

Theatre Criticism as Living Archives

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Abstract: *The Romanian theatre milieu is traditionally disrespectful, or, at least, not respectful enough, towards its own history. What better examples for such a brutal statement but the fact that the last edition of an official (edited by the Romanian Academy) History of Romanian Theatre dates back to 1973, and the Contemporary Romanian Theatre collective research, dedicated to the interval 1944-1974, published in 1975, was never followed by at least one similar project? We have never had a National Museum of Theatre, and the invaluable treasures of the former museums of the Bucharest National Theatre or Iasi National Theatre are hardly exhibited (Iasi) or stored in improper conditions and securely hidden from the public access (Bucharest). Historical researches are the subject of consensual disregard and pauperization – both by the so called cultural authorities and national research programs and funds. In this sad and depressing landscape, this paper aims at proving that theatre criticism – reviews, essays, surveys, interviews - can offer a rich and relevant archival dimension and vivid documentary material for re-imagining and revisiting famous theatre performances – in terms of directorial visions, spectacular visual and sound spaces and legendary acting.*

Keywords: *theatre history; theatre criticism; theatre directing; rhetoric; living archives.*

One could ask what would be the purpose of such an archival-reconstructive process in the field and with the tools of theatre criticism? This is a strategic, rather than a truly legitimate question: first and foremost, the efforts of all theatre historians have made such endeavors, based on written or oral testimonies, whether of critical value or not, in order to document how theatre performances were made and received in various times and spaces. However, once again, this is worth placing in the current context: both inside and outside the Romanian space, critical reflection contributions are fewer and less impactful, given the huge tsunami resulting from instant electronic communication and

¹ Translated from Romanian by Camelia Oană



social media platforms. The interest for historical recovery and conservation, especially in the field of theatre, oscillates between sporadic and non-existent, at least in Romania. Production practices change, audiences diversify up to attrition - this attrition is in fact a form of continuous contraction; theatre marketing systems have become increasingly standardized, or ghettoized. The professional exercise of theatre criticism has been pushed by the editorial policies of the new media into a hazy, ambiguous niche in which monetizing promotion - at any price (and even no price at all) - almost seems like the rule. Left alone on the “free market” of instant information, oftentimes pushed to exercise their profession in a semi-voluntary manner or even unpaid, “in their free time” stolen from other jobs that allow them to earn a living, theatre critics are vulnerable both to the sheer indifference of potential audiences, and to grumpy attacks by the artists, who forget or pretend to forget that the basic purpose of criticism is to act as a prospective-evaluative filter between their work and spectators’ reaction, between the real world and the world of art.

In other words, criticism archives and reconstruction are ever more necessary, considering that nowadays the theatre environment’s consciousness on its own condition must be reawakened, even restarted. It’s not theatre criticism that needs saving, but the rational-empathic self-awareness of the artistic environment, which cannot truly survive unless for the - daily, professional - exercise of research and prospection, that retrieves and projects robust and competent criticism. Metaphorically speaking, the criticism related to an artistic domain is an essential part of the artistic corpus itself, being responsible for the perception, the evaluation and the memory of artistic acts, in their present, past and – most especially – future.

Preferential genres of criticism archives. And a methodology.

In order to redo the three-dimensional structure of a performance, it is not enough to find its descriptive traces in chronicles, but one must also corroborate these with other kinds of “evidence” of its existence: photos and/or television or cinema news, interviews or, sometimes, memoir books. The preferential genres of publications that may serve the purpose of criticism archives give priority to reviews, of course, but alongside these, one can use numerous other types of materials published during the creation and the distribution of the performance, bringing context to both the atmosphere (political, social and aesthetic) of the time, as well as to the process of coagulating its vision and structure. Or, of course, the show’s impact on the spectators and the artistic world.

Unfortunately, our theatre tradition hasn’t deeply implemented the genre of rehearsal diary, which is almost completely absent from the period we are looking at, i.e. 1965-1977. And this, despite the fact that both directors and actors, as well as managers of performing arts institutions, had and were still appealing to theatre critics to attend rehearsals. Surely, the task for these testimonies rather falls to television and recorded news journal editors (which gradually disappeared after 1970). Nevertheless, both the sporadic frequency and the critical dimensions of these video materials made them ra-



ther superficial, as their primary purpose was to promote a production under development, building its status as a possible cultural event. It's even sadder that the practice of rehearsal diary-keeping by journalists, assistant-directors or literary managers, so well implemented in other spaces (such as in the USSR, Germany, Poland, etc.), only reached Romania after a long time and, for many reasons, its results, should we presume there were any, were not published: therefore, the 2012 publication of the diary of Monica Săvulescu Voudouri (Săvulescu 2012) which reflexively follows the creation process of *King Lear* staged by Radu Penciulescu in 1970 - probably the theatre performance that had the highest number of reviews in that decade - is of an (almost) unique value. That is why reading it alongside the most relevant reviews serves as an irrefutable argument that the rehearsal diary could have offered a chance for the imaginary, precise and living restoration of essential works, considered as turning points in the history of Romanian theatre.

For reasons related strictly to length, however, this paper aims to focus on the most widely used journalistic genre, the performance review which, in the interval under study, and especially in specialized journals or cultural magazines, can have the impressive consistency of analytical essays. For this reason, our approach shall have a preponderantly rhetorical methodological perspective, similar to rhetoric and anthropology studies conducted in Europe and the United States in the last 30 years.²

Should we follow the main functions of theatre review (the informative-descriptive function, the contextualization function, the hermeneutic function, the axiological function), in any interpretative-analytical text we will be able to detect and highlight several *discursive dimensions* which, in direct relation with the author's interest, specialization and, – why not?, talents are especially tightly interwoven, making up a complex, dense map of variable dimensions. To sum up, one can identify the following dimensions³:

1. **The contextual empathic dimension**
2. **The contextual comparative (cultural) dimension**
3. **The hermeneutical dimension**
4. **The descriptive-spatial dimension**
5. **The descriptive-interpretative dimension**
6. **The axiological dimension**

The **contextual-empathic dimension** covers the reviewer's immediate reaction in their own receptive process, also including, in a collateral or emphasized manner, the description of the effect of the performance on the audience, to the extent in which the author perceives and allows himself to be influenced by this. For instance, in an article

² In this sense, see Oesterreich, Peter L. 2009. „Homo rhetoricus”. In *Culture and rhetoric*. Edited by Ivo Strecker and Stephen Tyler, 49–58. Oxford and New York: Berghahn, or Strecker, Ivo. 2010. *Ethnographic chiasmus: Essays on culture, conflict and rhetoric*. East Lansing: Michigan State Univ. Press.

³ The following examples will mark by specific collours each particularity dimension.



about Valeriu Moisesescu's performance *Five Skits* by I. L. Caragiale and *The Bald Soprano*, published in *Contemporanul Magazine* on 16 April 1965, at some point Ileana Popovici draws our attention on the fact that:

«*De închiriat*» [To Rent] automatically doubles every word and every movement, with no mercy for the spectators, deliberately inoculating them with impatience. This conveys the tangible feeling of a decomposing body, as if the brains of the idiots who never get along had boiled in... High Heat [«*Căldură mare*»].

Popovici 1965

The contextual-comparative dimension includes both opinions on the relationship between the specific history and the intrinsic intentions of the play, and the particular way of how the show is built, as well as, especially, how the latter fits into the aesthetic (and/or ideological) landscape of the moment, or in the works of a certain director as a whole. For example, analyzing Penciulescu's *King Lear* of 1970, Mira Iosif refers us to the artistic "vicinities" of the director's proposal:

The signs somehow allude to the props of the former Living Theatre, Grotowski's Laboratory, or the experiences of small American "group" companies, and we emphasize that these are companies that are independent of the pressures of commercial theatre. I find it important that the various and disparate elements in this catalogue of contemporary theatre are incorporated into the organic and mostly motivating unfolding of this performance...

Iosif 1970, 51

To a great extent, this is where the hermeneutical dimension of the critical discourse derives from, arguing how the critic tried and succeeded (or not) to perceive and to synthesize the show's general intentions, how its system of meanings coagulates. Again, on this level too, the dialectic tension between the pre-existing text and the particular performance formula intersect (the recurrent battles regarding the primacy of the text in relation to the liberty of the director's interpretation were still topical in the years we are documenting). In a long review dedicated to Lucian Pintilie's staging of *D'ale carnavalului* [*The Carnival Days*], Andrei Strihan mentioned:

Unlike other stagings in which the show insisted on the plot, on the quiproquos, or especially on language, which holds such a characteristic function in Caragiale's plays, the director fully relied on a much more generous idea, which is evidently more difficult to accomplish. He aimed at painting a dramatic picture of the **psychology of an environment isolated** into its own existence, but which still acts on the destiny of the play's characters with a magnetic force. The characters don't have a personal psychology, or at least not at the level of elementary requirements of existence. They are differentiated through outer, human features; nevertheless, their psychology is the psychology of their environment; they are but particles through which the environment



becomes concrete, sensorial, while the reconciliation at the end gathers all these particles together, once again showing the picture of the unit [*authors underline*].

Strihan 1966

The **descriptive dimension** itself, so relevant in the attempt to imaginatively reconstruct the show, can be broken down into at least two levels: one - which is the most generous in Romanian criticism of the seventh decade - is dedicated to the scenography, including the set, the costumes and the atmosphere these create (plus, if the case may be, the soundtrack, illustrative music or score composed especially for that purpose). Statistically speaking, the theatre reviews of the interval 1965-1977 are based on space-description for the hermeneutical argumentation, and their evaluative decisions are also centered on this determining dimension. For instance:

The performance staged by Lucian Giurchescu takes place on a stage that has no taste for a fixed set; a few props and some curtains «give birth to» a living, diverse, highly suggestive scenography, with no heavily and ostentatiously stylizing emphasis. Due to his scenography act, Dan Nemțeanu plays an active and free part in the comedy's action - through the same props, allowing for the space to transform into various spaces: a military training field turns into an Asian pagoda interior, which in turn becomes a canteen/bar/barrack of the colonial occupation forces, then a tribunal, a false execution and burial place, then all these turn into a “battlefield” where the finale unfolds in a burlesque, though perhaps not terrifying manner, as it should, but touched by an ironic underground current, capable to add a little bit of lead on the broad and extremely melodious arias accompanying the march of the “conquering” Tommies... In general, Paul Urmuzescu's compositions soak up the world of this comedy and its songs with a dangerous, I would say, hit-like musicality, thus sinning through attributes that manage to cover, if not turn the poet-playwright's lyrics into mere “texts”.

Tornea 1969

The second level is the **descriptive-interpretative dimension**, dedicated to how actors build their roles, how the performers (including dancers or mimes), individually or as a team, understand, create and carry out their tasks in the structure and dynamics of the show. It is worth mentioning that, with few exceptions, in the time interval under study, which was full of exceptional acting performances, this is the poorest level, both in terms of quantity, and of expression, in the economy of theatre reviews. For this reason, we will first show an example illustrating the rule, rather than the exception.

This is perhaps the most eloquent proof of the last years that theatre first and foremost lives through the ACTOR, that the unseen work that the director invested into the text, as well the visible supporting work of the scenographer only come alive through the actor's creation. Gheorghe Dinică, whose qualities as mime and interpreter were known to us, manages to be exactly as the French philosopher described Rameau: a mix of pride and pettiness, of common sense and wandering; it's clear that his mind



doesn't grasp the notions of honesty and dishonesty, as he takes no pride in revealing his qualities and no shame in showing his defects.

Pascadi 1968, 6

Even based on this complex and rather long fragment dedicated to interpretation we can precisely determine that the author (aesthetician and professor at the Institute of Theatre and Film - IATC) does not actually describe "what the actor does", but resorts to a mixture between his direct reactions to Dinică's creative proposal and his own conclusions on the literary character, as coagulated in his memory, following his reading of Diderot's text. However, most of the time, the descriptive reference to the actor's interpretation is meant to describe, both back then and today, what we could call "*the character effect*" when receiving a performance. In rare cases, the described effect can involuntarily exceed the reviewer's initial intentions, as it happens in this almost psychoanalysis-like excerpt from a review of *The Disappearance of Galy Gay*:

The presence of Stela Popescu, captivating not only through her brilliant zest, but also an endless flow of scenic virtues, as well as her perhaps too much emphasized and exploited dowry of personal traits, covered this edgy, brutal comedy with a winding coat of femininity. Her Begbick was a rather "cheerful widow" (in the harsh manly atmosphere in which she lives) [...], a sutler that we can never see turning into Anna Fielding, but to whom one nevertheless listens in startled surprise when she seems to change into a graver character singing about "things flowing" and life, or holding the big monologue about the possibility to build or break down a human being.

Tornea 1969, 144

Finally, the last **dimension** is the **axiological** one, an evaluative level towards which all pieces of criticism tend, in a more or less skilled manner, whether by dedicating an entire fragment to this goal or by scattering it throughout the text in a balanced manner, in its descriptive, argumentative and hermeneutic paragraphs. For example:

Nobody can miss the valuable and the personal - from the standpoint of performing arts - in the picture of this dull, monochrome extravaganza, this synthesis of a society where everything is spurious for a cardboard demonstration, as Arghezi once said. I especially appreciate that the director's interest in comical applies to phenomena, and the colorful concrete is never there for the fun of it, but rather for meaning.

Elvin, 1965, 53

The architecture of a review and the archival reconstitution of the performance

As mentioned above, these six dimensions are, most often, permanently present in the critical discourse, as they interconnect and interweave to infinitely variable extents, depending on the particular style of each critic, and even on their momentary disposition or the general attitude towards a certain show, author or aesthetic. Even when, for a



certain reason, the reviewer avoids making a clear statement about the value of the performance, the axiological dimension is still inherent to how she/he describes or interprets the production of meaning and emotions. When, very often, the reviewer superficially lists the actors, possibly adding an epithet to their names, it's highly probable that her judgment reveals the platitude of acting, the lack of creativity or adherence to the director's artistic concept.

However, an average diagram of the relationship between rhetorical dimensions is shown below.

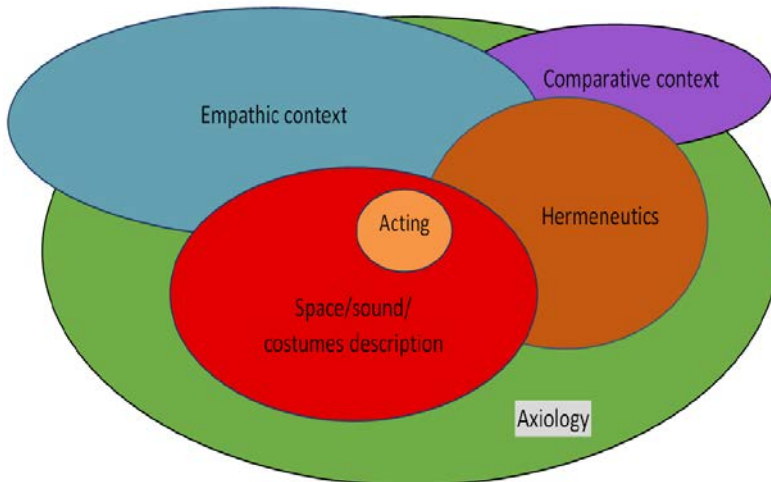


Fig. 1

From this perspective, we are interested in the capacity of the overall review to reconstitute, in front of the reader's eyes, over time, a coherent and living picture of the representation. Most of the times, it is not enough to resort to one review, but one should cross read several of these, so that the descriptive dimension(s) can work together fruitfully, illustrating both the compositional elements, and its dynamic feel/perception. Yet, let us first see how the above-mentioned dimensions harmoniously combine in the same piece of a review. To this end, we have chosen two reviews of two famous performances based on texts by I. L. Caragiale.

The "veristic" aspect is quickly overcome in the performance. In fact, the conventional-artistic image of Caragiale's slum is built on the foundation of a realistic investigation. The brutal detail – frequently used - serves not to an archaeological reconstitution of the 1880 suburbs, but to the evocation, through powerful means, of a lamentable moral atmosphere, raised by Caragiale to an essential representation of an ill reality. The sordid, so insistently highlighted in the excellent sets, as well as in costumes, emphasizes the general derisory of the environment and the trivial character of a counterfeit small-scale and cheap existence. The set especially (signed by



Liviu Ciulei and Giulio Țincu) considerably exceeds its secondary function and plays a role in this scenic representation, as a fine, sharp commentator of the action. Frankly speaking, through its brilliantly highlighted lines and chromatics, the scenography embodies the essence of the director's vision. The dreary flooring in the ballroom, the attic-like little window in Girimea's room, and the whole touch of makeup and dirt of the thus created ensemble, permanently spreads a sense of the atmosphere, with uneasy irony. The excesses of "ugly" painting are also present in the show, sometimes opposing the truth of the plot. [...] A highly important initiative reminding of how Ion Sava had resuscitated Alexandri's canzonets lends high-quality development to Caragiale's text. Lines being uttered in subtle, often surprising sync with the actors' movement adds to the meaning of words, projecting them onto the background of the general atmosphere. As such, the discussion between Pampon and Iordache in the first act, unfolding while Girimea's apprentice washes his feet and gets dressed, instils a hilarious tremble to words, thus transposing the audience, into the specific universe of this "barbershop pseudo farce.

Mândra 1967, 77-78

As we can see, in his capacity of essayist and theatre reviewer, professor Mândra does not show a detail-oriented descriptive capacity. His discourse is evidently conceptual, his short references to the set and costumes fall between hermeneutic decisions, while his evaluative references are also short and rather diagnostic: the phenomenological realism is *antiveristic*, sets are *excellent*, though the *excess of ugly painting* is present too, the universe of the performance is a *pseudo farce*. From our standpoint, however, the interesting thing here is the pertinent and almost photographic observation relative to the actor's interpretation, to the relationship between words, uttering, stage situation/relation, movement.

In the case of a review of the famous *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*) staged by Liviu Ciulei, the commentary of critic Ileana Popovici reveals a visual perception sharpness that is considerably more precious for reconstruction:

This ingenuity is clairvoyant, reaching deep down, like an X-ray. It is expressed on several levels: in the cast, which goes back the initial data and types in such a way that many, used to the stylized image, find it truly shocking; then in scenography (secondary scenographer: Dan Jitianu, costumes: Doris Jurgea), which is sharply ironic in condensing the contrast between the bad taste and the snobbish airs of the town's notabilities (Tipătescu's living room, with stained glass windows and plates on the walls, a stuffed stag head, sofas covered with plush covers, and the tiny, high refined coffee sets; the communal meeting room, with woodwork painted in a horrible "institutional" color), but seems to cover all this with a fine veil of understanding, which prevents it from degenerating into a caricature; finally, in a series of mise-en-scene details (for instance, the prefect listens to the policeman's story while shaving, protectively offers him a cup of coffee, whereas casually asking him, like the henchman that he is, to hold the mirror on his belly). After the main lines of the plot are exposed - the mess with the letter, the potential consequences on the elections, the power relations between the sides -, everything that follows is welded, interests can no longer be separated from



feelings, as love, the fear of scandal and ambition are all pulled into the same restless life lived by the characters. [...] The letter also represents theatre realism, but in an over distilled manner, far away from verism; the artistic expressivity is dilated, charged with a supplement of tension ad force. Since the comic language fertilizes the intention, theatricality is intensified.

Popovici 1972, 34-35

The chosen excerpt contains no reference to the actors' interpretation (to which the critic will dedicate long fragments further on), but we notice the very fine combination between the hermeneutical and the axiological dimensions of the discourse, interwoven in such a way that they connect in some very strong points, keywords almost, that fall in a diagnostic, energetic manner: the ingenuity of the perspective is *clairvoyant*, *X-raying* phenomena, the whole atmosphere, sketched by small visual and situational details, does not degenerate into a *caricature* due to a *fine veil of understanding*. The realism formula is over *distilled*, the effect is *intensified theatricality* - in fact, an assumed characteristic of Ciulei's artistry. The critic's argumentative technique, embedding precise photograms in the body of the hermeneutic analysis, concluding with an evaluative fragment directly derived from the two previous levels, is admirable.

Finally, to exemplify how productive it is to combine reviews and essays by multiple authors, we have chosen one of the renowned performances of the time, *Nepotul lui Rameau (Rameau's Nephew)* by Denis Diderot, staged by David Esrig in 1968 – a beautiful production who uniquely combined simplicity and sophistication. It was a big challenge for the critics, especially from the viewpoint of the two (most precious) discursive dimensions for the historian archivist: the spatial dimension (the set was made from multiple large and mobile mirrors and several tall tailor's dummies) and the actors' interpretation dimensions (there were only two actors, with really complex, multi-layered tasks). One of the chosen critics seems to obstinately avoid describing the show, over enhancing the axiological and the hermeneutical levels with uncensored enthusiasm (which only testifies to the enthusiasm and the admiration that this production by Bulandra Theatre evokes in the spectator).

Director David Esrig is on his trajectory. I try to avoid praise, adjectives or formulas that may block off real appreciation. The performance is based not only on a director's note-book, but on a whole investigation on Diderot, as well as on a complex vision on philosophical theatre. From his point of view, "Rameau's Nephew" was an *artistic X-ray* of consciousness, made through theatre art. But on stage, the text itself - as masterly as it were - needs an *atmosphere*, a universe and image to express it. Esrig is not just a director - with everything that one generally understands as part of this occupation - but rather a performance author; this is the extent to which his accomplishments stand out from the field of every-day job, reaching the field of innovative thinking. [...] This is a process that, according to theatre artist Giorgio Strehler, turns a theatre director into an enlightened critic. [...] Thus, the problem with this show was to avoid that these fictional consciousnesses, turned into I and Him, appear on stage only as Diderot and Rameau-the nephew. Beyond words, one was supposed to see the man,



the humans, the strong personalities or the spineless ordinary beings; i.e. to paint a gallery of types through a character and through an actor. (Which actually happens, as the audience always sees the same Dinică and still so many different characters, the same play and still different ideas, different thoughts.)

Alexandrescu 1968

What we “see” in this text is that we can’t see anything, other than the fact that Gheorghe Dinică interprets a character that, with great versatility, plays an unspecified number of other characters-ideas. However, David Esrig is not just placed on his own artistic trajectory, but also enthusiastically praised for his capacity, recognized as auctorial, to make in-depth investigations and to innovatively stage one of the most difficult and mainly non-theatrical texts. And through a hidden, diagonal comparison, we also find out that the critic has not just seen performances, but also read interviews with Georgio Strehler.

Without the actual dimensions of an analytical essay, professor Ion Pascadi’s review below is much better balanced from the standpoint of its rhetorical levels, as the praises relative to the staging are based on descriptive passages which, though not entirely clarifying on how space was treated, still help us get a glimpse of its underlying visual formula.

Rameau’s Nephew said that one must deeply penetrate art in order to understand even the most basic concepts, and that only by knowing the middle and the end can one clear the haze of the beginning. David Esrig’s staging achieved this, as he understood it wasn’t about gathering shiny reflection, but about the inner struggle of the same spirit and he managed to put this into a wonderful scenic image. In this show, one can truly “see ideas”, as the two actors don’t limit themselves to uttering, but embody them, while the original scenography signed by Ion Popescu Udriște is not reduced to illustrating them, but becomes a struggle through which one can read the most hidden thoughts, this way turned into a concrete picture. The artistic substance of the director and scenographer’s conception includes the ingenious solution of mirrors reflecting paintings of the time or the characters’ faces multiplied tenfold, which is why I think it is unjust to simply call Dorin Manolescu a “stage technician”. [...] This is perhaps the most eloquent proof of the last years that theatre first and foremost lives through the ACTOR, that the unseen work invested into the text by the director, as well the visible supporting work of the scenographer, only come alive through the actor’s creation. Gheorghe Dinică, whose qualities as mime and interpreter were known to us, manages to be exactly as the French philosopher described Rameau: a mix of pride and pettiness, of common sense and wandering; it’s clear that his mind doesn’t grasp the notions of honesty and dishonesty, as he takes no pride in revealing his qualities and no shame in showing his defects.

Pascadi 1968

Finally, in the extensive review signed by Valentin Silvestru, a theatre critic often prone to writing long and scholarly-comparative verbose accolades, we paradoxically



discover one of the most detailed descriptions of the spectacular apparatus, perhaps exactly due to the unconditional admiration he felt for the production:

But the barely perceivable movement of the mirrors, the tremor of the lights that seemed immovable in the suggested ceiling, a slight translation of tables and arm-chairs, the appearance, in a shallow light, of the colorful mannequins employed as extras in the heroes' world, the bizarre echo of their own voices in unseen megaphones finely, but confidently project the debate into the universe that generated it; into the society that is so complex and contradictory, depraved and intelligent, ill with beauty and tenacious in its hypocrisy, celebrating talents and treacherously chaining them, the golden pile of trash of feudal aristocracy, consumed by the smoke of the fire lit by encyclopedists. The philosopher discreetly resettles in the shadows, while Rameau, an ignoble failure, yet bright judge of mores, multiplies in the moving mirrored waters, portrays himself in the most surprising ways, dissolves into each character with such verve that it touches on the paroxysm of dementia and rebecomes himself, facing his own image.

Silvestru 1968

This excerpt has one of the most interesting dynamics, embedding the hermeneutics of the vision between the description of the space and the description of the actors' interpretation, and its discursive fabric is so elaborate, so dense that the interpretation and the diagnosis seem almost merged, hard to determine in the visual/apperceptive substance. It's spectacular how the end of the first sentence transfers the picture described in the value judgment, which was born directly out of the production's primordial metaphor, that of mobile mirrors: *project... the debate into the universe that generated it.*

Archives and reconstruction in King Lear by W. Shakespeare, directed by Radu Penciulescu

As mentioned above, perhaps the (event) performance that, in the stipulated time interval, saw the highest number of reviews with a distinct polemic touch, with fervent detractors and admirers, but also considerate, balanced analysts, is Radu Penciulescu's Shakespearean staging of *King Lear*, at the Bucharest National Theatre in 1970. Luckily, today's researcher has an essential instrument for the imaginary reconstruction of the production at hand: Monica Săvulescu Voudouris' *Jurnal de repetiții (Rehearsal Diary)*, first published in 2013 in Târgu Mureș and republished in the second volume of the anthology *Radu Penciulescu și teatrul la înălțimea omului*, coordinated by Florica and Ana-Maria Ichim in 2019.

The staging, which in the meantime has become legendary, coincides with the moment when the director, at his initiative, had renounced his position as manager of Teatrul Mic after just five years, in which the theatre's position in the artistic landscape of Bucharest and Romania had spectacularly ascended towards the top of the hierarchy. However, according to his own testimony, bureaucratic-organizational re-



sponsibilities had taken up more energy than the artist had wanted (during that time, he also taught at IATC, where he took an active role in the structural-curricular renewal of the directing department) and his artistic pursuits required a much broader free reflection and experimental space.

The rehearsal diary is an especially precious document, exactly because it highlights the dynamics of the creation process, from concept to final form, not shying away from recording what was given up, what diminished compared to the premises, the difficulties, the atmosphere, how the artists evolved (no only actors, but also the successive proposals of Florica Mălureanu, the scenographer). Monica Săvulescu is not a mere silent, obedient companion, but an active member of the team, making critical viewpoints in her discussions with the director, sometimes about the chosen solutions, while other times about how certain acting solutions come together.

Yet, perhaps the most important factor relative to the wealth of information brought by the diary is that it helps us paint a moving picture both on the director's initial vision regarding the interpretation of the Shakespearean text, and on the work method, to a great extent based on cohesion exercises and joint readings (the diary mentions not just the very trendy book by Jan Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, but also Umberto Eco's *The Open Work* and Brook's *The Empty Space*), successive attempts to resolve each scene by reinterpreting the relations between characters and sparking the improvisational reserve of the team, which was big and not easy to control. As importantly, we understand that the scenography concept also emerged as work *in progress*, as the rehearsals evolved, with *corsi e ricorsi*, with elements added along the way (for instance, the construction of the metal bridge in the background was suggested only on the 13th day of rehearsals, while the sketches of the costumes only came up in the discussions on the 14th day); and other things were totally let go, which brought about fast adaptations of the acting in the complex "spontaneous" choreography of one scene or another.

Of course, the roadmap described in this journal, which was only published 43 years after the premiere of *King Lear*, is not just an involuntary reviser of the show's image, as it coagulates at the crossroads between the reviews of the time, but also as a kind of... lighting system meant to bring an added dimension to descriptions, hermeneutics and momentary evaluations made by one critic or the other. From the multitude of reviews written back then, we have chosen two extensive ones (one generally positive, the other negative), of which we will only extract the fragments which seem most useful to us in the archeologic-reconstructive process. We will apply the same method of rhetorical analysis, while making the inevitably required corrections based on the diary.

Perhaps the most extensive analytical picture is painted by Mira Iosif in her essay published in *Teatrul* Journal, a text that, while maintaining certain objections regarding both the solutions chosen and the acting, still describes the scale of the performance and its overwhelming effect on the audience.



Florica Mălureanu's sets tend to get close to the requirements of a "poor" theatre, solely based on human material and its powers. The circular platform made of wooden boards and surrounded by a ramp vaguely, but obsessively suggests the Elizabethan inner stage, the main performing space. It is here that key scenes, the great moments of the representations take place. In the second plan, a metal bridge, a horizontal line threaded with thin verticals, makes up the second performing space. This is the space of the orderly institutional world, where Goneril, Albany and Oswald move, and it's here too that the participants, members of the "group", are standing, adopting "relaxed", yet very meaningful attitudes. From this bridge too, having changed his looks, Edgar jumps on stage, when he becomes Poor Tom. Finally, the third performing space – emulating somehow, by metamorphosis, the three levels of Elizabethan theatre – is created by covering the room's lateral boxes with boards making up two narrow platforms, where Lear talks to the Fool and Edgar and Edmund fight. [...] The performance stands under the sign of the visual; hence, the challenging power of the text, the force of plasticized ideas, the violence of its relationship with the spectator. Penciulescu very fervently exploited the capacity of the theatrical sign to impress, blowing up old theatre clichés and dramatic conventions, proposing new signs for our theatre aesthetics, in the consensus of current searches of contemporary theatre. The signs somehow allude to the props of the former Living Theatre, Grotowski's Laboratory, or the experiences of small American "group" companies, and we emphasize that these are companies that are independent of the pressures of commercial theatre. I find it important that the various and disparate elements in this catalogue of contemporary theatre are incorporated into the organic and mostly motivating unfolding of this performance; that the actor and the spectator are obliged to revise certain widely accepted practices, certain convenient and comfortable work and reception principles. The violence and brutality of the relations, included in the verses, are visible on stage, and we are no longer limited to hearing them. [...] In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, that is 30 years ago, Camus referred to the "actor's physical destiny", which is mandatory in Shakespearean theatre, where "characters abandon themselves to the first impulse - everything is determined by the violent impulses of their bodies"... "knowledge becomes possible through the body", in a word, "the body is king". The actors were sent down this road, trained into a ritual of collective expression. On a general level, one can first identify the text's spatial coordinates, "the figure" accompanying each scene's theorem, which allows the creation of the show's visual graph, scheme. Then, on the detail level, one sees the gestures of each hero. Finally, the movement in the background, the atmosphere, the group, made up of both extras and protagonists, a collective character, witness and culprit of the action, catalyzer and creator of states that work as a permanent visual element, sometimes also fulfilling the function of the set (the hut, the throne) and playing an overwhelming role during the storm scene.

Let's have some examples of these signs-metaphors. When the "Court" enters and Lear's "abdication" ceremony begins, the actors put on shiny white plastic coats under the audience's eyes, a convention that suggests institutional protocol, a symbol of authority. Plain shiny white suggests the calm order of a sufficient world. When Cordelia is confronted in the disowning scene, when Lear's error is outlined, the secondary characters start intermittently, rhythmically hitting these coats; the symbols deteriorate, marking the beginning of disorder and chaos. Finally, over their normal costume (black trousers and blouse), the actors once again put on some "coats" under the au-



dience's eyes - this time, greyish rough blankets. Shiny white gives way to dirty, poor grey, the color of tranches and battlefields. Then, with grave, slow movements, the interpreters take off these coats and lay them on the wooden floor of the stage. Small grey graves appear everywhere, surrounding the few people still alive. Cordelia and Lear are caught using ropes and strings thrown from the four corners of the stage: surrounded and caught in a gin brought from the four winds...

Iosif, 1970

In the extensive fragments above, one immediately notices the author's almost photographic attention to the description of sets, skillfully including in the first excerpt cultural contextual references to Grotowski's poor theatre and to Penciulescu and Mălureanu's potentially intentional hints to Elizabethan stage. Yet, Monica Săvulescu Voudouris' diary makes almost no reference to Elizabethan theatre, which nowadays could make us believe that the similarities were not intentional, but accidental. In fact, Grotowski is only mentioned in passing, despite Penciulescu's constant efforts to coagulate liberating stylistics, very precisely anchored in both the team of the youngsters in the choir, and in his work with complex characters, which to a certain extent allude to the Polish master. Instead, the diary testifies both to Penciulescu's obsessive need to theatricalize through simplifying the "decorative" dimension to the maximum (a tendency that Penciulescu supported for years, including in a semi-polemic with famous theatre director Liviu Ciulei⁴), and to the impact of Brook's *Empty Space* (which he and his team read multiple times) over him.

Similarly, the diary does not refer to Living Theatre or other alternative American projects. However, the fact that some of the reviewers refer to the Living Theatre in their articles has legitimate contextual explanations: not only did Penciulescu mention in several interviews the impact of his participation to some performances by this company, but some critics, despite not personally seeing any of the performances that Beck and Malina toured multiple times in Europe, had at least read part of the numerous articles, reviews and interviews that were very much in fashion in Europe in the previous decade.

Predictably, for those who are familiar with the theatre criticism of the time and with the perspectives of the most important reviewers, Radu Popescu - back then the editor in chief of *Teatrul* journal, and also a collaborator of other publications, first of all *România liberă*, where he wrote a column for over a decade, is one of the reviewers that most challenges Penciulescu's directing vision. That is why it is very interesting to follow how, from his standpoint, it is still possible to coagulate an image about the effect of the show on a certain category of spectators prone to reading Shakespeare's play in a

⁴ See for example Radu Penciuleacu „Fiecare spectacol, o dezbatere” (Each Performance a Debate), *Teatrul*, nr 5/1960, p 6; see also Penciulescu's intervention in „La masa rotundă cu realizatorii spectacolului Umbra” (Round Table with the artists from The Shadow); *Teatrul* nr. 9/1963, pp 52-53, and Liviu Ciulei's reaction in the same debate, p. 63.



text-centered/prudish manner. Here too, the rhetorical analysis represents a good tool to imaginarily take apart and recompose the production.

The wild poetry of Shakespearean brutality becomes pure wilderness when dilated beyond lyrics, which can encompass ever more wilderness than gestures even, but dazzling with dilation in one's imagination. The very costume and weapon can fulfill the role of distancing and screen. The idea of close quarters, under which violence can – sometimes – look for and spread the dubious thrill of skin voluptuousness, of panting and of smell, takes us to a totally different direction, if not to directly hilarious results, like seeing a hulky soldier killed by a small woman with a single... kick! As swords are considered archaic and out of fashion, Edgar and Edmund duel with a hammer, a modern instrument, just like it happened in another Shakespearean performance, in England even, a highly progressive country in terms of technics and theatre courage. Violence, as directed by Lear, is not just mere violence, but it's also very long: brawls, including punches, kicks, bites, mounting, neck-breaking, lasting for minutes on end, while the retaliation, oftentimes forgotten, is prolonged with pants and groans, splashed with rivers of sweat from the poor fighters. The hidden source of this violence is a sexual suggestion, another impulse towards infinite gymnastic-ballets, that are totally futile and insanely boring: the most conclusive sample comes from the scene Regan-Oswald, when the letter to Goneril is stolen. The general picture of the show is masculine-adolescent, on a continuous dermatographic, if not dermatologic background, and, may God forgive me, I've only seen so many uncovered navels, chests, thighs and armpits in the harsh environment of army medical visits. And all these in an endless frenetic movement, which evidently gushes with truly beautiful plastic moments. [Emphasize added] But who knows if due to art or to nature! It's certain that all this display of physicality and violence rarely serves the point and is often made to prevent the poetic impetus and even the strength of uttering for, while you madly struggle and make a terrible physical effort, you cannot shout out lyrics.

Popescu 1970

The fragment begins with general judgements about the scenic representation of violence in general and about the functions as a symbolic filter (apparently) produced by conventionally sticking to the "rules of representation" through classical costumes and sets. This very beginning talks about the critic's attitude towards the type of theatre he not only prefers, but also presumes to be canonical-normative. By using the phrase '*the wild poetry of Shakespearean brutality*', he emphasized the idea of the primacy of literature; seen today, from the viewpoint of the rehearsal diary, this abrupt intro evaluating through the rule fully unveils not just its inflexibility, but its refusal to search for and/or find the hermeneutic essence of Penciulescu's proposal. Monica Săvulescu Voudouris' testimony tells us that the fundamental theme of his vision comes from the chaos-inducing conflict born out of the cross between the main characters' divergent definitions for their freedom, in total blindness relative to the natural limits of any freedom. The brutality and violence (which, in fact, Radu Popescu cannot deny, as long as they are present in the relationships, situations and acts of Shakespeare's world) were never a



major target for the director, but were 'used' as an unavoidable means to build this world, as trans-temporal means.

Yet, the lines in which, with pamphleteer intentions, Radu Popescu describes '*the display of physicality and violence*' are much more revealing, as they stir the reader's interest and, almost involuntarily, betray the critic's outraged sensitive points. Whether these phrases pertain to the hermeneutic register ("*the dubious thrill of skin voluptuousness, of panting and of smell*") or "*the general picture of the show is masculine-adolescent*", or describe, with the expert skillfulness of a polemic, actions or pictures ('*brawls, including punches, kicks, bites, mounting, neck-breaking*', '*pants and groans, splashed with rivers of sweat from the poor fighters*'), in fact, these reveal an outraged prudishness, an almost Victorian-like scandalization on assuming corporality as a means of theatrical expression.

'*The masculine-adolescent drawing*' that the reviewer sees should be read, from today's standpoint, based on its real scale at the time when written. They actually work, if not as a masked denunciation, at least as an urge to reproach (this is 1970, the time of a "silent" assumption of the sexual revolution within the young urban generations in Europe, implicitly in Romania, as well as in a context in which, both legislation and mentality wise, eroticism and especially homosexuality were seen as deviant, therefore unacceptable). Psychologically speaking, today the text's rhetoric reveals a type of double-bind or cognitive dissonance: Radu Popescu is unconsciously attracted, but at the same time disgusted with this attraction, thus accusingly resorts to an otherwise pertinent comparison, that is phantasmatic efficient in its apparent vulgarity, beyond its insulting intentions: '*I've only seen so many uncovered navels, chests, thighs and armpits in the harsh environment of army medical visits.*' Cross-read with the Rehearsal Diary, the author's insinuating, aspiring to be hermeneutic-evaluating descriptions become ever more ridiculous, as, in the first part of her text, Monica Săvulescu accurately notes down both Penciulescu's motives on the purposes and the meanings of the group of young people in the choir - courtiers, Lear's guard, soldiers, natural phenomena and even set, suggesting a young, *militarized* universe, yet untamed by "civilization's" regulating stereotypes, as well as the persistence and the difficulty of exercises and training meant to bring energetic and stylistic unity into this human apparatus.

Still, it's even funny how Radu Popescu counteracts the virulence of his insinuating comparison with an evaluative lunge that stutteringly suggests a step back and another one to the front in the direction of denigration: '*And all these in an endless frenetic movement, which evidently gushes with truly beautiful plastic moments. But who knows if due to art or to nature!*'

However, it is worth emphasizing that reading the reviewer's text, especially half a century later, involuntarily causes an almost apperceptive effect (in which the visual combines with the olfactive and the tactile) that is absolutely opposed to the evaluation it aimed for when it was published: it transfers to us the intensity of the haptic dimen-



sion of an extensive part of the show, as well as the unleashed, provocative energy it transferred (and aggregated in the body) to the spectator.

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What, at this moment, seems to us as the conclusion of this stage in our effort to prove the availability of theatre criticism to offer pertinent tools for a functional and useful performance archives is the change in weight, which is due to rhetorical analysis, between the dominant dimensions of the critical discourse. In any immediate contemporaneity, both for the reader, and for the author of the article, the axiological and hermeneutic functions are highly priced, which centers the reader's attention on the review's synthetic-evaluating dimensions. In the historical-reconstructive research nevertheless, this hegemony is somehow overthrown: evaluation inevitably loses weight, and hermeneutics becomes highly dependent on the comparative context - in other words, of the momentary particularities of the canon; and from these loses benefit the descriptive and, paradoxically, the contextual-empathic, personal dimensions, which help us see things in terms of space and plunge in the world of the performance that is to be reconstituted. Theatre critics, as many as there are left, should therefore keep in mind that, over time, the soft tissue of their value judgements tends to become mummified, while the solid skeleton of detailed descriptions remains an ever regenerable source.

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