

## On Romanian Theatre in a... Belated Modernity

MIRUNA RUNCAN

À la différence de la littérature ou des arts visuels, dans le théâtre que l'on pratique chez nous depuis des décennies les directions „postmodernes” sont à la traîne des autres pratiques culturelles-esthétiques, elles ont pris un retard considérable et sont dépourvues de cette énergie polémique propre à les définir. Coïncées dans la zone des variations stylistiques comme affectées par une sorte d'aphasie identitaire, elles n'ont jamais franchi le seuil d'une constitution esthétique. Partout dans le vaste monde, les mécanismes associatifs-évocateurs de la modernité tardive discréditent par leur fonctionnement même toute prétention de vérité ultime. Leur enjeu est bien moins ambitieux et les stratégies fragmentaires – éphémères de discours ne s'acharnent pas à grand effort de tambours à „résoudre” quoi que ce soit. Alors que chez nous, les constructions scéniques des auteurs omniscients ne consentiraient pour rien au monde à abandonner le jeu trompeur des petits cailloux colorés en nourrissant l'illusion – triste en dernière instance – que la personne du spectateur / du public acquerrait de la noblesse et rentrerait dans l'ordre transcendant rien qu'en pratiquant l'empathie avec le commentaire culturel & narcissique.

Peut-on concevoir un discours de la modernité tardive qui, tout en valorisant les différences, reste logo(ego)centrique?

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Romanian theatrical postmodernism – assuming that it exists as such, namely as an aesthetic attitude possessed of self-awareness, backed intentionally and manifest – has never truly enjoyed a space and a time of debate, a space and a time of coagulation. Therefore, to embark always and again on my sceptical meditations, I would say that today, after a significant number of years since the passage into the new millennium, in tackling such a topic one's writing assumes perforce a tone rather too synthetically assessorial, too formal and ill-humouredly academic. Unlike in the space of literature (fiction, poetry, essay or literary theory), or in that of the fine arts, the “postmodern” directions in the theatre as performed on our stages for more than a few decades are detectable almost exclusively in the comet's tail of all the other cultural-aesthetic practices, are drastically behind their times and, most noticeably, lack a polemically defining energy. In other words, they experience a kind of identity aphasia, lagging behind in the vague area of stylistic variations, without ever having crossed the threshold towards an aesthetic constitution (and it is ridiculously late today to imagine that this handicap can still be surmounted through sprightly leaps over various horizons of expectations).

Romanian theatre, as it is and such as it is, meaning the theatre on stages, not the one confined between literary covers (which is merely a proposition/challenge to which theatre-makers can choose to react or not), is, in a dismal tradition of sorts, allergic to concepts. It is bohemian and philosophises solipsistically, yet it does not take it upon itself to ask ontological self-legitimizing questions. It is, in other words, rather like a spoiled child, bred in luxury, born in the Eastern horizon of bourgeois Romania, as a symbolic product of an urban society in direr need of ornament than of sewerage, of villas with gold polished stuccos than of reliable schools, and of a promenade road than of many roads competently paved. This spoiled child, raised in the luxury that only parvenu sloth can supply (swiftly wiping away the constructive, gruelling, effort that ought to lie behind the circumstances of opulence), has learnt only with great difficulty, if at all, to raise serious questions on its own condition, functions, responsibilities, and powers.

Having swiftly bounced from the condition of budget-assisted figurehead of “national” culture to that of a cultural industry, just as centralised and budget-supported yet intended... “for the working people” (!?!), theatre in Romania has obstinately shunned any currents, trends, tribulations, transformations, changes of discourse or of content, even in the most dramatic moments of its existence. It has chosen rather to... adapt through books, or in other words, to adapt in its formulae, not its anxieties. This was true even in those sorrowful times when theatre was the... only direct and socially open form of artistic expression, as in the last years before the “revocoup”. Its heroism of survival, over which there was so much noise for more than a decade after the fall of the Berlin wall, was, to a critical extent, the result of the closure: it was the closure that preserved and exacerbated this “leisure” practice of urban populations, preserving and exacerbating the practices of theatrical discourse already established in the 1960s and ’70s. What came about this way was an exponential increase of... “author’s (read director’s) stylistics”, in parallel with the complete shutting off of any space of debate – or even respiration – that bore upon the theatre’s very condition for existence.

However odd it may sound, a discussion on Romanian theatre in postmodernity (or, more correctly said, in Vattimo’s train, in *late modernity*) seems to me inescapably pained as long as we do not raise enough distance between ourselves and the current literary practice. Without such a distance one could never distinctly grasp the fact that the theatre’s condition (self-assumed as often as not) is that of a museum exhibit proud of itself. I am ignorant as to whether the Romanian state of affairs is indeed unique, yet I have long tired to state again and again that the theatrical mainstream keeps banking on the favourable state of affairs, which is that of a prolonged and irresponsible childhood: theatre is because it was begotten, and it must be given because it will be given. Why it was begotten or whether it deserves to receive is... not its affair.

### *Theatre vs. Dramatic Literature*

What I think that one must accentuate from the very beginning, after this long and rather plaintive prologue, is, in Brook’s terms, the fact that Romanian mainstream theatre, for its

greatest part, is quite deadly, in spite of the fact that it is “beautiful” and precisely because it is “kicking”. As Brook said, genially, the deadly theatre is indeed “virulently alive”.

The first clear dimension, shell-like, surface-like, which strikes you when you look at the late modern theatrical landscape of Romania is the blatant and severe asynchronism between the dramatic literature and the stage production of the last two decades. The post-1989 dramatists, by which I mean those from the first post-revolutionary interval, excluding Matei Vişniec, but to some extent including those in his succession, had no directors, and continue not to. More precisely, **they have no directors from the class of the famous, the iconic, the export-ready**, but merely – in the happiest cases – from the class of professionals, often considered to be just “craftsmen”...

Let us not delude ourselves. The cultural interest in Vişniec’s post-Beckettian theatre came not so much out of the stage artists’ acute need to embrace his theatrical universe, but out of a sense of duty that descended upon certain theatres, urging them to curtsy at a Paris-confirmed “celebrity”. The fragmentarily academic dramatic constructions, the collage-like recompositions of theatrical clichés/mythemes signed by Horea Gârbea have hardly, if at all, established any partnerships with directors, which amounted to nothing. Vlad Zografî’s texts of the last decade, which, as I never tire to declare, are exceptional, have passed almost unnoticed, despite their excellent reception in literary circles: *Petru* has barely enjoyed two stagings, both much narrower than the ambit of the literary venture (which is in the late modern, reflexive-polemical line that has gained so much acclaim among the British through Howard Barker, among the Germans through Fassbinder, etc., while also receiving a dependable philosophical grounding through thinkers of Sloterdijk’s breed). *The King and the Corpse* enjoyed only a few performances, while *Oedipus in Delphi*, a play that has much to offer, even from the point of view of the naked performance, has never been staged.

A much more productive dramatist, because he is much more stubborn in his determination to be professional and comprehensive, Radu Macrinici (master of a singular poetical discourse, stemming both from a palimpsest-like scanning of the successive cultural layers enveloping being and the subject and from obsessive plunges into the individual and the collective unconscious) has been staged by a few fans in provincial theatres, and has come to be “patrimonised” while only one single play by him has ever been put on in Bucharest, namely *The Electric Angel* (directed by Radu Afrim).

In his own fashion, Macrinici is the Romanian dramatist that may, in letter and in spirit, have come closest to a genuinely appropriated trado-modern drive, if we only look at the fact that his texts, at core, thematise the idea of communication: communication that engenders the event – be it comic, tragic, conflictual, or dramatic – but is forever deviant from the causal point, an accidental one, which is that of the character expressing him/herself. Macrinici’s world deconstructs the fluid flesh of the word in plain sight, overthrows its significations through an operational “cleansing”, and reveals the tragic side of relativism<sup>1</sup>.

I, at least, still find it inexplicable (if not downright dumbfounding) that some of his most vibrant pieces, genuine carnivals of spirit, fantasy and depth, yet also free constructions, not in the least confined in a sacrosanct rhetoric, overflowing with subtlety and jovial at the same time [such as *A!Frica!* (Rom. *frica* = fear), or *T/\_ara mea* (*M/My Country*)] have never seen

the limelight; while others such as *Ping Body* or *Mama Lolita* have only enjoyed one single staging each. The former at least, written almost a decade ago, has finally come to be a show that captured the lively tone and interactive dynamics inscribed in the textual proposal (with Theodor Cristian Popescu as director).

An even more drastic situation is that of the newer generation of dramatists, coming straight from the literary field with lingering traces of that fragmentary and pamphleteering combinatorics, with rebellious pert touches, which is the province of postmodernism taking itself seriously: only one play of Caraman's, *Dead and Quick*, has been performed a few times, yet with no far-reaching consequences, while so many other plays have hardly ever seen the limelight, if at all; Dumitru Crudu has suddenly found himself in the position of an award-winning, yet barely staged, author, the TV production of one of his plays emerging rather like an inexplicable eccentricity. The saddest of all seems to me the case of Saviana Stănescu, a truly original and powerful author even before she left Romania, with a discourse that overtly declares itself postmodern, who has been staged only with works from her poetic-experimental stage, dating from almost a decade before; her theatre still remains a kind of *terra incognita* here, even if *The Inflatable Muse* came out in volume form – and three other plays in an anthology – already two years ago, even if in New York she is increasingly enjoying a well-deserved recognition, and so forth. Yet, as an actress symptomatically said at the radiant première of *Waxing West*: “You mean to say that those Americans really have a theatre?”

### *The Text of Representation as a Comparative Literature Essay*

There is an entire chain of reasons for the prolonged and disproportionate disinterest of directors belonging to the now peaking generation in dramatic texts contemporaneous to them/us, both Romanian and foreign. The prime reason comes directly from the protracted process of preservation that we have talked about in the prologue. On it a lot has been written (much by myself). Briefly put, we are talking about a two-headed dragon, one head full of the **mythology of the theatrical work as an auctorial work**, the other full of the **obsession of an essayistic-cultural-anthropological-comparatist constructivism**.

Formed, for their great majority, in a period (the 1970s) when the idea of a salvation through culture was maturing and one acquired a “personal” voice shaped on the templates (both abstract and psychoanalysis-dependent) of thematicism and archetypalisation, today's top directors, with very few exceptions, opt for performance as commentary. That, in semiotic terms, translates as a *dramatic text* lyrically constructed by none other than the directors themselves and “one use only”: this text is “cut out” to the direct and almost tutorial benefit of the *text of performance*, which is the finite show, the way we take it in sitting in the theatre hall. Most of the times, even if deep underneath the autonomous literary, classical, text still exists, the dramatic text generated by the director does not mean to be a mere interpretation of this fundament, but proceeds from it and uses it as a block start, in an adventure of reading very similar to that of the oneiric collage, driven partly by the vocation of self-portraiture, partly by that of a journal of readings/ideas.

There would be nothing unusual here, let alone anything bad. Except that the creative freedom set on a bibliographic-comparatist foundation has gradually become a ready-packed recipe for commercial success (in the eyes of the critics and of the producers-exporters, not in those of living audiences, which clap in timid astonishment and shrug as they leave the hall).

One may then justly speak of collage techniques and of the inter- and trans-textual de-centering that sweeps the archetypal away with the force of an imagistic tsunami as used to happen in Purcărete's large and polemically baroque compositions, such as *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth, Phaedra*, or even, more recently, in *Closing Night at the Fun Fair*. One may also speak of intertextuality substituting paradigm in the construction of significations (or, to put it differently, of the fact that the show begins to speak only vaguely about something, freely evoking other works instead; this shift is visible in the distance reached by Purcărete after *The Danaïdes* and by Mona Chirilă after *Servant for Two Masters*); or of the metalinguistic siege on the actual poetics of performative discourse (or, to put it differently, of the fact that the show directs its strategies chiefly towards exposing its own stylistics, as it happens in some of Tompa's celebrated shows, from the unparalleled *Bald Singer* to his much more edgy *Hamlet* or his recent *Lear*). One may just as well speak of the tendency for cultural contaminations to substitute themselves – excursionistically, even walking with kitsch on kitsch – to the message-bearing construction, pulverising the semantic flux (as it frequently happens in many of the serial constructions by Mihai Măniuțiu, increasingly independent of verbalisation, from *Săptămîna luminată* to *Mr Leonida*, and from *The Wedding* to the recent *A Hot Summer on the Iza*). And so on, in many gestures of “adaptation” to the late modern discourse procedures. Such adaptive appearances may even push one unsuspectingly towards the most dangerous of confusions: believing that one has sufficient elements to speak of an aesthetically constituted late modernity in the Romanian theatre.

Nonetheless, right from the outset, between Bob Wilson's dream of shaping the discourse of oneiric images, which defied any centralising/universalistic pretension, and the endless, “journal of ideas”-like, re-readings, or even quotes through self-quoting, of our great productions of the last decade **there is a considerable, and not purely formal, distance**. This distance relies, dramatically and self-destructively, especially on the “functional” mimicking of the largest associative freedom, while the **semantic nuclei**, such as they are, **are forever and totalitaristically universalistic**.

Differently put, how is it that nobody finds it strange, or at least discomforting, that the seamy and lyrical, self-exploring, theatrical discourse of the great Romanian shows is inexorably centered on the “great themes”? Man, sin, atonement, the religious condition, DEATH? (Not Mr. Jones's death, but the eternity of death...!) Temptation, the condition of the “chosen” man (the tragic hero again, what do you know!), the great migrations, the clashes and contaminations between civilizations, the end of history...? These are as many – plus a few more (but not a lot more) – topoi/themes, all preserving the (unacknowledged?) pretension of re-centering, of the final paradigm, even if merely a nostalgically reminiscent one, manifest through dazzling personal collages, sub- and sur-realist. All of them enforce the unique voice of a total author at the directing desk, who temporarily (yet this impermanence has lasted for decades now) usurps the position of the prophet.

Otherwise, in the world at large, the late modern associative and reminiscent machineries, winking at the addressee, often in a flippant and self-parodic mood, undermine, through their very functioning, all pretense at ultimate truth. What is at stake there is a lot less pretentious, and the fragmentalist, ephemeral, discourse strategies do not have the bombastic steadfastness doggedly meaning to “solve” something: all they can do, at best, is induce an extension of the critical spirit. Whereas here, the scenic constructions of our total authors resort, as usual, to the vehicle of kaleidoscopic stones (jumbled, diffuse, fragmentarist, encyclopedistic) **with the illusion** – a sad one at core – **that the spectator/public’s self becomes uplifted and reenters the transcendent order** through the simple exercise of empathising with their cultural and narcissistic commentary.

Is it possible to conceive a discourse of late modernity that valorises differences, yet remains logo(ego)centric? I find that to be a numbing paradox, a getting stuck in nonsense. My honest mind? I believe that our theatrical “postmodernism” is just as postmodern as, in its time, Mistress Chirița’s French was indeed French. Yet, as Brook said, this does not mean that it is dead, but merely that even this way, not fully begotten, it is sometimes quite “virulently alive”.

#### NOTE

- 1 “Now, with the passage from modernity to postmodernity, force appears to become signification, being to become word, and operating signifying. In the signifying rationality of postmodern culture, the operability of modernity actually triumphs. Communication is taken for signification, significations are taken possession of by mass-media technologies, and semantics are dominated by syntactics”. Aurel Codoban, “Postmodernismul, o contrautopie?” [“Postmodernism, a Counter-Utopia?”], in *Postmodernismul. Deschideri filosofice* [Postmodernism. Philosophical Openings], Dacia, Cluj, 1995, p. 99.