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Scenographic Aesthetics in the Theatre of Silviu Purcărete

(Szcenográfia-esztétikák Silviu Purcărete színházában)

– Summary of the Doctoral Thesis –

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Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

Keywords: scenography, visuality, theatrical space, stage image, postdramatic theatre, Silviu Purcărete, Helmut Stürmer, Dragoş Buhagiar, director–scenographer collaboration, visual dramaturgy, set design, costumes, Lia Manţoc, sound and rhythmic spaces, musicality, Vasile Şirli, dream logic, spaces of culture, aesthetics of ruins, *mise en abyme*, *trompe-l'œil*, iconography, iconology, sign and meaning, motifs and symbols

As a student at the Bachelor's Degree Programme with a double major in Art History and Theatre Studies, I have always been interested in how these two fields I chose can be organically connected. Although at first glance they seem obviously and inseparably linked, after completing my studies and working as a literary secretary and dramaturg, I managed to observe this connection in practice in very few cases. Beyond the clear parallels between dramatic texts and the turning points of art history reflected in stage texts, I found the most connections in the visual world of performances: in their scenography, set design, and costumes. However, I discovered that during the creative process, the importance of these elements is often diminished. Often, we don't even have the right words to describe the visual world of certain performances. Thus, my desire was born to study this visual world of performances in depth, to name its elements and to be able to follow the creative processes with understanding, as visuality becomes increasingly important not only in theatre but also in all areas of our lives.

During a more in-depth and specific analysis of the subject and research, I encountered several difficulties, as there is not much comprehensive specialized literature on this topic, nor is there extensive terminology in the Romanian or Hungarian theatrical vocabulary. Certain concepts have been included in the vocabulary of theatre critics, but they are often applied only superficially or are so steeped in theory that they become difficult to exploit in practice. Even in formulating the title, I encountered a problem: in Hungarian, scenography is usually referred to as "*set and costume design*", and sometimes the light designer is also mentioned, but *scenography* means much more – it refers to the totality of visual elements that appear on stage, down to the smallest details.

Another major problem is the fact that the scenographer's work is often invisible, and a coherent and unified visual world rarely appears in the oeuvre of a scenographer,

because creative freedom is often subordinated to directorial, technical, or financial constraints. Assuming that the director's concept and the development of the visual world should be born hand in hand, in an efficient creative process, I found it necessary to choose artists who are not only well-known creators in their fields but who have also collaborated with each other on multiple occasions. In this way, the research is not limited to a single creative process, but can cover several years of collaboration, thus allowing the conclusions to be more relevant. For this reason, I chose the productions of Silviu Purcărete, one of the most well-known and respected directors in Romania, both nationally and internationally, whose highly visual performances were often created together with the same creative team – his main creative partners being scenographers Helmut Stürmer and Dragoş Buhagiar.

„Silviu Purcărete's theatre is a theatre of the Art of Direction, in which classic works are rediscovered by means of contemporary forms of expression and invention. His productions are impressive. They are forms of jubilation, they offer “excessive images” and most of the time they use non-conventional spaces.”¹ His performances may be characterized by „peculiarly hypnotic fusion of sound and spectacle, his productions tend to have the seamless intensity and archetypal quality of a dream, with images of poetic beauty and surreal barminess passing in a weird, lateral drift across the scene.”²

1. Introduction

The thesis aims to explore in depth the evolution, principles, and distinctive traits of scenographic design in contemporary theatre, focusing on the scenographic aesthetics of Silviu Purcărete's theatre from the perspective of the collaboration between director and scenographer, as well as the role of visual dramaturgy within the context of postdramatic theatre.

The starting point of the research is a review of the historical and theoretical transformations of stage space and theatrical visibility, analyzed from the perspective of

¹ Ludmilla Patlanjoglu, "Silviu Purcărete and the Apocalypse of Us," *The Theatre Times*, March 1, 2017, accessed January 10, 2021, <https://thetheatretimes.com/silviu-purcarete-apocalypse-us/>.

² Paul Taylor, *Not a Pretty Sight, The Independent*, May 23, 1997, quoted in Cristina Modreanu, *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism: Children of a Restless Time* (London: Routledge, 2020).

paradigm shifts that occurred in the 20th and 21st centuries – such as the *linguistic*, *visual*, *spatial*, and *performative turns* – while referencing authors and creators who have fundamentally influenced how visibility is conceived in contemporary theatre. Alongside theoretical foundations from theatre studies, the analysis also integrates concepts borrowed from art history – *iconography* and *iconology* becoming essential methodological tools for interpreting stage images, alongside notions such as *symbol*, *motif*, and *visual structure*. Following this theoretical grounding, the analysis focuses on representative performances directed by Silviu Purcărete, with the core of the dissertation centered on collaborative works created together with Helmut Stürmer, Dragoş Buhagiar, Vasile Şirli, and Lia Manţoc, with special emphasis on the organization of scenic space, visual composition, and their harmonization with the sonic universe. The goal of the research is to map how scenography becomes an integral part of the director's vision and contributes to the creation of a unique, often symbolic theatrical language.

From a methodological point of view, the dissertation adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining perspectives from theatre studies, art history, visual culture, and semiotics, while also employing comparative analysis, case studies, and tools from applied semiotics to examine how visual elements contribute to meaning-making in the analyzed performances.

2. Approaching the Topic: The Development of Modern Scenography

Following the introduction, justification of the topic, and presentation of the research context in the first chapter, the second chapter focuses on outlining a broad historical framework, highlighting how scenography evolved from decorative backdrops to integral elements of theatrical expression. The fundamental influences of pioneers such as Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig are critically evaluated, whose concepts – emphasizing three-dimensionality – profoundly shaped the development of modern scenography. The dissertation further details several *transformative paradigms* in theatre – especially the linguistic, performative, spatial, visual, and postdramatic turns – exploring their impact on contemporary scenographic practices. Through the theories of Hans-Thies Lehmann (*postdramatic theatre*), Erika Fischer-Lichte (*performative aesthetics*), W. J. T. Mitchell (*pictorial turn*), and Erwin Panofsky (*iconography* and *iconology*), the work

outlines an essential theoretical framework for understanding the complexity of contemporary theatrical production, emphasizing scenography as a vital element of communication, not merely an aesthetic support.

3. Focusing on Perspectives and Parallels: Sound–Space–Image

The third chapter of the dissertation delves into the key concepts of *theatrical space*, *stage image*, *atmosphere*, *visual dramaturgy*, and *sound* in the context of postdramatic theatre aesthetics. Building on the paradigm shifts discussed in the previous chapter, this segment of the research aims to clarify how space and image are perceived within contemporary performance. It analyzes notions such as *parataxis*, *sign* and *signification*, the relationship between text and image, as well as the contribution of sound and rhythm to the construction of *performative space*. Theoretical references start with the works of Hans-Thies Lehmann and are further complemented by concepts from other thinkers who have influenced visual thinking in theatre. Thus, the chapter offers a solid conceptual framework for the aesthetic analysis of Silviu Purcărete's productions, highlighting the central role of visuality in stage communication.

At the end of the third chapter, two artists are introduced as relevant parallels – Robert Wilson and Giorgio Strehler – whose stage aesthetics provide significant comparative points for the thesis's analytical approach. Their examples function as essential references in constructing the theoretical framework of the research, particularly regarding the understanding of stage space and visuality as autonomous theatrical languages. In the case of Robert Wilson, his performances are defined by an extremely elaborate visual dramaturgy, where stage image, light, movement, and "*soundscape*s" combine in a poetic composition that transcends classical narrative. The analysis of this type of scenic construction provides a relevant reference point for understanding Silviu Purcărete's performances, in which musicality, rhythm, and visual elements are just as important as the dramatic text.

On the other hand, Giorgio Strehler, known for his poetic vision of directing and his remarkable contributions to opera and large-scale productions (opera direction), demonstrates how scenography can become an organic extension of music and the actor's expressivity. This approach provides a useful comparative framework for analyzing

Purcărete's performances, where collaboration with artists such as Helmut Stürmer, Dragoș Buhagiar, and Vasile Șirli creates a balance between the visual, musical, and textual components. Thus, integrating the aesthetic models proposed by Wilson and Strehler into the thesis's analysis helps highlight how Purcărete's directing lies at the intersection of *visual dramaturgy*, *soundscape*, and the construction of *scenic space*, creating a unique theatrical language within the postdramatic context.

4. Focusing on the Creators: Main Directions and the Creative Collective

Chapters four and five of the thesis represent the analytical core of the research, focusing on representative performances directed by Silviu Purcărete in collaboration with set designers Helmut Stürmer and Dragoș Buhagiar, and composer Vasile Șirli. The analysis investigates how *scenic space*, *imagery*, and the *sound universe* are constructed in close relationship with the director's vision, generating a unified and recognizable theatrical aesthetic. It examines aspects such as the use of *visual symbols*, *stage composition*, the *dramaturgy of space*, and the *role of music* in supporting the internal rhythm of the performance. Each case study follows how scenography becomes an extension of directorial thinking, and how the collaboration among artists is not merely functional but also creative and conceptual. The analyzed performances reveal a distinct *visual poetics* specific to Purcărete, in which set design, lighting, costumes, and music contribute to shaping a dense scenic world – sometimes dreamlike, sometimes grotesque-symbolic. These examples demonstrate how the theories discussed in previous chapters are materialized in practice, offering an applied perspective on a theatrical aesthetic that transcends classical dramatic conventions. Emblematic performances such as *Ubu Roi with scenes from Macbeth*, *Phaedra*, *The Danaids*, *The Night at the Breaking of the Fair*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Metamorphoses*, *Faust*, *The Tempest*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Victor or Power to the Children*, *The Scarlet Princess*, and others are thus recontextualized as illustrative examples for each analyzed thematic line. Techniques such as the use of stillness and silence as dramatic elements, the construction of stage tableaux in a painterly manner, narrative fragmentation, and the creation of a suspended or cyclical stage time are discussed. These strategies converge toward a visual dramaturgy in which scenography,

music, and directing do not function as separate elements, but communicate in an integrated, often symbolic, poetic language.

The first part of Chapter Four analyzes Silviu Purcărete as a multidisciplinary creator whose career is marked by a constant balance between dramatic direction, visual theatre, and opera. It highlights the "*Craiova Phenomenon*" and the international impact of his performances in the 1990s, as well as the dominant thematic directions after 1989 – from tyranny and grotesque to forms of cabaret or theatrical circus. A subchapter is dedicated to the concepts of *intertextuality*, *self-reflexivity*, and *mise en abyme*, which recur in the analyzed performances, also emphasizing those productions in which the director himself signs the scenography, followed by a reflection on opera directing, seen as a logical extension of Purcărete's visual poetics.

The second part focuses on the director's visual collaborators: Helmut Stürmer and Dragoş Buhagiar, whose scenographic contributions are essential in shaping the aesthetics of the performances. Concepts such as *cultural spaces*, *the aesthetics of ruins*, *landscape imagery*, *light as a pictorial substance*, or the relationship between the *image-frame* and the *scenic screen* are examined, reflecting on the way scenography becomes both a playing space and a symbolic space. In this context, Silviu Purcărete's movie *Somewhere in Palilula* (2012) is also analyzed, as it extends his theatrical visual language into a cinematic medium. The film provides an additional perspective on pictorial composition, scenographic symbolism, and spatial fragmentation, illustrating how his aesthetic translates from theatre to film without losing stylistic coherence.

Next, a subchapter is dedicated to composer Vasile Şirli, analyzing how *sound space*, *rhythm*, and *musicality* contribute to the poetic coherence of the scenic world, and the final section highlights Lia Manţoc, the costume designer, as the fourth essential collaborator, investigating *costume as a visual and identity sign* in the construction of characters and their relationship to space.

5. Focus on Productions: Architecture, Fusion, and Reflection

Chapter Five proposes a systematization of the recurring themes, visual techniques, and aesthetic signature specific to Silviu Purcărete's directing, based on the analysis of the previously discussed performances. The chapter's structure follows the main thematic

directions identified in his creative work: the *dreamlike logic* of scenic construction, *symbolic and mythological imagery*, *bodies in space*, *visual composition* and *parataxis*, the *aesthetics of ruins* and the *grotesque*, *musical viscosity*, and *sound spaces*. Each subsection explores these concepts through the organic relationship between directing, scenography, bodily presence, and sound space, in an attempt to define a coherent and recognizable visual poetics.

The first part of the chapter is dedicated to how the internal architecture of the performances is built – from conceptual sketch to final structure – revealing a directorial approach that blends visual planning with controlled improvisation. This is followed by an analysis of the relationship between *perspective*, *proportions*, and *optical illusion* – including *trompe-l'œil* techniques – frequently used in scenic compositions to distort reality or intensify the metaphorical effect of space. An important subchapter addresses the difference between *found and constructed spaces*, presenting examples of reconceptualizing non-theatrical locations, such as a former factory or a multicultural space adapted for performance. This spatial flexibility allows the performance to negotiate between the real and the symbolic simultaneously.

Further on, the chapter examines how different temporal spaces – historical, mythological, personal – are merged into a single stage, creating the kind of narrative density specific to Purcărete's productions. In this context, the table – as a physical object, but also a symbol – is analyzed in relation to ritual, communion, and the dissolution of community, shaping the performances as social microcosms. The final section discusses the presence of scenic homages, cultural references, and recurring visual citations, with one emblematic example being the evocation of the cherry orchard as a metaphor for transience and fragility. The successive stagings of *The Cherry Orchard* also provide an opportunity for comparative insight: how the same visual creators work with other directors and how these productions differ (or resonate) visually compared to their collaborations with Silviu Purcărete.

The chapter demonstrates that Silviu Purcărete's performances do not function as simple stagings of a text, but as autonomous theatrical universes, constructed in close collaboration with artists such as Helmut Stürmer, Dragoș Buhagiar, Vasile Șirli, and Lia Manțoc. Thus, a coherent and deeply visual aesthetic takes shape, one that transcends the

conventions of traditional dramatic theatre and organically aligns with the aesthetics of postdramatic theatre.

6. Conclusions and Future Research Directions

Chapter Six synthesizes the conclusions of the research, emphasizing the central role of scenography in the theatrical aesthetics of Silviu Purcărete and outlining possible future directions of inquiry, especially in the interdisciplinary field of visual and performance studies. The findings show that visuality is not merely decorative, but becomes a form of directorial thinking and an essential tool for dramaturgical construction. Scenography, music, and directing merge into a unified poetic language, defining a recognizable theatrical identity within the context of contemporary postdramatic theatre. The conclusion summarizes these explorations, reaffirming the essential role of scenography in Purcărete's work and in contemporary theatre more broadly. The thesis argues that scenography in Purcărete's productions goes beyond conventional limits, becoming a fundamental medium of theatrical communication and artistic expression.

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