

# Staging The New Heroes of Socialist Realist Drama in Romania: Mihail Davidoglu's "The Miners" at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** *Considered one of the first socialist realist plays in Romania, Mihail Davidoglu's "The Miners" premiered on stages throughout the country in 1949. Focusing on the staging at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, the paper explores the creation and reception of Davidoglu's play in a centralized cultural and ideological context, as well as the intertwined relations between the politics of industrialization and the rise of the new heroes on and off the stage.*

**Key words:** *theatre in state socialism; socialist realism; new hero.*

"The Hungarian theatre of Cluj made the turn towards socialist dramaturgy in 1949. Studying Stanislavsky and adopting his working methods, a domestic and a Soviet play became the touchstone" (Jordáky 1971, 123). This is how Lajos Jordáky, historian, politician, and the literary secretary of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj between 1948 and 1952, looked back on the opening of the 1949/1950 season a few years later.<sup>2</sup> Up to this point, the nationalization of theatres in Romania was completed – a process that started in 1945, and by 1948 eliminated every private company –, and the state became a people's republic with the Romanian Workers' Party taking over the power. The centralized ideological control of the Sovietization/Stalinization period brought about the new law of July 18, 1947, concerning the organization of state theatres, operas and philharmonics: from this moment on repertoires had to be put together within the guidelines given by the Superior Council of Dramatic Literature and Musical Creation (Anon 1947, 6199). With theatre conceptualized as a weapon for building socialism, a special attention was given both to the centrally controlled repertoires and the ideological education of the artistic staffs. As an official document of the Committee for Art<sup>3</sup> – issued in 1950 with the aim to analyse the preceding two years – stated,

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<sup>2</sup> Even though the book – a double portrait about theatre director Jenő Janovics and actress Lili Poór – was published in 1971, Jordáky wrote his manuscript in 1957–1958. The possible reason of the delay of publishing the manuscript might be the author's political persecution at the end of the 1950s (see Antal 2022, 95).

<sup>3</sup> The Ministry of Arts operated as the Ministry of Arts and Information (Ministrul de Arte și Informații) between 1948 and 1950, and then as the Committee for Art (Comitetul pentru Artă de



[...] The main task [of theatres] was [...] to effectively contribute to building socialism through agitation and propaganda within the large masses. In order for the art of theatre to fulfil this task, it was necessary to acquire a corresponding ideological basis. A new, revolutionary<sup>3</sup> repertoire was needed, put together from the perspective of the struggle of the working class. For this, the measure of planning the repertoire for the whole country has been taken. The main objective of the new, planned repertoire was to stimulate original dramatic literature, born from the turmoil of the working class in the Romanian Peoples' Republic, a dramaturgy that would be on a revolutionary position, on the position of the struggle of the working class. [...] Also, the Theatre Directorate [hand-written above "M.A.", referring to the Ministry of Arts] [...] has programmed a series of Soviet plays, through which the Romanian public becomes aware of the realities of the Soviet Union during the civil war, building socialism, and especially the current period of building communism.<sup>4</sup>

Anon 1950a, ff. 230.

The document includes statistics of plays staged in theatres in Romania (a balance between original – Romanian – and Soviet plays can be noticed). Lists of staged plays were requested from all theatres in the form of monthly reports<sup>5</sup> put together by the literary secretaries.<sup>6</sup> For minority language theatres, such as the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, original plays written in their language were also encouraged. Centralized cultural policies, centrally organized theatrical life, along with socialist realism as the solely recognized method of creation, make it possible to understand individual theatrical events in a larger cultural and political context. This paper aims to explore the multiple layers of context – ideological, critical, cultural and literary – of a single premiere, as well as the specific, informal practices of the institution it was staged in.

### Creating the Hero of Industrialization

The two plays literary secretary Lajos Jordáky refers to as milestones for the Cluj theatre's shift to socialist norms were *The Miners* by Jewish-Romanian playwright

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pe lângă Consiliul de Miniștri) between 1950 and 1953, having several subdivisions, one of them being responsible for theatre matters.

<sup>3</sup> Cut with red ink in the original.

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all the English translations of Romanian and Hungarian sources were made by me, Sz.-R.E.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, manuscripts of Jordáky from the Manuscript Archive of the Transylvanian Museum Society show us how detailed these monthly reports were: from list of plays staged to list of films and books the actors watched and read, from time spent at rehearsals to the number of minutes being late from rehearsals.

<sup>6</sup> It was the duty of the literary secretaries to put together the artistic work plans, to gather data and statistics on the theatre's activities, to organize Stanislavsky circles and to control the actors' ideological development (see Malița 2006, 33–35.)



Mihail Davidoglu and Vsevolod Ivanov's *Armoured Train*. The latter, portraying the worker-peasant alliance in the 1917 Russian Revolution, premiered on the stage of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj on 7 November 1949, during the Soviet-Romanian Week of Friendship. The play was based on Ivanov's homonymous novel from 1922. The novel appeared on one of the lists published by the Soviet Writers' Union as a model for socialist realist writing (Clark 1981, 262), after the method has been canonized in the Soviet Union, with Zhdanov's speech at the First Writers' Congress in 1934 playing a pivotal role in the process of its institutionalization. *Armoured Train*, the play, had a significant success in 1927, premiering at the Moscow Art Theatre, pressured to stage pro-Soviet plays in a context where critics were turning on Meyerhold and also accusing academic theatres of catering to the bourgeois public (Gardiner 2023, 27).

Mihail Davidoglu's *The Miners – Minerii* in its original – was published in 1949 and received the Ion Luca Caragiale Award for dramatic literature. Followed by a particularly large press coverage, it was staged in theatres throughout the country, proclaimed as one of the first socialist realist Romanian plays. The programmatic article *Forward in the Fight for a Theatre of the Era of Building Socialism in the R. P. R.*<sup>7</sup> published on 11 June 1949 in *Scântea*, the official journal of the Romanian Workers' Party, welcomed the rise of those new Romanian plays – especially Lucia Demetrius' *On the Road to Reconciliation (Cumpăna)*<sup>8</sup> and Mihail Davidoglu's *The Miners* – through which “bourgeois critical realism is transformed into socialist realism” (Anon 1949a, 1). By this time, *The Miners* was already present on the repertoire of theatres in Romania, premiering at the National Theatre of Cluj (1 May 1949), the National Theatre of Bucharest (18 May 1949), the state theatres in Craiova (20 May 1949), Arad (3 June 1949), Ploiești (30 September 1949), Reșița (6 October 1949), Iași (10 October 1949), the Hungarian language Székely Theatre in Târgu Mureș (29 November 1949) and the state theatre in Timișoara (16 February 1950). The premiere of the play at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj was on 22 October 1949, marking the opening of the new season.

In his notes made in preparation for the Cluj staging, literary secretary Lajos Jordáky considered it important to underline, among other things, that the topic of the play was “class struggle from the perspective of increasing coal production”, and that “the author worked in a mine and thus came close to and learned about the life of the miners” (Jordáky [1949d]). This aspect is vividly described in an article on *The Miners* published in the Bucharest-based newspaper *Contemporanul*:

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<sup>7</sup> In original: *Înainte pentru lupta pentru un teatru al epocii construirii socialismului în R.P.R.!*

<sup>8</sup> *Cumpăna / On the Road to Reconciliation* was not staged at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, although it appeared among the possible plans. “After reading and studying it [...] we planned the possible translation of Lucia Demetrius' play: *Cumpănă* [sic!].” (Jordáky 1949b, 2.) The following month, the literary secretary writes in his notebook that they considered staging the play, but “although it has been accepted for theatres by the Ministry – we did not recommend it for performance” (Jordáky 1949c, 2).



Mihail Davidoglu, imbued with the importance of the effort made by the working class to transform our society and its renewing role by introducing new work systems and a new morality, voluntarily approached the life of some leaders of the working class. The miners' environment offered him, along with the most significant problems of the present day, a dramatic setting susceptible to providing the playwright with powerful conflicts, but also a dramatic picturesqueness, less common in other environments.<sup>9</sup>

Alterescu 1949a, 9.

The archival documents, however, tell a different story about how “voluntarily” the author went to explore the Jiu Valley, a region with coal exploitation dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to a document of the Ministry of Arts and Information dated 6 July 1948, Davidoglu, who presented his play’s draft to the censors, received detailed suggestions for the development of the plot, as well as the task “to get in contact with reality” – to go on location.

The writer M[ihail] Davidoglu set out to write a play about the life of miners in the Jiu Valley. He asked us for a consultation regarding the choice of the theme. We agreed that the main theme in the play should be the class conflict, as it appears today, in the Romanian People's Republic, unfolding on two levels: the conflict between the old and the new forces in the souls of the heroes. Both conflicts would be constructed in such a way as to highlight the role of the party as the engine that determines the victory of the positive forces. [...] The introduction of a new, preferred work systems could constitute the core of the action, and could be intertwined with a love conflict, in which the hesitant hero would be caught between two tendencies: on the one hand, the need to give everything for victory in competitions, on the other hand, the tendency to “let go” because of personal concerns. [...] It was agreed upon that all that was discussed could only constitute a framework and comrade Davidoglu will only write his play after he comes in contact with reality, committing himself to considering the main suggestions given during the discussion.

Malița 2006, 21.

In its most important aspects, the plot of the final version can be traced back to the suggestions of the censors. *The Miners* was published in 1949, not long after the nationalization of mines and industry in Romania. Taking place in 1948,<sup>10</sup> the play, in a

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<sup>9</sup> The newspaper article also informs the readers, that Davidoglu is already working on his next drama, centred around the metallurgists of Reșița. The drama was published under the title *Cetea de foc* (*Fortress of Fire*, as Reșița was called because of its metallurgical industry) in 1950.

<sup>10</sup> As the law of nationalizing the industry and mines came out on July 11, 1948, setting the time of the play might be of significance. The published version, as well as the typescript from the fond of the Ministry of Arts sets the time of the plot in mid-winter, 1948: “Middle of winter, but it feels like spring or autumn. It'll be a while before we meet this winter of '48.” (Davidoglu 1949a, 8); “Winter, winter, but it feels like spring or autumn. It'll be a while before we meet this winter of '48.” (Davidoglu [1949b], f. 2). (We can notice the slight alteration in the opening of the first sentence, a correction made by handwriting in the typescript.) The majority of the press reviews don't mention the time the play is set in, the one from the 13 May 1949 issue of



nutshell, is about a miner, Anton Nastai, who took part in the infamous miner strike of 1929 in Lupeni – in the play this was meant to highlight the private banker owners as the class enemy who exploited workers. Determined to follow the directives of the Party, Anton develops a new, more effective method for coal mining to increase production and, as a final goal, to exceed the prescribed annual production plan. The characters' names reflect the multiethnic society of the Jiu Valley: people with Romanian and Hungarian names (Ilona, Ianco/Jankó, Mihali/Mihály, Ui baci [Új bácsi in Hungarian, referring to an older man]) appear in a natural cohabitation, united by work. In the original, Romanian version (both in the published book (Davidoglu 1949a) and in the script declared „suitable for staging” by the Ministry of Arts (Davidoglu [1949b])) one of the characters, Ui baci – mister Új, has a Hungarian line, the first line of a popular song, “O zo sep, o zo sep; ochi nec o seme chec” (correctly “az a szép, az a szép, akinek a szeme kék”, ‘Beautiful is the one with the blue eyes’, Davidoglu 1949a, 94), and jokes about Austro-Hungarian emperor ‘Franț Iosif’ – Franz Joseph (Davidoglu 1949a, 34, 95); while another character also has a short reply in Hungarian: “Io iștenem” (correctly “jó istenem”, ‘good God’, Davidoglu 1949a, 65).<sup>11</sup> In turn, the Hungarian translation of the script used for the staging in Cluj (Davidoglu [1949c]) does not insert any replies in Romanian, leaving it to the names of the characters to reflect the multiethnicity, later stressed by a review:

We saw a phase of the struggle of the working class on the stage of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj. Hungarian artists played Romanian and Hungarian miners, just as Romanian and Hungarian workers work together in the mines, completing and surpassing the norms, many of them already producing for the year 1950. The Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj surpassed its norm with their performance of *The Miners*.

–sz –s 1949, 16.

Checking the boxes of the Soviet production novel's master plot (see Clark 1981), the hero of the play, Anton Nastai, meets a variety of enemies during his quest: a reactionary warehouseman, the wife of the former mine manager who fled to the West, an agent of the Anglo-American imperialists, a Jehovah's Witness, and his wife, who, fearing for both the perils of mining and their personal happiness as a couple, opposes the experiments of Anton. After failing for the first time, in the end the hero manages to

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*Contemporanul* makes a reference to the winter of 1948, while Aurel Baranga's article from the 24 May 1949 issue of *Viața Capitalei* notes the spring of 1948. The play was translated to Hungarian by György Jánosházy. In the program booklets of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj appear both early spring of 1947 and – in an earlier version – winter of 1948. (Anon 1948a, f. 100 and f. 142v.) Jánosházy's translation was used for the stagings in Hungary in 1950 (Budapest) and 1951 (Miskolc, Debrecen), this explains why the local press reporting on these premieres mentions 1947 consistently.

<sup>11</sup> Of course, it is almost impossible to verify whether these lines were said on the Romanian stages.



perfect his new method and extract a much bigger amount of coal from the mine, thus planning to surpass the yearly plan of production.

Representing the new Soviet man was pivotal in the Stalinist literary policy of the socialist countries. Archival documents show that for instance in Hungary rural writers were discouraged from moving to the capital, partly because they were given a role in nurturing the talents of worker and peasant writers, and partly because they could observe the operation of collectivized agriculture and the lives of rural workers up close and use these observations in their literary works (Scheibner 2014, 201). In Romania, on the front page of the Sunday supplement of *Scânteia* from 9 February 1948, three articles dealt with artist and the new topics they should address. Their titles are telling: *Writers, Poets, Artists: The Masses are Waiting for You* (Șelmaru T. 1948, 3); *Our Topics are the Topics of Life* (Ignat 1948, 3); and thirdly, a survey with the leading question: *What Topics Do You Propose to Our Artists?* (Anon 1948b, 3). On the same front page, along five photographs taken at the Ceanu Mare construction site in Cluj County, capturing workers installing a pipeline, through which the city of Cluj was to be supplied with methane gas, there was a call for visual artists as well. “Look at these faces, hard at work, illuminated by enthusiasm: they are simple photographic indications. But what wonderful works can come out under the hands of artists who will learn to express more deeply the spiritual transformation of the people of Ceanul-Mare, of the people on the great construction site into which the Romanian People's Republic must be transformed” (Anon 1948c, 3).<sup>12</sup> In 1949, the Hungarian newspaper from Cluj, *Utunk*, translating an article from the Russian *Pravda*, presented the views of the Soviet Writers' Union on the role of theatre, the state of dramatic literature, and the shortcomings of the new plays: “the key to everything is that one must get to know life and the Soviet man, especially where he is most fully revealed: in the field of work.” (B. V. 1949, 13.) A year later, the newspaper republished an open letter from the Stalin Prize-winning Stakhanovists to Soviet playwrights from *Sovetskoe Iskustvo*. “Your first duty, comrade playwrights, is to show in your works the life and activities of the Soviet worker”, they wrote, listing a few topics to be explored – from the Stakhanovists who surpassed the norm at the Moscow transformer factory to the workers who renewed the method of steel casting (Stürová et al. 1950, 3).

In order to “get in touch with real life”, Davidoglu, as we saw, following the censors' instructions, travelled to Lupeni, a mining town in the Jiu Valley to observe the lives of coal miners. He even wrote a short article in *Scânteia* about his experience, listing the changes he made in plot after consulting with the local miners (Davidoglu 1949d, 2). World War II put its toll on the coal industry, coal production decreased in the years that followed the war, a part of the miners migrated from the Valley struck by famine (see Baron 2020). The worn-out infrastructure called for technological

<sup>12</sup> The titles in original: *Scriptori, poeți, artiști, masele vă așteaptă; Temele noastre sunt temele vieții; Ce teme propuneți artiștilor noștri? Ce teme vă propuneți?; Câte teme prețioase pentru artiștii plastici!*



reorganization, as coal was a raw material of the industry and railway transport, and as such, it was the backbone of Romanian economy (the process of mining, however, was dangerous). As a document of the Committee of Arts looking back to the 1949/1950 season of theatres stated, “[t]his year [1949], the most important political problem the republic faced was the successful fulfilment and surpassing of the plan. The plan started from the idea that the basis of our industrialization is heavy industry. Dramatists should have focused their attention precisely on this heavy industry. However, the struggle of industrial workers was presented in the repertoire only in 4 plays” (Anon 1950a, f. 233). Among these, the document highlights Davidoglu’s *The Miners* and *Fortress of Fire*, his next play centred around metallurgical industry.

### Miners on the Stage

*The Miners* premiered in theatres all around Romania.<sup>13</sup> The director of the play, along with the set designer from the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj (Lajos Kőmíves Nagy and György Szakács) travelled to the Jiu Valley to study local clothing, material culture and customs for the authenticity of their staging (Anon 1949b, 2). So did the directors and set designer from the national theatre of Bucharest and the state theatre of Arad (Anon 1949c, 4). At the Arad premiere there was a delegation of miners from different mining towns of the Valley (Anon 1949d, 2). The company of the National Theatre from Bucharest, following the premiere, travelled to the mining town Petroșani, and played in front of an audience of miners on 21 May. They “brought the performance home”, and the actors visited the workers’ homes in order to portray characters as realistically as possible (Anon 1949e, 1). Stressing the realism of the play, journals reported that on their arrival, the actors from Bucharest tried to recognize the characters of the play among the locals. There is even a confusion at one point, when they announce that Andrei Nastai will give a short speech, the actors looking at the actor who plays the main character’s father with this name. As it turned out, there was a miner with this exact name, he hosted Davidoglu during his stay (Radomir 1949, 4).

In line with the countrywide wave of premieres, the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj originally planned to stage *The Miners* for the first time in May 1949. In the end, the play, directed by Lajos Kőmíves Nagy, premiered on 22 October 1949, as the opening performance of the new season. Among the literary secretary’s hand-written statistics and monthly reports (in Hungarian, most probably for his personal use, serving as basis for his official reports written Romanian) dating from September and October 1949, we can find details about the preparation and staging of the play, offering a glimpse into the internal publicity of the theatre, the everyday work, “the production”. The actors from Cluj visited the mines of the Jiu Valley not too long before the premiere, as part of their summer tour.

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<sup>13</sup> In 1951 it was also staged in the fellow socialist county, Hungary, in theatres in Budapest, Debrecen, and Miskolc.



The data on the process of production of the performances included, among other things, ideological, memory and dress rehearsals. Jordáky kept separate records of the number of rehearsals and working hours, broken down individually for every actor and director involved in the preparation of each performance. *The Miners* were rehearsed a total of 20 times in September, which amounted to 70 hours, this was completed by the working hours of making sets and costumes. “The statistical data of the plays in production prove that we have taken serious steps towards the implementation of planned artistic work. We cannot yet measure the results of the planning in the artistic field,” adds Jordáky (Jordáky 1949a, 2).

Ideological rehearsals were spent interpreting the play and outlining the literary, social and ideological context. “In connection with *The Miners*, we dealt in detail with the history of the Romanian labour movement (from 1920 to the present), the role of the Romanian Communist Party and the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union”, states the literary secretary’s report (Jordáky 1949a, 7). In addition, the archival fond of Jordáky contains a reading list with 19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century mining novels and journalistic reports in English, French and Romanian.<sup>14</sup> In his report written in October, the month of the premiere, Jordáky noted that the actors did not deal with the reading list, but they tried to understand the ideological truth of the play and bring it to the stage.<sup>15</sup> Then, quoting from monthly questionnaires he created to be completed by the actors about their professional and personal activities,<sup>16</sup> the literary secretary illustrated the rise of the socialist spirit in the theatre and the ideological development of the artistic personnel.<sup>17</sup> In their questionnaires, the actors of the Hungarian theatre wrote about the play in a strikingly similar manner, using the bureaucratic language of the time: praising the first real socialist realist play in the theatre, where not only the play itself, but the staging and collective artistic work reflected the method of socialist

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<sup>14</sup> Émile Zola: *Germinal*; Richard Llewellyn: *How Green Was My Valley*; Howard Spring: *Fame Is the Spur*; A. J. Cronin: *The Stars Look Down*; Geo Bogza: *Țara de foc*; Ion Pas: *Tablouri în cărbune* (see Jordáky [1949e]).

<sup>15</sup> The ideological preparation of *The Miners* was “thorough and long-lasting, but it is a shortcoming that the members of the play’s collective did not deal with the history of the Romanian labor movement and did not read novels depicting the life of miners” (Jordáky 1949b, 13).

<sup>16</sup> Jordáky put together a questionnaire that every actor had to complete monthly between 1949 and 1951. The form included inquiries about how the actors spent their work hours, the ideological books they read, the plays movies they saw, as well as their opinions about the theatre’s premieres, their colleagues’ work. About the relevance of these sources resulting from an informal institutional practice, see Szabó-Reznek 2025.

<sup>17</sup> “Most of them made a serious effort to embrace the ideological message of the play and tried with equal effort to realize it on stage. The rise of the socialist spirit is evidenced by such expressions in the questionnaire as Ilona Benes, who is ‘happy to have played in *The Miners*’, Jenő Flóra, who sees that ‘the actors became immersed in their roles’, Miklós Heves, who believes that the play represents a turning point in acting, etc. The development of the self-critical spirit is evidenced by Erzsébet Czenk, who still has not reached the point where she can perform the role of Eliza as the author wrote” (Jordáky 1949b, 13).





realism (just a month later, they wrote in a very similar way about Ivanov's *Armoured Train*). Jordáky later highlighted actress Lili Poór, widow of the famous theatre director and filmmaking pioneer in Cluj, Jenő Janovics. Poór, a classic actress of the bourgeois theatre tradition portrayed an old miner's wife: her very first, non-bourgeois, non-aristocratic role (Jordáky 1971, 123).

In his official report, written in Romanian and sent to the Theatre Directorate of the Committee of Arts, Jordáky stressed that the Hungarian theatre of Cluj was the first Hungarian theatre in the country to premiere *The Miners* (the Székely Theatre of Târgu Mureş to follow on November 29, 1949).

With *The Miners* we continued the attempts started last season to adapt and accomplish the style of socialist realism. We can say that both the working method and the moral of the collective, as well as the ideological and artistic deepening, gave good results and the performance is a decisive step and a victory in the development of our theatre. [...] The stage director, together with the entire collective of artists, worked a lot on the play. The premiere, which was attended by all the leaders from Cluj of the Romanian Workers' Party, and the representatives of the People's Council, the Army, the University and the theatres in Cluj, was a true celebration. The play and the performance were a formidable success. As can be seen from the attached critiques, the theatre and the actors have reached a point where they can apply the basic principles of socialist realism / reflection of reality in art, socialist optimism, revolutionary romanticism, etc. / The main merit of the performance is the success of the collective acting.

Jordáky 1949f, 2.

The socialist realist method of theatre directing, as well as creating a performance through collective work was a topic widely discussed in the press from 1948 onwards. *Utunk* even published a series of articles (Jánosházy 1948; Metz 1948), after a piece by Jenő Szentimrei on the new ways of theatre directing (Szentimrei 1948) generated discussion. Directors worked together with assistant directors, but, as a journal article warns, collective directing shouldn't be confused with the idea of multiple directors, rather, it means that the whole team, actors and directors work together to understand the play (Marosi 1948). It is no wonder that Jordáky put an emphasis on this in his report. Then he turned his attention to the public of the premiere:

The public received the play and the performance with great enthusiasm. The political issue was received with a political sense, and the parts where Anton talks about the Party were greeted with applause. The public met with satisfaction the destiny of Craiu, Vlanga and Olga [the imperialist, bourgeois boycotters]. We believe that this proves the ideological development of the masses on one hand, and the development of our theatre and actors on the other.

Jordáky 1949f, 3.

Press-coverage was extensive on *The Miners*, with critics analysing both the play and the stagings. Just as theatre itself, theatre criticism was expected to "become a



full-fledged weapon on the front lines of socialist construction and the cultural revolution”, to break with the insipidity of bourgeois journalism and “to find the expressive words that reveal the shortcomings and virtues of the actor’s concrete work”. In addition to describing plays and evaluating the work of the theatre, its tasks also included “disseminating Marxist–Leninist aesthetics applied in practice, explaining dramaturgical knowledge and especially the experiences of Soviet dramaturgy”, wrote *Utunk* in 1949 (Szász 1949). However, in 1954, after Stalin’s death, a debate taking place on the pages of the same newspaper, considered Stalinist theatre criticism full of generalities and lacking substance (György 2022)<sup>18</sup>. A part of *The Miners’* press reception – including but not limited to the ones regarding the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj – is line with this, limiting itself to praising the new, Romanian socialist realist dramaturgy, the new hero, and highlighting or condemning the actors of the different staging. Others offer layers of context to understanding the play and theatrical life in the late 1940s. For example, the reviewer of the Bucharest-based Hungarian language newspaper *Romániai Magyar Szó* feels that there is nothing new to write about the (too) late premiere of the Hungarian theatre of Cluj, rather appreciates the gesture as a turn in the repertoire policy of the institution (Deák 1949).

In line with creating the new language of the new reality (see Jákfalvi 2023, 22–26; Fónagy and Soltész 1954), “the new dramaturgy, which reflects the struggles of the working class [...], results in uttering new expressions and words on the stage, different from those used by bourgeois theatre” (Anon 1949f, 4). As such, a newspaper from the capital explains the technical terms of coal mining that appear in the play. Several newspapers published separate reviews about *The Miners* as a dramatic text, and as a staged performance, making medium-specific critical remarks. Some note that the role of the Party in introducing the new methods of work is not stressed enough. Because of this, the hero risks to appear as an individual visionary, rather than a worker guided by the Party (Şelmaru T. 1949). The character of Anton’s wife, Maria, was also critiqued: she was the enemy of the working class, the couple’s idyllic reconciliation at the end of the play is unreal and against proletarian moirés (Şelmaru F. 1949). One of the most interesting critical texts is a comparative analysis between the staging of *The Miners* at the National Theatre of Cluj and the National Theatre of Bucharest. Highlighting the stage design of Liviu Ciulei from Cluj, but critiquing the unrealistically clean miner costumes, the author contemplated on the two directors’ (Aurel Ion Maican in Bucharest and Marieta Sadova in Cluj) different understanding of the play in light of socialist realist ideas: while the Bucharest production focused on the positive hero and the socialist new man, the Cluj production was praised for giving the leading role to the mass, the working class (Alterescu 1949b). Besides the established theatre criticism, newspapers gave space for the voices of miners, who saw the play on stages from Petroşani to Cluj and recognized their reality. “When the curtains rolled up, I was surprised to see that the old theatre was gone, I felt like I was at home, in the Jiu Val-

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<sup>18</sup> In 1952 in preparation for a debate about the positive hero Jordáky writes: “what help does criticism give. Not much, because critics do not delve into the material” (Jordáky 1952).



ley”, wrote a miner after the performance at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj (Szászkirály 1949). “This is our life”, claimed the miners of Lupeni (Davidoglu 1949d, 2).

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While in 1949 the play about the lives of the miners of the Jiu Valley has been performed on Romanian stages, the press published news almost daily about the actual miners of the Valley, who were competing to meet the production norm set for 1949 as soon as possible. By mid-July, a group of miners from Petrila succeeded, and were celebrated and photographed in the papers (Crișan 1949), juxtaposed with articles about the play – the victorious miners even attended the staging of the Bucharest troupe on tour in Petroșani (Tabacu 1949). Despite its nationwide success, *The Miners* had a short life on stages in Romania. It presented a moment of transition in the Jiu Valley, which, as a result of the fast-paced industrialization, was quickly surpassed by reality.<sup>19</sup> This is illustrated well already in Davidoglu’s article about his experience and conversations with the miners he met when writing the play:

At one point the play talks about 20 holes [made in the wall of the coal mine]. The leading miner Poboreni, who was present at the discussion, asked me: “How many did you say, comrade, 20 or 90?” – “20.” “That’s too few. We already reached 70 holes. But you should put 90 holes in the play as an incentive for the people, because I’m sure we’ll reach 90”.

Davidoglu 1949d, 2

After a long break, nine years after its premiere, the play was staged in Baia Mare, noting that the plot lost its timeliness and became a historical document (Căliman 1958). Davidoglu continued his career as a playwright, becoming, for two years, member of the editorial board of the theatrical journal *Teatrul*. Founded in Bucharest in April 1956 – just two months after Khrushchev’s revelations about Stalin and the “cult of personality” at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party, a landmark of the post-Stalinist thaw<sup>20</sup> –, *Teatrul* set out to be a professional medium for both contemporary issues and theatre history. Even in the more liberal cultural context of the de-Stalinization, the journal – of which relationship with the Party remained quite conservative (see Runcan 2019) – never failed to mention Davidoglu’s first important socialist realist play. *The Miners* might have disappeared from the stage but remained present in the discourse about theatre as a point of reference for playwriting in socialist Romania.

<sup>19</sup> As research on the Soviet socialist realist novels pointed out, many of them had an ephemeral subplot, like new socialist achievements, that after a while became outdated and forgotten (see Clark 1981, 5).

<sup>20</sup> Even though the plans of founding a professional theatre journal with the title *Teatru* appeared in the documents of the Ministry of Arts as early as 1950 (Anon 1950b, f. 87; Anon 1950c, f. 103, Anon 1950d, f. 3).



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