh critique and competition. When the piece of the pie is small, I am afraid the professional arena can become a battlefield and it is true that my country is a ...small pie place! Also, I miss very much the experience of mentoring. We do not have a very established and even formal context of internships, residencies etc. I think this is very unfortunate and takes a lot away from the joy and inspiration of our work. Especially in the area of applied theatre for all and young people included, which is one of my interests we lack teaching, practice, proper design of relevant programs and opportunities to bring them to the right target groups and to the stage.

WHO IS WHO



Alexandra K* (Corfu, 1985) is an author, playwright and screenwriter based in Athens. She was a writer-in-residence at the University of Iowa International Writing Program, has been repeatedly commissioned by the National Theatre of Greece, the Greek National Opera, the Athens-Epidaurus Festival and the National Broadcasting

Company as well as from private cultural institutions. She's a regular contributor in *Vogue Greece* and has been conducting Playwriting workshops at the University of Western Macedonia. Her latest book, *Virgin Mary Smoking in the Bathroom*, (short stories, Patakis, 2023) became an instant #1 best seller in Greece.



Ioli Andreadi is a theatre and performance director, playwright, researcher, Assistant Professor at the University of Western Macedonia specializing in Theatre and Education and **Aris Asproulis** is playwright, Dr. of Sociology at Panteion University, Director of Communication of the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus, the historic Art Theatre Karolos Koun and the Lykofos Productions. They have co-authored 14 theatrical plays (7 original and 7 adaptations) from 2015 until today, which have been staged in Greece, New York, London and Bulgaria, directed by Ioli Andreadi and having received excellent reviews. Ioli Andreadi and Aris Asproulis specialize in creating original theatrical works, based on the study of real events, through research of primary archival material; documents and publications; interviews; books; field work. They also share a deep interest in the Classics (literature, theatre, art), having adapted for the stage a version of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, a version of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* and Euripides' *Ion* and *Helen*. Their work also includes *THE ARTAUD TRILOGY*, three new plays on the life and work of Antonin Artaud: *Artaud/Van Gogh*, *The Cenci Family* and *Bone*. All their plays have been published by Kapa Publishing House. Ioli Andreadi's research books *Anastenaria: Ritual, Theatre, Performance. An Experiential Study* (2020), *Performance: Theory and Practice; Directing, Philosophy and Culture* (2021) and *Theatre and Education: Theory and Practice* (2023) was published by Kapa Publishing House, too.

IRENE MOUNDRAKI



Yannis Kalavrianos was born in Thessaloniki, Greece. Graduate of the Medical School and of the School of Drama-Faculty of Fine Arts, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, where he is also a PhD student. He worked as a doctor, playwright, actor and director. He wrote and directed plays presented at the: National Theatre of Greece, Ancient Theatre of Epidauros, National Theatre of Northern Greece, Deutsches Theatre Berlin, Kunstfestspiele Herrenhausen Hannover, Spazio Teatro NO'HMA Milan, CSS Teatro Udine, Theatre tri-bühne Stuttgart, Piccolo Teatro Milan, Heidelberger Stückemarkt, Sarajevo Winter Festival, Centro Dramático Nacional Madrid, Cyprus Theatre Organisation Nicosia, Michael Cacoyannis Foundation Athens, Megaron The Athens Concert Hall, Greek National Opera etc., Athens & Epidauros Festival.



Stathis Livathinos was born in Athens. He is a graduate of the School of Drama Pelos Katselis and of the Department of English Literature of the University of Athens.

He graduated from the Theatre Department at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts (GITIS) in 1990 with a M.A. in Theatre Direction and a M.F.A. in Theatre Acting. In 2001 he became the Artistic Director of the Experimental Stage of the National Theatre of Greece. During the seven years (2001-2007) of his service Livathinos directed several shows and launched the foundation of the first School of Theatre Directing in Greece in 2001. His directions have toured in Europe and overseas (recently his *Iliad* by Homer toured with great success all over the world) and he has been awarded with numerous prizes, among them the Moscow Critics Award for his thesis-performance *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* by Tom Stoppard. He has taught theatre in the University of Patras, the Center of Ancient Drama, Harvard University (A.R.T.) in Boston and most recently at Shanghai Theatre Academy (May 2016). From 2015 to 2019 he was the Artistic Director of the National Theatre of Greece.



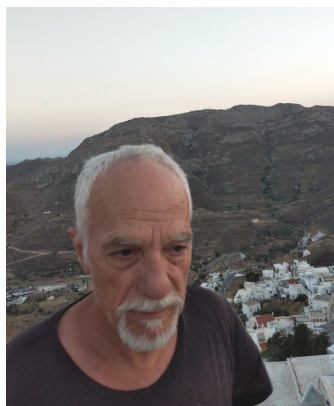
Yiannis Panagopoulos is a graduate of the Drama School of the National Theatre of Greece and the Athens University of Economics and Business, while he is currently a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Theatre Studies (Fine Arts), University of Peloponnese working on his thesis on *Cultural Democracy*. He has worked as an actor and director at the National Theatre of Greece, the Athens Epidaurus Festival, the Athens Concert Hall, the “Karolos Koun” Art Theatre, Kefallinias Theatre and Theseum Theatre, among others. He served as artistic curator at the Opening and Closing Ceremonies of the Special Olympics 2011 in Athens and as Deputy Artistic Director for the candidacy of the city of Messolonghi as the European Capital of Culture in 2021. He co-founded along with Zoe Mylonas and Dimos Klimenof the NOVUS Theatre Ensemble.



Elli Papakonstantinou connects notions of myth and gender philosophy by revisiting the classics and creating immersive experiences. Elli is a performance director, playwright, visual artist and cultural manager. She creates performances with an emphasis on music, and new media. She is the artistic director of the international theatre company ODC Ensemble. Elli has lived in the UK for over a decade and has created and presented her work internationally. The global lockdowns led Elli to experiment with a new form of digital theatre, that she named “theatre of seclusion”. Twice a proud Fulbrighter, in 2019 she spent 4 months researching new technologies in performance at CCRMA (Computer Center for Music & Acoustics), at Stanford University (US), and in 2004, she spent Spring at the Media Lab, at Princeton University with a “Fulbright Artist’s Award” and a “Stanley J. Seeger Visiting Fellowship”. Amongst other achievements, she has been credited with a “First Prize Award” at the Edinburgh Festival (UK) and a “First Prize Award” for the REP, Birmingham (UK), as well as the “Music Theatre Now 2018-19” international competition. Elli has been commissioned by the European Capitals of Culture “Valetta18” and “Eleusis21” and has presented work at the European Parliament of Culture.



Thanos Papakonstantinou is a Stage Director and Actor. As a director, he has collaborated with Athens and Epidaurus Festival, National Theatre of Greece, Pallas Theatre, Megaron – Athens Concert Hall, Kypria International Festival – Nicosia, Greek National Opera, Onassis Cultural Foundation, Bayreuth Baroque Festival, Michalis Cacoyannis Foundation – MCF, Apo Michanis Theatre. Among his directions: *Thyestes* by Seneca (2023), *Iphigénie en Tauride* by C.W. Gluck (2023), *Hope of Homeland* opera by Giorgos Kouropos (2021), *Crude Iron*, opera by Andys Skordis (2021), *Juditha Triumphans* by Vivaldi (2021), *The Free Besieged* by Dionisios Solomos (2021), *Apocalypse* (2019), *The Haunted* musical by Dimitris Maramis (2019), *Electra* by Sophocles (2018), *L'Orfeo* by Claudio Monteverdi (2018/ 2023), *Colossus* (2017), *Redshift* by Yiannis Mavritsakis (2014-2015), *Macbeth* by W. Shakespeare (2015), *Pedestal* (2013), *Venison* (2012), *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare (2011).



Savas Patsalidis is Professor Emeritus in Theatre Studies at Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, where he has taught at the School of English for close to 35 years.

He has also taught at the Drama School of the National Theatre of Northern Greece, the Hellenic Open University and the graduate program of the Theatre Department of Aristotle University. He is the author of fourteen books on theatre and performance criticism/theory and co-editor of another thirteen. His two-volume study, *Theatre, Society, Nation* (2010), was awarded first prize for best theatre study of the year. In addition to his academic activities, he writes theatre reviews for various journals. He is on the Executive Committee of the Hellenic Association of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics, a member of the curators' team of Forest International Festival (organized by the National Theatre of Northern Greece), and the editor-in-chief of *Critical Stages/Scènes critiques*, the journal of the International Association of Theatre Critics.



Takis Tzamargias was born in Piraeus. He studied acting at the Acting School “Piraeus Society” and he holds a Bachelor Degree on the Educational Department of National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. He also holds a Master’s Degree in “Theatre in Education”. He has been working as special academic staff at the University of Athens since 2003. He has also taught in various acting schools in Athens. He was the founder and for 15 years the director of the theatre team of the municipality of Keratsini. He has worked with the National Theatre of Greece, the Theatre Organization of Cyprus, the National Theatre of Northern Greece, etc. He was the Artistic Director of the Municipal Theatre of Piraeus for a 2-year period (2013-2015). He has lectured in many conferences about theatre in education. He has

written many articles and he was part of the writing team of books about theatre in schools. He is the president of the committee of the Ministry of Culture for the theatre awards for new plays for non-adult audience.



Sofia Vgenopoulou is working in Athens, Greece, since 2001 as a theatre director and a practicing child psychiatrist, after 10 years of studies in the USA in theatre, drama therapy and child psychiatry. In May 2017 she became the Head of the Young People's Stage and related educational programs for young people at the National Theatre of Greece, a position she held until January 2024. From 2010 to the present day, she has focused her work on young audiences and has brought forth the importance of active participation of young people in the arts within their educational settings and within major cultural organizations and educational programs created specifically for them. This has included disenfranchised youth and young refugees. She has directed 37 performances by, with and for young people, working at times with professional actors and at times with young people, including multicultural companies of professionals and young refugees. She has designed and coordinated a significant number of educational programs of national calibre in secondary schools funded by the EU and has taught extensively about applied theatre to professional artists and teachers.

IRENE MOUNDRAKI



Eirini Mountraki has obtained a BA, a MA and a PhD in Theatre Studies from the National and Kapodistrian University of Athens. She also studied Arts at the University of Milan, Italy on a scholarship. She works at the National Theatre of Greece since 1999 and she is head of Drama, Library, Archive and International Relations Departments. She teaches in the MA Programmes at the Universities of Peloponnese and Athens. She also teaches at Drama Schools. She taught Theatre in the Army and has directed several plays with her students. She is the founder and head of the Greek Play Project, a dynamic platform for the promotion and study of contemporary Greek dramaturgy (greek-theatre.gr). Alongside her work as a dramaturg, she has published books and translations, curated exhibitions, organized and led workshops and seminars and lectured about theatre in Greece and abroad. She is an International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP 2013) Alumna of the USA and member of the IATC. Among other significant roles, she has been President of the Consultative Committee on Theatre Grants of the Greek Ministry of Culture (2017-2021) and President, Vice President and member of the board of the Hellenic Association of Theatre and Performing Arts Critics (2016-2023). She is a member of the Board of the European Theatre Convention.

*“If you want to see the light you should bring it
into the darkness”*

Ştefana POP-CURSEU¹ in dialogue with Çağlar YİĞİTOĞULLARI



Çağlar Yiğitoğulları was born in Ankara, Turkey, in 1977. He graduated in Theatre – Acting from the Bilkent University in Ankara, the Faculty of Music and Performing Arts. After graduation, during 2001-2003, he lived in Australia and studied contemporary dance. Returning to Turkey in 2003, he started working for the Istanbul City Theatre, as an actor with a permanent contract. In parallel with his work at the Istanbul City Theatre, he began producing his own performances, bold

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pieces exploring the limits of corporeality, and presenting them in the country, as well as abroad. Diss (2008) and Luovstory (2009) are two of his most celebrated works. In 2017, disheartened by the limited freedom of expression in Turkey, he moved to Germany, where he currently lives and creates. Çağlar Yiğitoğulları has been awarded several important prizes, including the International Association of Theatre Critics (IATC)' "Actor of The Year" in 2010. He has worked with influential theatres across Europe, such as Abattoir Fermé in Belgium, Attis Theatre in Greece, Münchner Kammerspiele and Maxim Gorki Theatre in Germany.

Ștefana Pop-Curseu: *You are at your second production at the National Theatre in Cluj, and, as you said, the Servants of Beauty, inspired by the Hindu text Bhagavad Gita, does in a way continue The Quest, that was inspired by The Conference of the Birds by Farid ud-Din Attar². How come? Can you explain what you meant?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: *In the beginning I had not thought about this, but when you are busy with an issue, the situation brings you another kind of dimensions and perspectives. We were so much in this idea of finding our own leaders in ourselves, when rehearsing for *The Quest*... Actually, this is a very Shamanic and Sufi understanding of the way of living and finding your own leader. In Islam Sufism it is called "Ana'l-Haqq", meaning "I am the God", "I am the God of myself". In Shamanism it is said that you are the Shaman of your life and of yourself. So, this was one of the constant things I was telling the performers. And then, I started questioning in my mind "So now, what is the responsibility of the leader?" We found that we are the individuals, the leaders of our lives but this is not an easy thing, this issue comes with responsibility and from today's perspective, all the politicians are using this in a really horrible manner, with all these constant wars. So, I wanted to continue with the same group of people, seeing them as the leaders of their society, where they have to be confronted with the difficulties of their position.*

² See Ramona Tripa, „The Biggest Challenge is the Heaviness of Existence as a Human Being Living in and Feeling Responsible for Today's World. Interview with Artist Performer Çağlar Yiğitoğulları”, *Studia UBB Dramatica*, LXVIII, 1/2023: 199-205.

“IF YOU WANT TO SEE THE LIGHT, YOU SHOULD BRING IT INTO THE DARKNESS”

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *Making choices?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Yes, the constant possibility of choice, this is one of the issues in the performance too: the responsibility of choice as an artist, as an individual. So, this was the first motivation for me to continue in this way.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *And so, you chose as a starting point this antique Hindu text, very well known in Indian culture, Bhagavad Gita being one of the fundamental texts from the Mahabharata. Why did you make this choice?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: As a maker, am not interested in the details of the performances that I am doing, but only in the plot, in the story. For both projects, *The Quest* and *The Servants of Beauty*, I am a hundred per cent the author. In the previous one there was not a single word from the original poem, I wrote everything, and this time, there are seven sets of questions, six from the *Mahabharata* and in Arjuna's first monologue, we have three sentences from *Bhagavad Gita*. I wrote the rest. As an author, I don't want to know much about the details, the dialogues of the initial story, I like to have my own space to fill, where I can express myself, with my own experience and my own words. That's how I fantasise, I write something and then go into the details as a maker, a director, a performer or whatever it is. For me, this story is quite similar to that of Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, when Raskolnikov kills the woman, and then, still, we keep arguing if he had the right to kill her or not. So here it is the same situation with Arjuna: he had to go to war, but ethically it was not a good thing to do, and still, it is very controversial, ethically, philosophically, but on the other side it has a beautiful dimension. Every Indian person knows that it is a text written by human hands, but they worship it. It's that important, I wanted to dive in these dimensions, it's one of the holiest books, and it's incredible. So first I wrote the text, I started reading, searching, listening to lectures, and I found very critical things about the text, actually. So, the very first day I came here to start rehearsing, I talked about the main perspectives, about seeing things. Because most of the time we see things as we are, not for what they are. Then I told them other stories from the *Bhagavad Gita*. One of the worst names of the nazi regime, one of

the vilest figures, Heinrich Himmler, who organized the concentration camps and who was the leader of Auschwitz, carried all his life in his pocket a special edition of *Bhagavad Gita*. And you know – this is where I want to get with this, that from his perspective, it can be read: “Do your duty!” For millions of people, it’s a spiritual text, but it is so easy to see things from this terrible perspective as well.



Fig. 1: Mihnea Blidariu as the narrator in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: In all the Holy books human kind ever produced, you have very profound philosophical and poetical writings, that function all in similar ways, no matter what religion they give foundations to. They offer you concepts, key phrases to think of, but they leave you the choice to understand or not, to do or not to do what is written...

“IF YOU WANT TO SEE THE LIGHT, YOU SHOULD BRING IT INTO THE DARKNESS”

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: I am coming from a Muslim country, and without being religious, you can see from my work that I am so much rooted in the philosophy of Islam and Sufism. It's because I come from this geography. For me, it is the most divine knowledge of humanity. But for others, it is different. As I told you about “Ana'l-Haqq”, (I am the God): under this law, people killed in the most brutal way. This is how they understood it, that if they had God in them, they were the new Gods. In that sense, I just took the story line, because I wanted to argue about the ethics of this choice, so this was the very first motivation for choosing *Bhagavad Gita*, not knowing if Arjuna was right or not to go to war. I did not want to show the ending... but after I got the feedback from Mr. Mihai Măniuțiu – because he's my master, you know, I do not question it a lot if it comes from him – and also from Anca Măniuțiu, I took it as a new encouragement, as a new perspective of seeing things, and I changed the ending.



Fig. 2: The Army/Arjuna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *So, in the performance, you show this path, how Arjuna gets to understand what choices he has, what he is supposed to do, through a dialogue between him and the God Krishna. You integrated here into the scenography, the presence of 5 bicycles, in a line, with dynamos, energy producing bikes, and the pedalling sound gives us the feeling of an army preparing to go to war. Is this the feeling you wanted the spectators to experience, what is the reason behind the presence of these black bikes?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Yes, you know my universe, I like bringing obstacles, performative elements which keep the performers present in the moment, so that they do not have space to go in their own universes, problems or issues. A constant physical obstacle, different from *The Quest*, because there, they were solo, they had obstacles during their solo parts, but here it is the other way round, during the whole performance they have this physical constraint: pedalling. And I did not know what kind of bikes we would have, how it was going to work, technically, but my dream was to produce real electricity, and play with the intensity of the light, depending on the speed of pedalling. For us, in these circumstances, it did not really work like this, because the intensity did not change the way I wanted it to, when the pedalling was very fast or slower, it was mainly the sound that changed. So, this brought another challenge which I turned into an advantage in my understanding. I kept the sound continuously, but in a slow manner at some points, not to hear them too much, and intense at some other points, and I worked on the design of the lights according to the pedalling. Sometimes I have all the five being used, sometimes just two, or one, or three. But yes, they are the army, as individuals, as Arjuna, but also his army, swinging on their horses, waiting for the moment they would attack. It's in between. And this position is not comfortable, but quite painful: they have to move, they have to change, to put on the helmet, and there are so many other things that are not visible, I hope: they play with the gloves and the sunglasses, it's a hidden choreography. And then the text comes into play... You know, my language is not easy to learn. In English there are five pages, in the translation there are seven, but there was a struggle to learn it and deliver it in the best manner, as a chorus and as individuals. So, this is the concept concerning the bikes.

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Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *They give a special feeling, because they bring this ancient text in our contemporary world in an unusual way, with these warriors forming a line on their bikes.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: It is an alignment effect. For the performers and for the audience, there is always another reference, another image, another sound from the spoken words.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *And the sound of the pedalling is very strong, announcing that something bad is coming, the preparation for this war, and then one by one, they get off the bikes and come in front, becoming Krishna. But their getting on and off the bikes brings us this idea of Arjuna being there, present in each of them, he's the leader and he has to convince them, but he and they are hesitating. Arjuna is in each of them with his wisdom but also with his doubts.*



Fig. 3: Diana Licu as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: There is a hidden message: first the storyteller comes, he leaves the costume and then the other comes, presents Krishna and leaves the costume for the next performer. All this is saying that it is so easy to be the God, the wise man, it's just the costume, the outfit, the animal skin you put on, it is just about decision. But this is one thing. On the other side, I call myself a game-maker and they are the game-players. I just develop the concept of a game: these are the rules, these are the characters which have to be restored, kept, told, and you have the obstacles, the bicycles, and this is the game. Whenever the costume is free, somebody has to come in front and continue the game. So, I told them just to play the game truthfully.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: A game with a mystery at the end, because we do not know what is going to happen to Arjuna... Is he for you more than a character from the Mahabharata?

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: From another hidden level, this is the subtext: Arjuna is the artist. During this process of becoming wiser with the information received from Krishna, Arjuna is getting a better artist. He's an artist who wants to know more and, in my universe, artists are leaders of society, this is the why it should function, I believe. And Krishna tells Arjuna that as a leader, he should learn from the Artists, who spend their entire lives learning how to pronounce words in the best manner, with care, with a lot of intention. It is not easy. You see, declaring war is not just going into a Parliament or talking to your colleagues and deciding in 5 minutes for the whole society. It needs time and intention, just like how we do it. All our lifelong we try to create our images, words in the best manner so as to be understood, to clarify what we want to say. So, the hidden part is about the artist...

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: And your conclusion is thus that artists should be listened to, but they are actually not. Society does not pay enough attention to what they have to say. They are not always believed.

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: For me as a director or a theatre maker, and for the performers, for you as an artistic team director, for us, whenever the performance starts, this is the time when we exist, when we present something from our

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artistic view. It's the time when the artists are heard and seen, this is when we are given the chance to speak. For me, this is also a big responsibility, and a chance to deliver my message, to say my words, if I want to say something. You may choose not to say anything but may just like entertain the universe. It's also another kind of decision, another kind of policy making, it's a political choice. Not to say anything can be even more political than the way I present my work.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: Your work is political in a good sense. It gives the freedom of choice. Nowadays this political dimension is misunderstood. Being political does not mean just to deliver a certain ideological message, an already given solution to the audience, telling them how things should be, what they should fight for, how they should think, without giving a freedom of interpretation, without giving them space to agree or disagree with the proposal.



foto: Nicu Cherciu © TNC

Fig. 4: Anca Hanu as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: At the very beginning of this performance the storyteller says something: “Krishna tells to Arjuna not what to decide but how to decide” So, for me, this is the mission of art actually, we shouldn’t show what to dream but how to dream, or this is the definition of my theatre. But for the first time, I couldn’t stop myself and wanted to say in the end what to dream, in the very first version of my ending, but I was mistaken in the way I wanted to do it, it was too direct, too lame, with a wrong coloration... I also learned my lesson and changed it. I did not take the feedback I got as a critique or as a censorship but as a mastership, it is welcome if it can bring the production a better level. Because, you know, I am mostly working alone, writing alone, producing alone, I know that in a way, I am turning to my own small universe. I need to encounter, come together with other worlds, other creators. And this is why I changed the ending...

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: It is important to see the reactions of the audience, they can guide you. But tell me, do you feel more comfortable working on your own, solo, or is it because your life history brought you to this, and you took advantage of it?

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Working solo has never been a choice, but an obligation. I just wanted to continue... First when I started producing my work twenty years ago, I literally couldn’t find anyone standing next to me. So that’s why I had to learn everything on my own, and I don’t say I am a hard worker, but I constantly work. I mean, people are telling me that I am working hard, but, the other way round, I think they are lazy... I am doing what I like to do. When the theatre was closed during the pandemics, I was taking the stages, working from morning to late hours on my own. And when the theatre season was closed, or all the studios were occupied with productions, I went in carpark places, I kept working, thinking, I never stopped. Because, if I can’t find a real meaning, motivation for my work, then, I lose the motivation of my life, so that’s why I wanted to know more, and give myself a motivation to continue working in these city theatres in Germany where I could earn my life and support my work. So that’s how it continues and now I have full freedom, full responsibility too, and you know, I spend 70% of my time with bureaucratic things, I have to apply to different funds to

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receive money, and even after presenting my work, for months I have to write reports: how I used money etc. But I appreciate it in a way, because I am not cleaning the streets, I do the job that I like to do, even if it could have been easier... But working as a maker, in Cluj, with this team, is everything to me. It is not similar to any other thing that I am doing. I also do this in Germany, but it is completely different, a different atmosphere. Literally, I could spend the rest of my life just working in this studio with this team and keep searching and producing, it is so precious. Of course I cannot do this, because I have a family, but there I am...



Fig. 5: *Mis/Using the Body as the Object*, performance presented at the Faculty of Theatre and Film, UBB Cluj-Napoca.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *It is great to work with people who want to work with you, who are in, who love to explore the direction you propose, to follow and readjust themselves to what is being proposed, this is wonderful!*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: I had a line in *The Quest*, that was said by Radu Dogaru: “keep knocking, what you seek is seeking you”. And in our rehearsal process, we keep knocking, we keep searching, and it should be always like this, till the very last moment.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *In all the great mythical and philosophical texts you have this beautiful idea. In the Bible too, where it is said that you should knock if you want somebody to open... these lines are the legacy of human wisdom... Now, because you have been talking about spaces, urban spaces that you used for your training, tell me what is the importance of space in your performances? You have been working in open air spaces, but also closed, indoor spaces...which do you prefer?*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: I don't think my universe would work in an outdoor space actually, but I love indoor and empty spaces. Even if there is a kind of concept for a setting in *The Servants of Beauty*, there is still an empty space. And it is filled with the actors... There is something relatively hidden too. I worked with Jan Fabre and he calls his actors, actresses, dancers “servants of beauty”, so from the very first level I declare that what I do is an actors' theatre, not a director's theatre, so they are the servants of beauty in their lives too, they are sacrificing their existence to create something beautiful. So that's why the space is left for the performers to fill. It is not an easy thing to do, it is a big challenge for them, but they are doing it in a really beautiful manner.

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *This helps the spectator's imagination too. You are very close to what Peter Brook meant with his empty space theory or to what the symbolists were proposing when emphasizing the importance of leaving free space for the audience to imagine in their own way the universe which the actor is opening for them.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: This is a beautiful thing that you mentioned: the fantasy. Before coming here this year, but after *The Quest*, I made a project for a state theatre in the city of Lübeck, where in the meantime I moved to, and where I live now. And during the project, I was thinking: “Why are things not working the way I want them to?” It was because of the lack of fantasy. In the dramaturgy they are so intellectual, but they cannot fantasize. For example, imagine only the last scene of *The Quest*: Sânziana is spinning and she is spreading flour on the ground, and then suddenly it creates some images, and Anca comes, and she “discovers” that something is written there, and she starts reading the message from the flour... which is a beautiful fantasy. And I didn’t have any difficulty in making them believe that this was happening, and they were all there and all found this so beautiful. And it is not incredible. That’s also why I love myths epics. For us, in our geography, they are real stories, but there are gaps in them, which gives us the chance to fill them. And then, we can fantasize. This is the exact principle of what we are doing on stage. We leave gaps on purpose, they are not hundred per cent clear, starting from the stage concept.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: *We have so many beautiful and complex myths and traditional literature in Romanian culture and I could notice that students who are interested in this cultural area of connections, for example, between the ancient Pagan world and the Christian perspective, between the rural world and the contemporary urban one, between mythology and our every-day life, are much more open, they understand life and the artistic experience differently, there is another dimension contributing to their understanding of the world.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: Yes, most of the people are not aware of what is hidden under all this. When you say “Pagan”, yes, this is the way art was created, so why tend to forget? When really primitive people, let’s say, not from an intellectual point of view, but timewise primitive, primary, took the animal skin and put it on... well, this is the principle of what we are doing in our *Bhagavad Gita*. The Krishna costume is the “animal skin”. You come, you take it, you turn into another being and you tell a story, and exactly like primary people, who did not think about a curtain, nor have the idea about the fourth wall, nor

have the support of the light and all this, we don't need all this. Nor even the support of the make-up which actually they used. We used it in *The Quest*, but not this time. Yes, it is very pagan... It's not easy, but at the same time, you cannot change all these habits, attitudes, preferences, that we have been collecting during a lifetime, in four-five weeks of work. But I see how much the actors changed actually since we started our collaboration...



Fig. 6-7: Sânziana Tarța and Radu Dogaru as Krishna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj

Ștefana Pop-Curseu: And they love to work with you. I have to say that Sânziana did also a very beautiful job with the creation of Krishna's costume, this golden mantle with peacock feathers, so royal, and the bird's presence that sends us to the Indian cultural geography...

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Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: In fact, something incredible has happened. In my proposal to you, when I mentioned that I wanted to use this text, I had in mind to combine it with Zoroastrian rituals. But there was something that I did not think of, there was no intellectual connection between the two directions, although a wonderful coincidence makes that it had been always there, and I realised it only later on. From my mother side we are Yesidi, Pre-Zoroastrian, and, ten years ago there was a huge massacre from Islam side³. But I started reading more about Zoroastrians, because of the oppression of Islam (you know that this is the geography: Anatolia, Mesopotamia, Iran, Iraq), the Zoroastrians were forced to leave this geography and most of them took refuge to India. And nowadays, India is the geography where Zoroastrian populations are concentrated. So, it's incredibly connected. It's a Hindu story, but in a way, it's expressed with influences of Zoroastrian rituals.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: If you have the good feeling, you go in the right direction, without really knowing it...

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Yes, and this is quite a shamanic thing, you know, Shaman say: “Seeing eyes are blind, one should see with the eyes of the heart”.

Ştefana Pop-Curşeu: Before concluding, I would like to ask you something about one aspect that you were talking about when presenting your work to the students at the Faculty of Theatre and Film. You insisted on the artistic importance of “mis-using” the body and objects on stage. And this sent me directly to the avant-garde movements and their aesthetics. But you combine in your work, two very different approaches with the antique, mythological, ritualic background on the one side, and the contemporary, urban, experimental, avantgarde hints and compositional lines on the other side. Is this also a trigger for imagination? Can you explain how this “mis-using” works for you?

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: It is very visible starting with *The Quest*, from the very first video when I am shaking my head: it's an example of mis-using my body, it's a simple human movement, but when you do it as fast it creates a

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yazidi_genocide

lot of images and new stories. Taking Mihai Nițu's episode from *The Quest*, where he is just running: he's doing it at the maximum and you know, if I were directing Gogol's *Diary of a madman*, it could have been at least one hour performance and this would be the crescendo level which I would like to reach with the actor. But in a few minutes, with very few obstacles, Mihai comes up to this level. I always ask them to start from zero, from *tabula rasa*: don't use any facial expression, use your vocals very naturally, and coming from this level, very neutral, to this other very intense level is extremely sharp, and the audience experiences this huge transition within very few minutes. But this happens only when using the body in an unexpected way. It means also to give yourself the freedom to make mistakes, to hurt yourself, to seem ugly, stupid, not always seeing yourself from outside where you always give poses to the audience. There is the freedom, I believe, the challenge, and this is where the beauty starts. So that's why I first try to encourage them to break their habits, the images that they have in their minds. "Mis-using" means also searching the possibilities of the body and of the objects...

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: As you do in the performance you showed us, when walking and moving on glasses. It creates a different relationship to the space, to the ground, to your own body and its gravity, affecting your image and pushing a "refresh" button regarding our place and assumed condition in the environment we live in.

Çağlar Yığıtoğulları: Without pronouncing any words, you are telling a story about limits. You are constrained, limited, and you go on: emotional limits, physical limits, country borders, state borders, fears, everything!

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: You stir up the spectators' imagination, and different associations surface, freeing the imagination and changing the point of view, the perspective of our "reality". When you look at the streets from the asphalt, as you did in your project in München, it is not the same as watching them when walking naturally. The same when you watch from above, be it from the top of a tree or of a skyscraper. From time to time at least, we should all change our perspectives. And theatre can do this, placing the audience on other level, in other dimensions.

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Çağlar Yiğitoğulları: At least, in this sense, it brings us together, and this is one of the most precious things, we come together, we trust each other, we like each other, and starting from the group of people, the producer and then the audience, in my understanding, this is the best way of creating a new community, a good community. And if we spread it and enlarge it, we wouldn't have any wars, any fears...



Fig. 8: Sânziana Tarța as Arjuna in *The Servants of Beauty*, production in rehearsals at the National Theatre in Cluj, 2024

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Let's be optimistic...*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: Let's keep producing, creating...

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Which is possible if we search the light even when the world is getting darker, or when, as you do, in The Servants of Beauty, work in the dark, in order to see the light better.*

Çağlar Yiğitoğullari: This is what I say in our performance: "If you want to see the light you should bring it into the darkness".

Ștefana Pop-Curșeu: *Thank you very much, Çağlar, we are waiting for the next project and last part of your trilogy at the National Theatre in Cluj.*

*Eventually, theater will regain its position as a great...
rassembleur*

Raluca RĂDULESCU¹ in dialogue with Robert LEPAGE



Robert Lepage is one of most renowned stage and film directors today and a leading figure in the Canadian avant-garde, writer, designer and actor. His artistic work attracts particular attention for his challenging cultural interferences and multimedia-rich theatrical performances, as well as for his innovative approach to the Shakespearian plays.

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Raluca Rădulescu: *Robert Lepage, you are back again in 2024 at the International Theatre Festival in Craiova, and the first question coming into my mind cannot be but linked to this: How do you consider this festival, what attracts you here?*

Robert Lepage: For me it's very important, I love the people who hang out there, there's a lot of Shakespearean scholars but it's also a great audience, I love the audience in Craiova, or Romanian in general, but what I find really exciting about it is that it's a great place to talk about Shakespeare because we're not in England, you know, there's always this thing in the English-speaking world where people in New York or people in London or in Stratford think that they have the monopoly of all the interesting ideas and the analysis of the Shakespeare work, when in fact it's really a universal work and I think that in Craiova it does that: in French we say, *un pied-de-nez*, we send a finger, and we say: "Okay, well, there's also other people in the world who are interested in him, who relate to his work and who are rewriting him, who are transforming him, who are using him as a writer of our time". So, I think Craiova has that special focus, I'd say. It's very different than having Shakespearean scholars from Great Britain or from the United States who come with their sentences and you know... So it's great, it's great fun and it's very crafty, I love how it's organized, I love the youth also of it, there's a lot of young people. I've seen some interesting costume exhibitions there, and people who do younger productions. It's the youth of it, and that's where the hope is if you want to continue to do Shakespeare in a modern way, a contemporary way.

Raluca Rădulescu: *Speaking of youth and hope, you're back in Romania with a new staging of Hamlet, a text that you're staging for the third time in the last, let's say, 30 years. After Elsinore, in 1995, the one man show in which you also acted, and Hamlet Collage in 2013, which was also seen in Bucharest at the FNT, in 2023 you did a dance show with a choreographer: Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. Over the years you have staged other Shakespeare plays. Why did you choose to return to Hamlet for the third time?*

Robert Lepage: Yeah, well you never finish doing *Hamlet*, you do it all your life, you never get it right, in fact, you never get it *full*, because *Hamlet* has so many facets to it and so many layers and I think it's a lifetime project *Hamlet*. You're more informed about what the play is, of course, the more you do it and the more people you meet who've played *Hamlet* before, because they shed light on certain other meanings of the play, but I think that for me what's interesting is the formal aspect of it. It's fantastic to suddenly be asked by a dancer, a star dancer, who wants to perform *Hamlet* and who says: "Well, you know I'd like you to help us stage this", and he does a choreography and I bring the whole dramaturgical approach and the staging approach to it. And what's interesting and challenging about that is that I say: "Yeah, but what about the words?" *Hamlet* is well known, it's the greatest soliloquy play of all times, it has all the great soliloquies and how do you do the soliloquies? How do you use the same themes and the same characters without using the words? So that of course is very challenging and that's why I like revisiting *Hamlet*, because it always challenges a consciousness of understanding, of transmission, so that's what I think is the main challenge. I mean, when I did a long, long time ago, a one-man *Hamlet*, I was obsessed by a different question: Where does this happen? Why Elsinore? Why the castle of Elsinore and how does this place tell the story? So, of course there're all these different layers and skins that you want to peel off and try to discover, and there's always something to discover: it's a bottomless pit.

Raluca Rădulescu: *And what is it like to switch from monodrama (after 2 one-man-shows) to a performance with so many characters, and above all combining nonverbal and dance theatre?*

Robert Lepage: This time it's not a solo, it's a company of dancers and what's interesting is that the scholars who are interested in the literature of *Hamlet* noticed that Shakespeare does not make characters speak the same way depending on their class rank, depending on their relationship. So, there're certain ways of speaking, certain words that are used if you're a prince or a king or a queen that are not used by other characters and so there is a kind of a hierarchy. In the dance version, we try to develop that feature because we have some classical ballet dancers who dance with contemporary dancers

and also with street dancers, there's people who do hip-hop... So, we take all of the different vocabularies of dancing and help create the level of the characters. The characters don't express themselves in the same way, physically. So that's the big challenge that we've done, so that we try to express the richness and the fullness of Shakespeare's language, through the gesturing, which of course is performed by different performers who have different disciplines.

It's a coincidence that I go to Romania for a second *Hamlet*, it's a coincidence because right now I'm preparing a *Macbeth* for Stratford for next year. I've done *Romeo and Juliet* and I've done *The Tempest* a few times and of course there are other Shakespearian plays that I would like to present eventually in Craiova, but now it's just a coincidence.

You realize that, when you take the words out of Hamlet, *Hamlet* still exists and it exists because there's so much action and people forget that it's a play of action. It's about action and inaction, right? What's the problem of Hamlet? It's that he thinks a lot, but he doesn't take action, right? Action is very, very important, so how you can express that physically is all about action or non-action. So, we've discovered other layers of that play through the dancing, and this is quite interesting. It's very respectful of the play, and it's also respectful of the epoch. I think we are doing a very modern Hamlet but it's not set today. It's set in the Elsinore, the Denmark of Jor. But the way we use it, the way we choreograph it, the way the dramaturgical work has been approached is very, very contemporary I'd say.

Raluca Rădulescu: But still, why were you tempted by directing a dance performance?

Robert Lepage: Very often, in the dance world and, certainly, the classical dance world is closer to theater than contemporary dance, there's a high level of abstraction, that often frees the dancer. The dancer is free to go into expressing the subconscious, expressing certain poetic levels of character that you can't really do when you speak. But, very often there's a lot of details about the characters that are overlooked, and in this case, we worked very closely with the dancers and my semi-great pride is that the night of the opening, there's a lot of people who said: "Oh, where did you find all those actors who can dance?" That means that they think there are actors who dance and they say

they dance amazingly well for actors, because a lot of these dancers, for the first time, have been instructed of all the subtleties of the characters and their contradictions and their paradoxes. And how do we express that? It's interesting because they create all this amazing choreography, then I come in and I say: "Yes, but this character could not do this because of that", or "I think this is missing". And because they work so fast (that's the amazing thing about the dance world, they're so quick, you know, they do and redo and undo and everything is so quick, which is not the case with actors), I took advantage of that and said: "It's okay, fine, let's redo this, but this time there's this level that's missing or there's this explanation that has to be brought in, or let's see how we express that without miming".

For them it's been a good experience I think, and they've become good actors doing this... All of my shows are always works in progress, so, of course, the more we perform, the more we rework and also because, contrary to theater, even if they've done the performance many times, every day they come in and they do classes, and they're always revisiting and re-questioning not just the dance, and the gesturing, and the movements; they're also re-questioning everything, which enriches the whole experience.

***Raluca Rădulescu:** Robert Lepage, we talked about your most recent performance, which can also be seen by Romanian spectators at the Craiova Shakespeare Festival, but starting from here, I would also like to ask you how you see contemporary theater, with all its current trends, from Montreal, from Ex Machina?*

Robert Lepage: I think theater today is in reaction to cinema or in reaction to television; it's either fighting against or incorporating it. So, I think that that's what we're seeing, and sometimes it gives interesting things, I'm not against that. But when you want, for example, to structure what you perform or write on a more filmic format (you know the film format is anyways modeled on the Greek tragedies; if you read all of the Hollywood "How do you write a screenplay", it's actually based on the five act tragedies and even on Shakespeare's) you can take the good things from film, and leave out the bad things from film. Then I don't have any problems with that type of contemporary theater.

There were a lot of big revolutions in music. I think that's because people got used to having predictable music. Even if you've never heard a piece of Bach you could predict how the musical phrase is going to end, so contemporary, let's say modern, composers would try to contradict that, and say: "Well, let's do music that you can't predict!" so, it's a reaction to classical that gives a way to another form of expression. That's why I try to be open to that, and I try to understand why it is the way it is.

Raluca Rădulescu: I was thinking about the themes you approached and about your interest in the contemporary text...

Robert Lepage: I just came back from Shanghai, where I was performing 887. And you feel that even though theatre is very contemporary in Shanghai and there're some fantastic artists there, they are thirsty, they want to see change, they want to see how their craft can be part of the conversation, and it's really tricky you know: How do you invite the younger crowds into your theater? You really have to be appealing, and you have to allow a lot of aesthetic changes for that to happen... That's an interesting debate and the only way for it to work is when you see work that works in the sense that I look at somebody who's doing the *Tempest* or doing another play and I see it as an approach that changes my perception of the play. And I learn from that and it changes my way of adapting the values of the play to nowadays. Then, I can use this on other shows, on other conversations, so I'm interested in all of these, because the thing that we have to understand is that theater is about transformation. In *Midsummer Night's Dream* for instance, you see a character transformed into an ass, you know he's transformed into a donkey and you have other people being transformed... And that's what the stories on the stage have to be about; that's what the sets do and the costumes too, they change, you change, so it's all about change! I think we have to take that literally, theatre is a craft about change and changing. I don't think it's a trend, I think it's part of the nature of theater.

Raluca Rădulescu: And does the use of technology on stage have something to do with this transformation, with the changing you were talking about?

Robert Lepage: Technology is not necessary, and I don't use it all the time, but I invite it, in the sense that I let it happen. But I don't necessarily want to do a technological thing and technology is just... how can I say, it's like inventing a new painting... You know, when in the 19th century, the painters decided to move away from Romanticism and Realism and they decided to democratize painting. Because the acrylic is invented, suddenly, it's fantastic, everybody can use it! But acrylic comes with a problem, it dries very quickly, so that gives the start to impressionism because it's just what you can, what you have the time to do: an impression. But that creates a whole different way of painting, so that's why I'm saying that technology is a new way of writing or painting or doing music and it leaves its traces, and it changes the way we do things. I don't think it's necessary, but when it happens, you have to accept that technology has a great influence on how you say things, how you edit things, how you decorate things... and technology is part of the language that the people speak today. You know, the audiences are able to send emails and all that, they have a different technological vocabulary... It means you have to embrace the energy of your times in a lot of freedom.

***Raluca Rădulescu:** In 2018-2019 Robert Lepage signed two shows that were controversial from the perspective of diversity and inclusion, one staged at Cirque du Soleil and the other in Canada as a "theatrical odyssey based on black slave songs", but with the parts played by white actors, and it was canceled. The director considered it a "direct blow to artistic freedom", but after several public discussions and debates he apologized and the show was revived, leaving the impression that we first accuse and only after we analyze. And situations are often more complex than they seem at first sight. In this context, I ask Robert Lepage how he sees diversity and inclusion in theater today.*

Robert Lepage: Of course, I think that when people deal with realism, be it cinematographic or televisional, it is a tricky thing, because it's a different way of dealing with that new reality, but in theatre, there is a lot of poetic freedom, so that's why I enjoy more these propositions in theatre. You know, when I worked in Japan, a few times, what I found very enjoyable about the Japanese contemporary theater is that they don't have any problems to have

in the same play actors who are from different disciplines. So, you have a kabuki theater actor who will play with an American style actor, who will work with a kyogen actor. And for them, that's what they call "richness". In the Western world, we have a tendency to avoid this. You know... for example three sisters have to come from the same theater school... we have this kind of approach and I think it's a good thing that we break that, that we decide to allow ourselves to say: "well, people are not necessarily all from the same background".

The theater is always a suspension of disbelief, right? You walk into the theater, and you ask the audience, you say: "You know that I am not the character for real, you know, I'm an actor, but I ask you to have a suspension of disbelief". And I think that now, the new diverse approach to theater actually commands that; now you have to say to the people: "well, come in and you have our consciousness and our way of reading what we're going to do is at another level. It's more difficult in cinema, because cinema cares so much about realism and detail and accuracy of the facts. The facts, of course, sometimes have difficulties following this new trend, but of course, it's a necessary trend. And maybe there will be eventually a kind of balancing, maybe we are going very far into that, and then, slowly, we'll come back to maybe a more balanced approach. But for the diversity, you need diverse writings too. You have to have more and more diverse people who write their own plays, who speak about themselves. And that I think this is lacking for now, but there will be a moment I think where the repertoire, the dramaturgical repertoire will be enriched also by the diversity in writing.

Raluca Rădulescu: Would you say that theatre is still magic?

Robert Lepage: Oh, completely. Absolutely. And it's magic beyond the supposed magicians that we are, you know, people think that all the magic that we cast is all controlled and it's a vision, but not at all. Theater has its own power and pulls us in directions we never thought we'd go.

Raluca Rădulescu: Besides theatre you did opera and film. If you had to choose what would you choose?

Robert Lepage: I think theatre, I think that theatre is a grandmother art, it invites all the other forms of art. I think it is freer. The opera has too many rigid rules in the state it is right now. I think theatre is a more forgetful and open form of art. And I have hope that theatre will eventually regain in the West, will regain its communal power. Because, as I said, I just came back from Shanghai, but it's like that in Seoul, in South Korea or in Japan, I could see that the audiences are very young. The people who are in the audience are much younger than in the West. So, I have the impression that there is some kind of movement eventually where theater will regain its position as a great, in French, you see, *rassembleur*. You know, it's an art that assembles people around the project, but also assembles people in the room.

Raluca Rădulescu: *And a last question: what is Robert Lepage still dreaming of, today?*

Robert Lepage: Well, I think my dreams are about education in the sense that I've always been very, very busy creating all sorts of new shows and gathering people around different crazy projects and all that. I have the impression that I've done a lot of research and I've worked with a group that's been very generous with me to do that. But there's an aspect, maybe because I'm getting older, there's an aspect of my interest now, that is more connected to teaching. In the sense that, you know, sometimes we have people from all over the world who come to see us work, but I would like to have like an official, not school, because "school" is a bit rigid word, but a studio, have a place where people come and they try things, and I could coach them, and they could contradict what I say and whatever. That is for me, I'd say, a long-winded project.

Raluca Rădulescu: *Thank you!*

PERFORMANCE AND BOOK REVIEWS

The Silences of Collective Memory

Performance Review: *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare, artistic direction and stage adaptation by Declan Donnellan, a production of “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova, 2023¹

A premiere of *Hamlet* on the stage of the National Theatre in Craiova cannot be a mere triviality or a standalone product. On the contrary, it becomes a theatrical event through its very association with the history of the producing institution, whose precedents with the famous Shakespearean tragedy determine the maturity of the audience’s expectations, but also create the possibility of a resounding failure under the proportional pressure of these expectations. Consequently, it is difficult to analyze Declan Donnellan’s recent production and its impact on the public and critics without a contextual parenthesis explaining the aura of predestination for *this* production on *this* stage.

¹ **Text translated into Romanian:** George Volceanov, **Set Design:** Nick Ormerod, **Assistant Director:** Laurențiu Tudor, **Set Design assistant:** Adelina Galiceanu, **Music:** Tibor Cári, **Stage Combat – Fencing:** Antonie Mihail, **Sound:** George Udrea, Dan Feneșan, **Lights:** Dodu Ispas, Marian Tudorache, Alina Mitache, **Technical direction:** Cristian Norel Petec / Sorin Gruia, **Prompter:** Adrian Țircă, **Producer:** Claudia Gorun, **Poster graphics:** Denisa Neațu, **Cast:** Hamlet (Vlad Udrescu), Claudius (Claudiu Mihail), Gertrude (Ramona Drăgulescu), Ofelia (Flavia Hojda, Theodora Bălan), Polonius (Raluca Păun), Laertes (Alex Stoicescu), Phantom (Eugen Titu), Rosencrantz (Cătălin Vieru), Guildenstern (Darko Huruială), Undertaker 1/Third actor in the play (Marian Politic), King in the play/Priest (Angel Rababoc), Queen in the play/Undertaker 2 (Costinela Ungureanu), Guard 1 (Mircea Mogoșeanu), Guard 2 (Mihnea Presura). **Photo credits:** “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre, Craiova.





Beyond the effect of the Shakespeare Festival, which 14 years ago had an edition dedicated exclusively to the Danish prince and his metaphysical tribulations, distilled through the visions of directors such as Thomas Ostermeier or Oskaras Koršunovas, the artistic profile of the (currently) “Marin Sorescu” National Theatre has been closely linked with *Hamlet* over the decades. Thus, as a result of some fortunate coincidences, the full text of *Hamlet* was first performed in Romania here, with Ion Manolescu in the main role. Here, too, Vlad Mugur staged the first post-war Romanian *Hamlet* in 1958, and Tompa Gábor directed the first Romanian *Hamlet* after the Revolution, in 1997, featuring Adrian Pintea, whose performance remains legendary in Romanian theatre history.

However, Declan Donnellan is one of the most important European directors of the moment, and his collaboration with designer Nick Ormerod, with whom he founded the Cheek by Jowl company – already a familiar presence in the Craiova landscape, having inaugurated the first edition of the Shakespeare Festival with a famous *As You Like It* – provides an additional guarantee of quality. Thus, the premiere at the end of February this year was born at the intersection of Romanian and European theatrical history, becoming immediately an event of great national significance.



Given these circumstances, the anticipation surrounding the new production is understandable, as well as the audience's intuition that the final product will be surprising. However, the often austere simplicity of the production perfectly aligns with the well-established style of the creative duo, so the true innovation lies in the dramaturgical treatment applied to the text, in creating an atmosphere more from what is absent than from what is explicitly shown. And among the major absences marking the universe of the Craiova performance, that of Horatio is so striking and oppressive that it immediately enters into an unexpected dialectic with the apparent sobriety and conciseness of the staging.

There is already a tacit resignation to the fate many contemporary directors condemn, for instance, Fortinbras, preferring to substitute the gravity of political death in Shakespeare's final act by effectively eliminating the Norwegian prince. However, Horatio embodies hope, a source of vitality that, instead of relativizing the actual tragedy, elevates it to eternity. His existence guarantees the fulfillment of the primordial word, which creates life and even extends it beyond death. Without this character, we enter an

atheist paradigm, where man's disappearance is final, leaving no concrete traces. Thus, at first glance, Donnellan's choice is marked by pessimism, if not even nihilism to a large extent. Nevertheless, the show is actually optimistic in essence, and Horatio's absence does not leave a noticeable void. In fact, it becomes almost immediately apparent that we, the audience, are called to replace Hamlet's friend, and we are, in essence, a collective version of him.



As mentioned, the meaning of this production gradually unfolds, not so much through what remains of the Shakespearean play but through how it has been processed, cut, and stitched together. Therefore, there is a fluidity in the transitions from one scene to another, like a chain of thoughts generating each other, without pauses or breaks in rhythm. Consequently, we can speculate not only that we are Horatio but also that we are witnessing a mnemonic reconstruction, the story itself already consumed at the moment of its scenic performance. Thus, nuances fade, events lose their specific color, and the action seems to accelerate towards the denouement, suggesting the instability of memory, unable to preserve the details of the recorded facts.

The story Horatio tells, which we collectively remember, is incomplete, essentialized, and stylized, yet it erupts in unexpected colors when evoking traumatic moments. Perhaps for this reason, against a monochrome and cold background, Hamlet plays his madness in bright red.

As in other Donnellan productions, dramatic tension is heightened by the proximity between actors and spectators, the latter being seated on stands on either side of the playing space, which is thus reduced, narrowed, and devoid of broader perspectives. Everything happens frontally; there are no shadows or backstage intrigues, as we can only remember what we have seen. The props are minimal, and Denmark stretches along a corridor covered with a white paper runner. On either side of this diminished world are black metal stools, which later become another plane of existence, a sterile afterlife populated by neutral dead.

The characters are dressed in office costumes that depersonalize them, exhibiting the studied rigidity and attitude of corporate employees welcoming the company's new leadership with feigned enthusiasm. Despite this convention, the plot is not transposed into contemporary times or a recognizable everyday zone that would give the entire directorial approach a didactic note. On the contrary, we are permanently in an uncertain, undetermined space and time.

Initially, the corridor on which the family drama unfolds forces the actors into repetitive movements with unclear goals, perhaps even tiring for the viewers. Later, after the encounter with the ghost and Hamlet's resolution to expose the usurper king, the stage movement adjusts, mathematically following the rhythm of the text.

Overall, the show does not offer remarkable individual interpretations, does not highlight the specific color of each actor, but also avoids stridencies or lapses into grotesque. The coherence of the ensemble is more important here than the potential of the individual, with two major exceptions: Vlad Udrescu as Hamlet and Raluca Păun as Polonius – two symbolic pillars of a nation on the brink of disintegration. The prince embodies the compromised monarchy, and the obsequious counselor represents the inefficient state apparatus, a cog turning in vain towards its own destruction. Hamlet's "madness" begins with the mocking of feminine frailty through a scornful

exaggeration of traditional feminine markers, in an admirable parodic travesty. Polonius's femininity, on the other hand, is imperceptible, and the fact that a woman plays him is irrelevant beyond the actress's ability to construct her character with such precise lines – repulsive, well-intentioned, energetic in his sycophancy. Unlike Claudius, he was never a great villain, just a minor one, hence much more representative of the world about to disappear.



There are, as mentioned, scenes where colors seem to reclaim the space; for example, the actors' scene and the gravediggers' scene, two essential moments foretelling the end of an order that has exhausted its vital energy. Fortinbras is absent again, but the victory of the outside world is signified, on one hand, by the triumphant and disruptive entrance of the actors, and on the other by the chromatic protest of the gravediggers – a metaphor for internal disintegration.

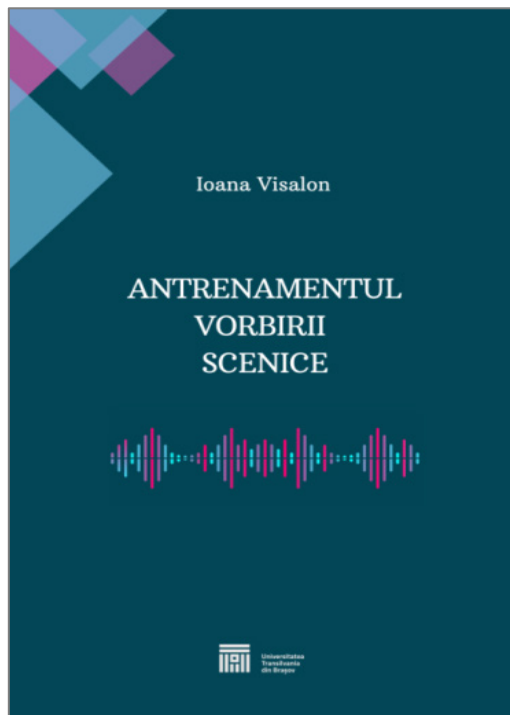
The conclusion “The rest is silence!” is pronounced before the final fight, which is silent, carefully choreographed, and extracted from the text. Here lies that apparent optimism that Horatio’s absence does not diminish but rather enhances. The king, queen, and Hamlet seem to have a reconciliation after death, in a moment of heartbreaking tenderness. Yet, if we are Horatio, and the story and its memory belong to us, we can only accept that this moment is a mere projection of imagination, meant to fill a gap in memory, a scene that the silent witness from this side of the grave never truly saw.

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*A Textbook by Ioana Visalon, Dedicated to the Organic
Approach of Acting*

Book review: Ioana Visalon, *Antrenamentul vorbirii scenice (The Voice & Speech Training)*, Braşov: Transylvania University Publishing House, 2023



This textbook concentrates a pedagogical experience of over 25 years dedicated to the integration of stage speech in the organic approach of acting, an approach based mainly on the methods created by K.S. Stanislavski, Viola

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Spolin, and Ion Cojar. The author substantiates her pedagogical approach on the need that the actor's speaking be the expression of spontaneous, honest reactions to the *Magical If*¹. This requires a training that progressively consolidates the use of new speaking skills in the complicated process of rethinking the memorized text and activating the creative imagination.

The book is also the first Romanian Voice & Speech textbook that offers a coherent and comprehensive training method structured on the Broadwell model of learning skills (adapted by Carey & Clark Carey to Voice & Speech practice²), it capitalizes on in-depth documentation, not only in the specialized literature of the discipline, but also in fields such as neuroscience or psycholinguistics, and includes no less than 104 exercises, described comprehensibly and in detail, as well as an excellent theoretical apparatus updated and adapted to the needs of student actors.

Ioana Visalon's³ pedagogical approach is based on the understanding of speech as a complex phenomenon that involves both conscious cognitive processes, and a multitude of automated, almost unconscious processes. The entire pedagogical method described in this volume starts from the fact that precisely this automation allows us to have spontaneous, immediate reactions to stimuli in real life. Therefore, in order to have a speech adapted to the demands of the stage, but as natural and sincere as the everyday one, it is

¹ K.S. Stanislavski's method involving the "Magic If" (Stanislavski, K.S., 1955, *The Work of the Actor with Himself*, third chapter *Action, If, The Given Situations*, 50-73) is an important part of his system for training actors and describes the ability to imagine oneself in a set of fictional circumstances. The actor's job is to be believable in unbelievable circumstances and the first step to achieve this "truth" is to use the "Magic if": "What would I do if I found myself in this circumstance?". This helps the actors of all ages, with or without previous theatre experience, to realize "on their own skin" the consequences of finding oneself facing a particular situation. By doing this, the actor steps easily from reality to fictional stage convention and gains the ability to transform the convention into an "objective reality" (according to I. Cojar, *The Poetics of the Actor's Art*, 1998, 78).

² D. Carey, R. Clark Carey, *The Vocal Arts Workbook + video: A Practical Course for Vocal Clarity and Expression*, 1st edition (Methuen Drama, 2008).

³ Ioana Visalon is an actress and Associate Professor PhD at the Faculty of Arts within "Dunărea de Jos" University in Galați where she teaches Stage Speech. She is also a VASTA member – Voice and Speech Trainers Association (<https://www.vasta.org/professional-index/profile/ioana-o-visalon>). She is the author of *The Actor Beyond Word* (2015), book published at the Transilvania University Publishing House in Brașov, a revised version of her PhD thesis, defended at the University of Arts in Bucharest.

necessary that the newly learned skills become automatic (through their daily use, in private life), and can be accessed in the same spontaneous way as in real life. This kind of speech can be achieved – according to professors David Carey and Rebecca Clark Carey from the *Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts*, quoted by the author – following a learning cycle that has four essential stages, that determine the structure of stage speech training.

A very valuable novelty element is the training structure that ensures the progressive passage through the four stages of learning – from *unconscious incompetence* to *unconscious competence*. Containing 10 specific objectives for the fulfillment of which it uses 4 types of programs, the training offers not only pragmatic and scientifically sound pedagogical tools, but also space for exploration and creative freedom of students. The four training programs, *class study*, *individual study*, *warm-up routine* and *micro-habits* ensure a gradual development of the targeted skills and are excellently oriented towards their use in the daily life of the student. Thus, the first two programs (class study and individual study) ensure the transition from unconscious incompetence to conscious incompetence and then to conscious competence, while the following two have the role of making the transition from conscious competence (in which attention is focused on conscious learning of new skills) to unconscious competence, where “the body knows by itself” because the new skills have become reflexes. Also noteworthy is the ingenuity of the *micro habits program* (adaptation of the “tiny habits” method of changing daily habits created by applied psychology professor B.J. Fogg) which allows the gradual insertion of new skills into current speech in a very flexible manner. This program directly involves the student in creating individualized exercises adapted to his/her needs and life schedule.

The manual is structured into 14 chapters. The general theoretical framework and the training methodology are presented in the first four chapters, and a separate chapter is dedicated to each of the ten specific objectives, which includes a short theoretical introduction followed by the description of the exercises (chapters V-XIV).

The first chapter includes the purpose and general objectives of the training resulting from the comparison between the conditions of communication in everyday life compared to the stage situation. In the second chapter, the

integration of stage speech into the organic approach of the actor's art is argued by the appeal to the stages of the learning cycle and to the use of new reflexive habits/dispositions in current speech.

The third chapter provides elementary notions of acoustics, the physical principles of the phonatory apparatus as well as the principles of the Alexander technique. These notions form the basis for understanding effective voice production. Next, the author analyzes the stages, main objectives, principles, and structure of stage speech training.

The fourth chapter presents in a succinct and accessible manner notions of voice anatomy and physiology as well as the sequence of physiological processes involved in voice production. The explanations are accompanied by suggestive, clear images adapted to the needs of student-actors. This chapter provides an excellent scientific basis for understanding the organic processes that support the functioning of the voice and speech.

Chapters V-XIV are each dedicated to a specific training objective, contain concise and excellently documented theoretical explanations of the methods and principles specific to that objective. All the exercises are very well described and exemplified with representative illustrations. These chapters work on the principle of communicating vessels, often the same type of exercise solving more objectives than its main purpose.

The targeted objectives meet the "on-the-ground" needs of current pedagogical practice and are achieved through effective and innovative pedagogical tools. Some "classic" objectives, found in most Voice & Speech textbooks, such as posture, efficient breathing, clear articulation, are pursued using established methods such as the Alexander technique, the McCallion and Linklater method, carefully adapted to the needs of Romanian students.

Innovative – at least for the Romanian space – is also the way in which the author uses a pedagogical tool proposed by Michael McCallion, *the vocal chain*, both for the development of "engaged speech" (the term belongs to the author and refers to a speech in which posture, breathing, articulation contribute for optimal voice amplification), as well as to combat precipitation and the tendency to "sing" the text.

The chapters dedicated to objectives that have not been addressed at all or only at the surface in the relevant specialized Romanian literature are also exceptionally useful. Among these, two particularly caught my attention – chapters IX and XII –, training programs for certain difficulties reported by

acting teachers. Chapter IX, dedicated to the correlation of speech speed with the length and complexity of ideas, is based on the Levelt model of incremental information processing in speech production. This model provides a better understanding on how the brain processes information during speech and therefore a pertinent insight into the correlation of speaking speed with that of rethinking memorized text and expressing ideas. In light of this new perspective, Ioana Visalon uses not only *the vocal chain*, to which I referred above, but also a series of exercises adapted from Barbara Houseman to physicalize energy and the fluency of ideas. Chapter XII integrates cutting-edge information from phoniatrics and behavioral neurobiology to explain the physiological reality of using the voice at high volume and with strong emotions, providing an excellent scientific foundation for training designed to solve one of the biggest problems encountered in acting practice. Thus, the training, using solid knowledge of phoniatrics, aims to develop the ability to produce strong sounds through the correct use of breathing and supraglottic resonators, avoiding the danger of laryngeal hyperfunction, i.e. forcing the vocal folds (Heman-Acka, Sataloff and Hawkshaw, 2013, as cited in Visalon, 182).

The need for specific training is convincingly argued.

“We are born with the ability to make loud sounds, we use this ability in the first years of life, while we are very vulnerable, and it is vital to signal when we are hungry or cold. As we grow up, we are taught NOT to express our feelings through loud sounds. We are discouraged daily from early childhood to shout or speak loudly. Consequently, as we grow older, the phonatory apparatus loses its training to produce loud sounds. That’s why almost every time we scream it stings our throat. The ability to make loud sounds (which we all have in early childhood) is lost in adults through lack of exercise. It is therefore logical that, in order to vocally express strong emotions, a retraining of the phonatory apparatus is needed.” (Visalon, 181)

The author structures the specific training starting from the physiological conditions necessary for the efficient production of loud sounds, which she describes clearly and convincingly. To meet these conditions, she accurately states the objectives and principles of training for the use of voice at high volume. The training program contains variants of some of the exercises by

Barbara Houseman and Carey & Clark Carey, excellently adapted to the needs of Romanian students and exemplified on extremely well selected texts. The exercises appeal in a playful way to the imagination of the students to access and rediscover the effective predispositions of breathing and emission used in early childhood that “civilized” life disabled.

The chapter dedicated to the correction of speech faults is also excellent, which provides the principles of this type of training as well as the complete programs for correcting the most common faults, namely sigmatism and rhotacism. A separate chapter is also dedicated to the acquisition of the literary version of the pronunciation in the case of students with regional speech. Thoroughly explained, the training is accompanied by texts specially created for this objective.

In conclusion, this manual offers an integrative and up-to-date system of Voice & Speech practice, identifying for each type of exercise the purpose and principles implemented, work stages, and pedagogical approach. The methodology and exercises described are pragmatic, directly oriented towards solving the problems reported by Acting teachers and have been constantly subject to feedback from the interested academic environment, both directly and through pilot materials (see articles by the author in the *Concept* academic journal⁴) representing the result of a didactic practice of over 25 years. The training contains both own, original pedagogical approaches and adaptations of established methods in the international space – created by McCallion, Carey & Clark Carey, Linklater, Rodenburg, Gutenkunst & Gillett. The textbook is therefore an original and important contribution to the development of the Voice & Speech discipline and a pedagogical tool of great value for the training of young actors.

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⁴ I. Visalon, “Integrating Voice & Speech into the Organic Acting Process. An Interdisciplinary Perspective”, *Concept* nr. 22, 1 (2021), 260-275; “Principiile corectării defectelor de pronunție în Vorbirea scenică. Studiu de caz: sigmatismul”, *Concept*, nr. 20, 1 (2020), 170-181.

Films Inspired by Actuality from the Communist Period as Historical Documents

Book Review: Ion Indolean, *Opinie, prudență și cenzură: Filmul de actualitate în România comunistă (1965-1989)* [*Opinion, Prudence and Censorship: Actuality Cinema in Communist Romania (1965-1989)*], Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2023



This solid, comprehensive book deals with a topic of great interest for film studies in Romania from an original perspective. It is about the “actuality cinema” during the Ceausescu regime, a theme that is quite frequently addressed



in Romanian academic and non-academic research, but rarely treated convincingly and from truly innovative perspectives.

In terms of content, Ion Indolean's book succeeds in providing a wealth of unpublished factual information, well systematized in three parts of three chapters each, framed by the *Introduction* and *Conclusions*, and put into a convincing network of meanings. *Part I. Film Production during the Ceausescu Regime* focuses on the issue of creation, *Part II. Films Produced during the Ceausescu Regime* focuses on cinematographic works of art in their specific structures, while *Part III. Promotion and censorship of films during the Ceausescu regime* focuses on the issue of public reception of films after the obligatory stage of censorship commissions. As we can see, Ion Indolean borrows a classical structure of the discourse on film and art (creation-work-reception), but nuances it, adapting it to the specificities of cinema, especially to the context so characteristic of Romanian cinema under communism.

First of all, the author carefully defines the central concept of his work, namely that of "actuality cinema", starting primarily from official Party documents. Ion Indolean shows that, as Romanian communist officials wished, this type of film – as opposed to the historical, "national epic cinema" – was intended to illustrate the glorious transformations of the "multilaterally developed" socialist society in all its compartments. In this respect, Romanian fictional films anchored in the strict contemporaneity of the Ceausescu years served the regime's propaganda about the creation of the "new man", the need for industrialisation or the cooperativisation of agriculture. Of course, such considerations do not essentially differentiate Ion Indolean's study from others by researchers such as C. T. Popescu, Ioan-Pavel Azap, Călin Căliman, Tudor Caranfil, Marilena Ilieșiu, Bogdan-Alexandru Jitea, Lucian Maier, Bujor T. Rîpeanu, Valerian Sava and many more.

The essential difference brought by Ion Indolean's work is represented by the interpretation of films inspired by actuality from the communist period as historical documents of the first order. This poses a number of specific problems, which the author solves effectively, as I will try to show briefly below. Communist films inspired by actuality are not pure propaganda, despite what most of the scholars listed in the previous paragraph have believed or seemed to believe. Ion Indolean points out that often, despite the

vigilance of the censors, the camera inadvertently recorded aspects of communist reality that the authorities did not want the public to see as such. On the other hand, some filmmakers built a creative-director project out of sneaking in “snatches” [șopârle, lizards] to show the dark side of the communist regime. *Sequences* by Al. Tatos, for example, manages to talk effectively about food shortages, about the corrupt system based on “nepotisms, acquaintances, relations” (*pile, cunoștințe, relații* = PCR/ Romanian Communist Party), about the staging of the big public events of August 23 full of dirty propaganda, etc. The communist films inspired by actuality, Ion Indolean points out, document the societal transformations Romania went through – especially the destruction of the old classes and social structures – much better than any other kind of objective record could do.

The author’s outstanding interpretative skills should be noted here. Ion Indolean almost never proposes a linear analysis of the subject matter, but rather a cross reading that always puts historical phenomena in the most appropriate analytical light. Several types of sources are brought into dialogue: first of all, the films themselves (over 100), which Ion Indolean knows in detail. The analysis of the content and form of the films is linked to the way in which they are reflected in public documents of the period (Communist Party directives, film reviews published in magazines), but also in private documents, with more or less mediated perspectives on the facts (these are the so-called “egodocuments”, especially memoirs and filmmakers’ diaries).

Ion Indolean’s film analyses are sometimes real case studies, extensive, precise, well-founded, designed to illustrate theoretical considerations. I would cite, for example, the excellent and rich historical analyses of *Power and Truth* by Manole Marcus and Titus Popovici (pp. 285-307), a film well promoted by the Party’s propaganda machine; *Reconstruction* by Lucian Pintilie (pp. 313-316), a film that was “obstructed” because it showed the absurdity of the communist system; *The Saturday Night Ball* by Geo Saizescu, a film that had a “normal” trajectory, to quote Indolean’s own terms, and ended up being seen by hundreds of thousands of viewers (pp. 329-338).

The Romanian material in the book is extremely well analysed and presented, but sometimes it lacks a comparative dimension. Ion Indolean’s approach would only have benefited from more extensive comparisons with

cinematic or social phenomena in former communist countries, led by the awful Soviet Union (they are sketched out, but not taken to their ultimate consequences). However, these comparisons could be undertaken by Ion Indolean in future, autonomous publications, which will have their point of departure in this book, born of high-level doctoral research.

The quality of Ion Indolean's style and writing are a guarantee of an enjoyable and fluent reading of an otherwise extensive work full of many accurate factual information. The author's notations are always precise, clear, the sentences are well formulated and well architected, and there are no unnecessary digressions in the book.

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