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SUMMARY
PHD THESIS

**PROPAGANDA AND THE ART OF STAGING. ROLES, PLAYS AND
PERFORMANCES IN ROMANIAN THEATRE OF THE ‘70’s. CASE STUDY: THE
NATIONAL THEATRE IN CLUJ-NAPOCA**

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1. The research hypothesis

The subject of the present research is the manipulation of art through the mechanisms of ideology, placed in the historical context of the establishment, then consolidation of the communist regime in Romania.

It certainly is difficult to put forth a hypothesis on whether the artistic activities carried out during the communist era were or not an extension of the propaganda policies. Internal mechanisms, inter-institutional and inter-human relations that lead to the publishing of a book or the performance of a play were relatively less studied, the researchers' attention having been focused on one-dimensional demonstrations, of greater magnitude.

We decided to centre our attention on theatre, the art of staging¹ whose mythical resorts are closest to magic. Its force of representation, the illusion of reality, the double and the 'parallel mirrors' made it possible for theatre to introduce a series of controlled fantasies that served to cement the national mythology of the past 20 years of the communist era. The premise of our approach is that the keepers of the memories related to Romanian theatre, currently accessed in memoirs, interviews and theatrology studies and critique, are humanist intellectuals of the period (from 1970 to 1989). In other words, the reality we could perceive has so far been mediated and revealed only through this filter.

The Romanian contemporary dramaturgy of the communist era raises a number of questions whose solutions can only be established by an interdisciplinary analysis of the period. The historical, political science, sociological, literary and theatrical multi-perspective can guide us to find objective answers related to a subjective past: What was the repertoire selection process in a Communist theatre? What was the decision making process like? Who were the most prominent playwrights and on what basis were their plays proposed for staging? How random was the distribution of foreign plays during the theatre season? How contextualized was the local dramatic production? What role did the secret police play in ensuring the ideological quality of the shows? What was the public response? What was the relationship between contemporary drama and the audience? To what extent did the economic and social situation influence the quality of the audience and the quality of plays that were staged? And finally, what is fiction and what is real

¹ M. Runcan; C.C. Buricea-Mlinarcic, *Cinci divane ad hoc*, Bucharest, Unitext Publishing House, 1994, p. 83.

from what we know and what we were told about theatre in the communist-era? This research is based mostly on the analysis of the repertoire of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca. We believe this institution to be the point of departure of an elaborate case study with complex ramifications.

The obvious obstacles of this endeavour stem from the sometimes involuntary mystification of some great actors, directors and playwrights of the period. Being considered genuine effigies whose status could not be questioned, their involvement in the complex political context of those times can be disregarded and categorised as an impiety or an affront to the perennial values of our culture.

Historically speaking, the late modernity of the communist era, reflected in the world of performing arts, represents the first overview of the subject. The new status of actors, the institutionalisation of theatres, the standardisation of the stage work, and the adoption of the first ‘method’ of training in the art of acting, that of K. Stanislavki, were the first among the immediate measures taken by representatives of the new regime at the end of World War 2. The professionalization was for actors, a double-edged sword: on the one hand it provided job security; on the other, it made them become the means by which the Communist Party ‘translated’ their policy into art. We followed the evolution of the actors’ guild in relation to left wing politics, beginning with the interwar period until the consolidation of the younger generations from the 60s thanks to Television and Cinema. As for dramaturgy, we analysed the recurrence in the repertoire of the people at the cultural forefront of the 70s, including D.R. Popescu, Titus Popovici, Horia Lovinescu, Aurel Baranga, and Paul Everac. The documents from the CNSAS (National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives) archives offered a series of arguments about the internal dynamics of the theatres and the types of conflicts, as well as a new hypothesis about the censorship or banning of key performances during the period in question.

The permanent assistance of the state, the only credit release authority at the time, offered preferential treatment to writers and intellectuals in leadership positions until the economic crisis of the late 70s and during the 80s. Ignoring market requirements, and even official directives, the book publishing process, for example, followed the unwritten rules of informal connections within the vocational guilds. Stating that the Communist authorities invested significantly in culture is no longer hazardous. In order to back up this statement, historians such Alina Pavelescu, Ioana Macrea-Toma, Alexandru Murad brought forth archive documents. It is certain, however, that the sorting of the cultural products on the market was not based only on the audience’s needs. The

situation is more complex and can only be explained if we take into account at least the following dual pressure: Party ideology on cultural products and the compliance with the unwritten rules within the artistic field. During the creative unions' crisis (1975-1989), cultural products depended on the opposition between cultural producers who felt 'excluded from the influence' and those who they thought were 'standing in their way'. The stakes, according to Verdery, were to see 'whoever gets to write school textbooks', 'whose books and how many copies will be published' or 'whose projects will receive finance which will facilitate further investments'². The selection process in the world of theatre remains mainly the same. The problems that needed to be addressed and that flooded the representative offices were related to questions such as: Who is to produce the performances for national theatres of important counties (Cluj, Timisoara, Craiova, Iasi) and Bucharest, the capital?, 'Which theatres failed to prioritize performances by contemporary authors approved by the regime (or supported by various levels of command, the metonymic representations the regime)?', 'Who was cast in an important play and who wasn't?' 'Which theatres were the first to chose among Academy and how come some young actors got to perform at important theatres after having been rejected and assigned a position in the provinces?

Symbolic power was the most productive resource generator. When referring to the same two categories of humanist intellectuals, writers and artists, we can identify in the late 70s three related types: the very well paid, who could earn up to the equivalent of 25 salaries from publishing a book, the middle income ones, who received the equivalent of 5-10 salaries for a published book or talented actors, but who were not cast in important roles within the ideological construct, and, finally, poorly remunerated authors or actors. The evolution of the latter had been blocked by limited access within the guilds, whether creative unions or theatres, as well as by the considerable decrease in state subsidies following 1975, due to economic factors that depended on the coercive nature of the communist state. But before the communist state began to formulate his famous claim of self-financing, its goal was to prevent the artist from 'experiencing the negative impact of great paucity', as D. Popescu would state. Even if the VIP status was different in the two systems of reference, if we were to compare Western and Eastern Europe, such a comparative approach is not, we believe, hazardous. It was not only financial potency - especially in a country in which services remained largely undiversified and failed to provide great material rewards - that

² K. Verdery, *Compromis și rezistență, cultura română sub Ceaușescu*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1994, p. 68-71.

generated privileges. The occupation of ministerial offices, the possibility of investing in imported goods, travel facilities and others that significantly facilitated (or improved) living conditions under the communist regime, can be considered, keeping reasonable proportions, the perks of very important persons.

During the period which we refer to, 1970-1980, Romania was already a consolidated communist state, after more than two decades during which the regime had operated massive cuts and reorganisations not only in terms of values and common ethics, but also in terms of population structure. The arbitrary nature of arrests that followed immediately after the war and lasted until the late '50s, the high number of political prisoners that overcrowded the prison system and the social effects related to the subsequent waves of terror led to the extinction of much of the opposition. The missing, unless they had died in the Gulag, were silenced and gradually replaced by the post-war generations who had never experienced another way of living than the one controlled by the socialist programme. In the 70s, these genuinely new people, reached adulthood. This was a change in the deeper layers of the society, a mutation, as Bogdan Murgescu states, 'even greater than what is shown in statistical data', if we consider both the migration of the youth to the city and the aging rural population. The 1966 census shows that 59% of the resident population of the city was made up of people who were not born in the place where were counted³. They had experienced, therefore, a fundamental rupture in terms of identity. Who were these people, we might ask?

Personal development had, according to the ideological mindset, the following pattern: the peasants had to become workers and then intellectual-workers. The scientific mythology of communism which privileged manual labour rather than the intellectual one⁴, claimed that the drawback of the already existing 'bourgeois' humanist intellectuals was that instead of producing surplus value they only consumed resources. This type of intellectual, whose proliferation was facilitated including during the 50s and 60s, is questioned in following decades. The factors that contributed to this transmutation were the introduction of compulsory physical labour, starting from school (internship in factories, patriotic work in agriculture) the dissemination of professionals trained in education or health at the countryside in order to fulfil they duty towards

³ B. Murgescu, *România și Europa. Acumularea decalajelor economice (1500-2010)*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2010, p. 350.

⁴ L. Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 2011, passim

the Party and the country, and the purchasing following the example of Renaissance⁵ of ‘commissioned’ art works to serve the political ideology. The moral ‘duty’ of intellectuals towards the Party’s generosity was implied especially after 1980, when relations between the two entities were filtered through the paradigm of ‘betrayal’. The institutional (to use a neutral term) criticism was that they failed to strongly support the ideology during that critical period.

We followed the succession of political decisions aimed to reduce the hazard involved in artistic activities and to calculate the rate at which doses of art could be offered to the masses. Ideologists tried to functionalize inspiration and measure literary and dramatic works based on some predetermined norms. The established mechanism resembles the one that is currently accessed by independent artists, who, in the absence of stable funding, organise their activity based on projects with budgets often deriving from multiple sources. The difference is that during the communist period, the only sponsor was the State. Thus, in a world where private initiative had not been appropriated, poems, plays, reviews, TV appearances or performances of poetry homage, all received a standard price. On the one hand, the state capped its contribution to cultural institutions in which these artists, poets, writers were working. On the other hand it left the door open for personal contribution, which could bring additional revenues.

We have observed evolution of drama as a political experiment whose results are difficult to measure using quantitative tools. Ranging from the sensory theatre in the early 50's which explored the psychological dimension causing a controlled regression, to the covering of the fourth wall, invisible and symbolically separating the audience from the stage with artifice designed to block the reverie, theatre techniques aimed to cause a change in the consciousness of viewers.

The ‘building site’ on which writers, playwrights and talented actors of the 7th decade worked on, aimed to create fiction based on socialist reality. Forcing the imagination to produce those fantasies, necessary for ensuring the political legitimacy of a regime, says Wunenburger, was an objective assigned to this generation. The payment of debt was generally simply made administratively by virtue of the fact that the sponsor had the right to ‘impose the communication of certain messages that were of interest’. Beyond this framework, it was either opportunism or apathy that, both equally harmful, for in the absence of a critical stance against the system, social schizophrenia was able to flourish.

⁵ D. Popescu, *Cronos autodevorându-se... Memorii vol. III. Artele în mecenatul etatist*, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2006, p. 17.

2. Structure

The research was structured in four chapters, as follows: the first chapter is dedicated to the relationship developed by Romanian actors with the leftist political activism starting with the interwar period until 1989. The second chapter is an elaborate case study of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca repertoire thanks to which we introduce the concepts of teatrology and literary theory and debate about the **aesthetic resources of performing arts during communism**, as well as published and unpublished information about the mechanism of repertoire approval and the ideological orders. The third chapter is a qualitative study of the audience. Based on a number of sociological surveys and field research, we present a revisionist perspective on **the quality of the theatrical performances on the cultural market** during the 70s and 80s. The results of oral history is analysed by corroborating data on the internal migration of the rural population to the city, on industrialization and the concentration of the working class in urban centres, on the state of the education and figures about book market dynamics. The last chapter is a **critical analysis** of unpublished documents discovered in the archives of the National Council for the Study of the Securitate Archives (CNSAS), in the operational file of the National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca. The argument is based on a series of interviews with cultural and artistic representatives, former directors of the National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca, such as Professor Ion Vlad, literary secretary Justin Ceuca and playwright Constantin Cubleșan, actors such as Dorel Visan, Magda Știef.

The topic under discussion is approached from a multiple, interdisciplinary perspective. The recovery of the analysed information from correlative sources is, we believe, a syncretic way of getting to the core of the historical truth, even if it remains somewhat subjective, because of its sources. Associating the data originating on the one hand, from the documents drawn up by the Securitate officers who oversaw the dynamics of the cultural-artistic sector with direct (interviews) or indirect (volumes of memoirs) testimonies of eyewitnesses of the events of the decade, provides us a new and more accurate perspective on the past. By permanently verifying the somewhat manipulated archival information, according to Gabriel Andreescu, we are able to sift the information and argue on the contexts and power relations that generated the **ideological programme applied to theatre. The interpretation of the decisions made in terms of repertoire** in this clarified framework, allows us to see the symbolic relations between the artistic representatives and the central and local politics decision makers but also the minor subjective

stories that got to dictate the historical canon of the entire Communist period, from a different angle.

3. The established objectives

The specific objectives of the present research deal with the debate on three issues that are, nowadays, a blind-spot (*punctum caecum*) of our recent history. Looking back on the past from this blind angle, either due to the extension of the same power relations to the present day, the true nature of the links between the Romanian culture and the Communist Party could only be hinted at.

3.1. Theatre and politics

Was theatre in fact a tool that helped build the ideological scaffolding of the communist regime, or not? The distinct nature of art and dictatorship, one governed by creative freedom, the other by bureaucratic constraints, still operate as principles at the foundation of a common: that although politically involved and infiltrated by activists, arts and literature developed as an implicit opposition, undermining the very system through their activity and endless resources of expression.

Our approach does not advocate the drawing up of notices of intent for some of the Romanian theatre personalities during the communist era. It is necessary, however, to explain to what extent the ‘negative messianism’⁶ that dominated the interwar period and radicalized elite (in the widest sense of the term) around the right-left axis, not only in Romania but also in Europe, enrolled humanist intellectuals and especially artists in a passionate race of destroying the foundations of liberal democracies considered to be the source of social inequities.

3.2. Contemporary dramaturgy or the translation into art of the New Man’s ethics

The second component of our theoretical approach is the consideration of the role of contemporary dramaturgy in the approved theatre repertoire. In the context of the 70s, characterized, in terms of discourse, by the urgency of internationally legitimising the traditional culture stemming from a root common to that of the state and party politics, we can state that the

⁶ D. Sdrobiş, *Limitele meritocrației într-o societate agrară. Șomaj intelectual și radicalizare politică a tineretului în România interbelică*, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2015, p. 8.

real effect was completely the opposite, namely, it generated an endemisation of culture. The self referencing was a result of the nationalisation of communism that faced an image crisis during the 70s and 90s. Regarding the theoretical model of contemporary dramatic works that worked, the psychological dramas and the one concerning the individual consciousness of certain characters determined at the time and even later, conflicting interpretations. Situated in a kind of ‘socialist humanism’, the characters of such works denied their social or genetic origin and managed to reach a haven only with the *age of enlightenment*, the dictatorship of Nicolae Ceausescu.

Starting from this theoretical foundation, we analysed the repertoire performed at the National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca between 1971-1989. We used the database available on the official website of the institution and we compiled tops of the playwrights whose works were the most performed. Not surprisingly, their names overlap the ideological needs formulated by the Party, as most of them hold leading positions in culture, as well as honorific positions within the leading governing bodies of the state. Their political validation which also generated a symbolic power within the guild served as a vivid example of what the activists from the top of Socialist Council for Culture and Education (CCES) understood by ‘translating the Party policy into art’. Repertoire dialectics becomes even more interesting to analyse if we question the selection of foreign playwrights for theatre seasons in Cluj. We can acknowledge that logic behind the distribution process relies on pursuing the ideological objectives. Using the reversed mirror technique, the chosen plays from the West dealt with a decaying anarchic society, with a precarious morality, facing an identity crisis which generated violence that came in contrast with the socialist society that was characterised by a linear, pacifist and humanist vision.

3.3. The actions of the Securitate in the sphere of performing arts

Similar to other European countries, the Romanian authorities have tried to discourage emigration especially by means of imposing legislative measures that intensified by the late 60’s, during the last 20 years of the regime.

The sharp regression from the liberalization of the social mobility towards a more aggressive limitation of the freedom of movement rights coincided with the period of relative openness to Western countries manifested by the communist society, which had attained a consolidated maturity following its 25 years of existence.

Professional visits, temporary study residences, the acceptance of scholarships or trips abroad seemed to confirm, prior to the onset of the harsh ideology of 1971, the hypothesis of a new Eastern civilization which reached a certain level of welfare other than by means of capitalism.

The intellectuals, especially the ones involved in arts and humanities, were to benefit the most from these exchange programs.

Over the last chapter, which analyses the documents of the operational files of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, we aimed to outline two hypotheses derived from the study of the investigation documents. On the one hand, we believe the surveillance carried out by the Securitate were not unrelated with the deepening of the East-West tensions in the second part of the Cold War.

We believe that the concern of the political police was more likely aimed to prevent the information about the internal political from leaving the country. The hearsay created through cross-border personal networks created by humanist intellectuals during their successive journeys out, damaged the international reputation of the Ceaușescu island, which was individualized among the member countries of the Warsaw Pact, as a result of a series of actions to delineate the hegemonic policy of USSR after 1963. Radio Free Europe, a contributing factor to this devaluation, where a great number of emigrated Romanian personalities worked, was considered to be an Achilles' heel that needed to be countered by the neutralization strategy.

By analysing the social behaviour of all those involved in carrying out theatrical activities in Romania during the 70s ranging from actors, playwrights, directors, ideologists, politicians to the humble spectator, we have tried to systematically answer two questions: Was the theatre assigned a role within the propaganda scaffolding of the Communist Party in Romania and if so, what was its purpose?

4. Conclusions

The relationship of the contemporary intellectuals with Romania's communist regime cannot be understood using a simple grid. Some leftist intellectuals, but not only, which was not marginalized after 1945 did not take into account any permanent interruption of the connections that linked them to regime, not even during periods of ideological constriction.

In conclusion, we can say that the relationship between the performing arts sphere and the political regime was not unidirectional, requiring directives from the Centre. The cultural institutions did not operate on the grounds of a hierarchical passivity, merely executing ideological norms, but

were actively involved in formal and informal way, in reprobating them. Interventions on the quality of theatre performances were not just political coercive and punitive resorts, but harmless causes, instigated by interpersonal conflicts, independent from the broad view of the historical period between 1970-1980.

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