UNIVERSITY OF ARTS OF TÂRGU-MUREȘ

ABSTRACT

of the Doctoral Thesis

Title:

The Role of Directors in Creating Formal Structures and Languages in Romanian Theatre Performances of the 20th and 21st Centuries

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Introduction and Motivation

The doctoral thesis entitled *The Role of Directors in the Creation of Formal Structures and Theatrical Languages in Romanian Performances of the 20th and 21st Centuries* has as its "point of support," to quote Archimedes, the title of Paul Gauguin's famous painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*. These fundamental questions, formulated by Gauguin and obsessively fixed in the subconscious of numerous artists and researchers — as well as in my own — thus become the guiding thread of this exploration.

The questions mentioned above incite, unsettle, and urge reflection — prompting lucid evaluations of all artistic manifestations and, implicitly, of theatre, of its evolution, of the metamorphoses recorded in the staging of dramatic texts and in the languages practiced in relation to the actions of time as history, social reality, and aesthetics.

I initiated this investigation along the axis of past-present, within the wake of time, starting from a double conviction: first, that every future takes root in the past, that the ideals of humanity — whether destined for science, literature, or art — are nourished by the fascination of that past, where perspectives are born and take shape; and second, that theatre is communication, emotion, and "representation," according to Roland Barthes. My aim is to identify aesthetics and theatrical poetics in the Romanian theatrical space in relation to the European context.

By associating the concepts of theatrical languages with the idea of the evolution of Romanian theatre in the 20th and 21st centuries, capturing the transformations it has undergone, I distinguish four major stages, structured as follows:

- The emergence of theatre performances in Romanian and the first forms of theatrical organization.
- The affirmation of the concept of directing and of the director as the main visionary author.
- The existence of Romanian theatre under the pressure of censorship and the experimentation of new languages pointing beyond context.
- The explosion of creativity and diversification of forms after 1989, once freedom of expression was established.

This work is based on an extensive bibliography and on direct observations from my experience as an actress, then as editor and theatre critic — witness and evaluator of the phenomenon. This

implies combining the reading of numerous specialized works by various authors, creators' memoirs, volumes of theatre history, essays, and criticism with personal analyses of theatrical practice here and now, known directly from within.

The ultimate goal is to highlight the way in which directors have influenced not only theatrical art but also Romanian society as a whole, emphasizing the importance of the stage director in defining aesthetic directions and in shaping innovative stage languages. The director is seen as a creative force capable of unifying the contributions of actors, set designers, and musicians into a coherent vision, meant to convey a complex message to the audience.

In the chapter *Reforms and Directorial Poetics*, I focus on those who profoundly marked stage language, the structure of performance, and its relationship with the dramatic text, in particular the director's creative contribution. The emergence of the concept of directing has been interpreted by various researchers, sociologists, and anthropologists — Jean Duvignaud, Bernard Dort, among others — primarily through sociological explanations. To these is added, not least, the late George Banu, who, in his volume *The Reforms of Theatre in the Century of Renewal*, concludes:

"The 19th century announces the modern era through the instability of the social structure. Relationships may be jeopardized and even overturned. The latent Promethean spirit now imposes itself as the principal attitude, for the social field allows the assertion of the individual. Passivity becomes culpable. In art, the repercussions of such a mutation manifest through the decline of the prestige of exemplary models in favor of unprecedented artistic expression. (…) The director becomes an inventor of worlds, in constant motion, and thus the stylistic unity that characterized previous epochs is followed by the multiplicity of personalities and, consequently, of modes. Directing personifies the independence of modern man from statuary values and works. We may establish the following lineage: social Prometheanism – artistic originality – theatrical directing."

Thus, directing bears the responsibility of continually reshaping the dramatic work in accordance with social dynamism. The director enters the theatre equation only at the end of the 19th century, when the experiments of Stanislavski, Brecht, Piscator, and Artaud begin to prove essential. Expressions such as *affective memory*, *epic theatre*, *theatre of cruelty*, *grotesque theatre*, and *political theatre* come into circulation — later nuanced by Grotowski, Kantor, Brook, Strehler, Barba — and give rise to notions such as *poor theatre*, *laboratory theatre*, and *empty space*, concepts also embraced by Romanian directors Andrei Șerban, Aureliu Manea, Cătălina

Buzoianu, Silviu Purcărete, Alexa Visarion, Tocilescu, and others. Once directing is recognized as a distinct profession, theatre performances undergo shifts in content and form, with an emphasis on aesthetic effectiveness, within a permanent process of transformation.

Creativity and Form

In the subchapter *Creativity and Form*, the panoramic view of several European theatrical reforms and directorial aesthetics of the 20th century aims to sketch a synthetic, overarching image of theoretical programs and their evolution as determining factors in shaping stage languages. It demonstrates that theatre, in its essence as a performing art, has been, from its very origins, engaged in a complex process of metamorphosis.

Naturally, the working methods and theoretical premises offered by the aforementioned creators do not hold absolute truth and have their limitations. The purpose of this research is not only to recognize and reaffirm the current relevance of the pluralism of directorial doctrines but also to provide greater understanding and appreciation of the multiple dimensions of theatrical truth — by extrapolating realities of the past and present, installed along the past-present trajectory in a relationship of mutual conditioning.

Referring to some of the moments that marked the configuration of European theatre throughout the 20th century — such as Meyerhold's methods, followed by Kantor's happenings, postdramatic theatre, or Rimini Protokoll's performances — does not mean these are the only or most important. They are highlighted because they are repeatedly referenced in today's Romanian directorial practices. Sometimes they spark genuine creative energies, capable of stimulating inspiration and innovation; other times, they reappear epigonically in productions, especially by younger artists, presented as models of absolute originality. This is not necessarily to be condemned, since, as Roland Barthes states in *A Lover's Discourse*, "language feeds on language through reflexive and amplifying resonance effects."

The Evolution of Directing and European Influences in the Romanian Space

The historical context in Romania was not particularly favorable to the development of art and culture. The first theatre performances in Bucharest, as is well known, were in Greek. An artistic event with a stimulating contribution at the time, following a spontaneous initiative, took place in 1819 when "Romanian dilettantes, students of Lazăr's school," presented the prologue *Saturn* by

Iancu Văcărescu, written specifically to salute and encourage performances in Romanian. In Moldavia's capital, Iași, on December 27, 1816, documents and researchers note the first performance in Romanian, with the play *Mirtil and Hloe* by Salomon Gessner and Jean-Pierre Claris de Florian, translated and adapted by Gheorghe Asachi.

In 1848, when the Romanian state was not yet consolidated, construction began on the "Great Theatre" as a national institution, inaugurated in 1853. After the unification of Wallachia and Moldavia, according to historian Ioan Massoff, performances in Romanian and the Great Theatre as an institution became a "matter of national dignity." C. A. Rosetti, who served as director between 1859–1861, formulated a program whose main mission was "to shape the taste, mind, heart, and morals not only of the youth, but of society as a whole, of the hundreds of thousands of people who had neither the means nor the time to attend other schools." That is precisely what the theatrical movement and its artists lacked at the time: a school, trainers, and models. This is why young artists were often sent abroad, to Paris or Vienna, to see performances or "prepare roles with actors who had a reputation as pedagogues, and also to visit museums," as Ioan Massoff notes.

From 1875, director Alexandru Odobescu placed the title *National Theatre* on the building's frontispiece, as the theatrical phenomenon increasingly aspired to discover and assert its identity. The theatre was considered, as C. A. Rosetti wrote, "the highest tribune of a nation." The ascent of Romanian theatre in the late 19th and early 20th centuries was evident, gradually gaining relevance and acquiring an original aesthetic status, but also difficult, particularly regarding the fate of its main element — the actor — who faced an ingrate condition.

The first forms of Romanian theatre, developed in the 19th century, were dominated by the personality of the actor, who was the main exponent of artistic manifestations, not the director. The latter had only a secondary role, more that of a technical coordinator. This irrelevance of the director, as the organizing element of a performance, in the first decades of the 20th century, stems from the function attributed to theatre at the time. "For us theatre was a school, an educational tribune, a means to spread in a more agreeable, attractive, and accessible form principles, theories, exhortations that, not being delivered *ex cathedra*, could penetrate and bear fruit in the minds and souls of those to whom we dedicated our artistic efforts," wrote Lucia Sturdza Bulandra. Her assertion of theatre as an "educational tribune," recalled shortly before her death, remained valid until the end of 1947, when Romania was proclaimed a republic.

Indeed, in the interwar period (1918–1939), Romanian theatre was expected to *educate* the public. "The spectator is not yet educated," noted the critics. "They laugh loudly at lines that require a subtle smile, and they fall asleep at others that deserve enthusiastic applause. The conclusion is that the audience should be educated, not flattered, since for now it is poor, incompetent, and ridiculous," as Ioana Pârvulescu writes in *Return to Interwar Bucharest*.

Romanian theatre was still elaborating its identity, while following the dynamics of European artistic trends and transplanting them onto local stages by way of grafting. Only after 1918 did the director begin to be seen, alongside actors and playwrights, as a reforming element of the art of interpretation. "If in the early years of my career I knew theatre dominated by the personality of great interpreters, where 'staging' played an insignificant role, after the First World War I witnessed the director and the spectacular aspect of theatre coming to the forefront," recalled Maria Filotti.

The transition to a modern concept of directing took place at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, with figures such as Paul Gusty and Alexandru Davila, who introduced the principle of unity of vision. In the history of Romanian theatre, the name Paul Gusty (1859–1944) is inseparably linked with the notion of director. "Once the necessity of the director as the guiding hand of a performance was recognized, the artist who held that position gradually gained increasing authority. (…) The repertoire began to be significantly enriched by the director, especially at a time when the National Theatre staged operettas, farces, melodramas indiscriminately," wrote Ion Marin Sadoveanu, acknowledging in Paul Gusty and Alexandru Davila "the two founders of Romanian directing."

The first was influenced by the discipline of German theatre, the second by French theatre. The balance tilts more toward Gusty, without diminishing Davila's merits as a leader of theatrical life or his role in creating the first private theatre company, "The Davila Dramatic Company." Gusty also remains known as the author of the play *Vlaicu Vodă*. As Florian Tornea observed in the preface to Victor Bumbești's book on Gusty: "To affirm the national personality of our theatre and to consolidate its tradition on this basis — that was the chief concern that seems to have tirelessly guided Gusty's work."

In the social atmosphere of the time, achieving artistically unified, realistic productions "with a cast appropriate to ensuring the success of a play" became the goal of artistic experimentation.

Conscious of "the artistic limits" of Romanian theatre's hundred-year existence compared to the three or four centuries of Western theatres, Gusty built with rigor, relying on his "practical, artisanal convictions," and consistently sought to persuade authors and actors of the validity of his observations.

Though aware of artistic trends abroad, particularly German ones, Gusty maintained a reserved attitude toward French theatre. While Jacques Copeau, Charles Dullin, Gaston Baty, Louis Jouvet, and Antoine (with his *Théâtre Libre*) achieved great success in Paris and Berlin (where a group of young writers founded *Freie Bühne*, the German counterpart of the Parisian movement), Gusty remained more drawn to Otto Brahm, "a sui generis director" who cultivated "a genre of theatrical art with more of a literary ideal," harmonizing actors' performances into stylistic unity rather than proposing bold innovations.

Although he observed Max Reinhardt's experiments, Gusty avoided imitating his style, believing that Reinhardt's approach was "so personal — and at times so risky — that it never crossed his mind to replicate it." He objected to excessive use of lighting and visual effects, the shifting of focus from the stage to backstage sounds, and the overshadowing of actors' performances by decor and music.

Gusty's artistic conscience and craftsmanship admitted only the truth of life, relying on "intuition of reality and the power of systematic observation." He is credited with founding "the first organized school of directing" on the Romanian stage, largely aligned with Stanislavski's methodology. Gusty had read *My Life in Art* in French, seen Moscow Art Theatre productions in Berlin, and considered Stanislavski's method "an axiom of theatrical art," writing that "yes, the most important factor on stage has been and will remain truth—that is, the word."

If today we tend to neglect or forget the imprint of past eras, it is important to recall that Romanian theatrical aesthetics were defined by history, ideologies, and constraints. As Lotman wrote, "Culture is a system of signs, organized in a determined way. The element of organization, appearing as a sum of rules and restrictions, plays the role of a defining marker of culture." Applied to performance art, this means that the dramatic text, like literature, becomes a carrier of artistic signs through staging, and the performance is the *summum* of artistic possibilities expressed through its creator's theatrical language.

In the interwar period, Romanian theatre began to be influenced by major European trends.

Stanislavski's ideas on character construction and psychological realism spread through theatre schools; Meyerhold's biomechanics and constructivism inspired creators; Artaud's *theatre of cruelty* and Brecht's *epic theatre* offered new conceptual tools.

In the subchapter *On "Loss" in Romanian Theatre,* I explored the artistic horizons of leading theatre personalities in connection with the cultural dynamics of interwar society. The interwar bohemia flourished in theatre evenings that began at 8 or 9 p.m. and lasted past midnight, followed by dinners and champagne at candlelight. Cella Serghi recalls the premiere of Camil Petrescu's *Venetian Act* (January 9, 1931):

"Until the premiere of *Venetian Act*, I did not know that a premiere was different from an ordinary evening… Actors and actresses I had only seen on stage, writers, journalists, elegant women in low-cut dresses, perfumed, glittering with jewels — it seemed as if they were not waiting for the curtain to rise, but for a ball at the Court to begin."

Such images could create a false impression of interwar Romania. The reality had two antagonistic faces: one in diaries of Mihail Sebastian, Marin Preda, Jeni Acterian, and others, revealing misery, despair, agony, and ecstasy; and the protean reality of theatre and literature. The interwar period remains "a time when the world seemed like theatre and theatre like life, where one could imagine oneself in Bucharest, without effort or metaphor, 'as at the theatre—spectator or spectacle, director or directed,'" as Ioana Pârvulescu wrote.

The director Soare Z. Soare (1884–1944), a colorful figure of Bucharest, came from a boyar family and lived a tumultuous life, studying in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, and Munich, where he apprenticed with Max Reinhardt before returning to Romania. Nicolae Bălțățeanu described his productions as revolutionary for the National Theatre, particularly his *Merchant of Venice* (*Shylock*) (1924–25), which was praised for imagination, taste, and technical mastery. With Soare's productions, the spectacular entered Romanian theatre, and the director's name began appearing on posters.

Whether Romanian productions of the 20th century were original or imitations of Western models matters less. As Camil Petrescu noted, European theatre has always been in close interdependence: "The coefficient of originality in theatre must therefore be reduced to a degree that seems incredible to critical thinking. In this sense, theatre is truly an imitative art."

Other key reformers of Romanian theatre included Aurel Ion Maican (1893–1952), Victor Ion Popa (1895–1946), and Ion Sava (1900–1947). Though many of them had law degrees rather than

theatrical training, they introduced avant-garde, realist, and experimental approaches. Ion Sava, whom Liviu Ciulei later credited as the first to treat theatre as an intellectually disciplined art, staged a controversial masked *Macbeth* that became an experimental landmark.

Together with Soare Z. Soare, these directors marked the emergence of modern staging in Romania, preparing the ground for future generations. After their deaths, directorial languages did not diversify, remaining focused on simplicity, clarity, and respect for text — represented by Sică Alexandrescu.

It is striking that, while Brâncuși revolutionized sculpture, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu co-founded Dadaism, Victor Brauner was praised by Breton, and surrealist poets Naum, Pană, and Luca were recognized internationally, no Romanian director achieved European visibility in the interwar period. Likely because the theatrical programs and artistic directions of the time were strongly tied to the notion of "national foundations."

Romanian Theatre under the Totalitarian Regime

After the Second World War, following the nationalization of 1948 and the dissolution of private companies, Romanian theatre entered a stage in which the ideology of socialist realism was imposed. Three phases can be identified:

- **The 1950s:** The communist regime, fully established after the war, imposed strict control over the arts. Beginning in 1948, for about a decade, theatre—like all artistic genres—was removed from the sphere of aesthetics and turned into an instrument of propaganda, subordinated to false and dogmatic socio-educational imperatives, forced to obey the official ideology of "socialist realism," synonymous with the most oppressive stage of absolute proletcultism.
- **The 1960s–1970s:** A period of liberalization in which art eluded communist ideology. Theatre experienced an intense modernization. A brilliant generation of directors became active: Liviu Ciulei, Vlad Mugur, Horea Popescu, Lucian Pintilie, Radu Penciulescu, David Esrig, György Harag, Valeriu Moisescu, among others, some becoming increasingly prominent. They marked the phenomenon of "retheatricalization," reorienting the stage toward visual expressivity, metaphor, and rigorous directorial construction. Alongside them emerged the so-called "golden generation" of Romanian actors: Toma Caragiu, George Constantin, Gina Patrichi, Victor Rebengiuc, Mariana Mihuț, Mircea Albulescu,

Sanda Toma, Silvia Popovici, Amza Pellea, and others.

- **The 1970s–1989:** Almost two decades of light and shadow. The "light" lay in the appearance, year after year, of a whole pleiad of talented young directors who joined and continued the work of the masters. The productions of Ciulei, Mugur, Popescu, Pintilie, Penciulescu, Esrig, Harag, Moisescu, as well as those of the younger generation — Andrei Șerban (who, however, left Romania early), Aureliu Manea, Cătălina Buzoianu, Silviu Purcărete, Alexa Visarion, Dan Micu, Iulian Vișa, Tompa Gábor, Mihai Măniuțiu, Dragoș Galgoțiu, Nicolae Dabija, Alexandru Darie, Victor Frunză, Mircea Marin, Ioan Irimia, Mircea Cornișteanu, Alexandru Colpacci, among others — often offered, from one season to the next, performances of event value, despite political constraints and increasing vigilance from the authorities.

The most significant aspect of this period is that politics gave theatrical art two diametrically opposed directions. One was the traditional form promoted by the authorities. The other, boycotted by them, was subversive: a theatre of truth seen through ideology versus a theatre of truth that disturbed and was unwanted.

Although censorship was exercised both on dramatic texts and on productions, directors found subtle ways of introducing critical messages. Scenes were carefully inspected, and shows could be banned even before their premiere. In this context, Romanian directors developed a theatrical language of allusions and symbols, allowing them to transmit political and social ideas without being immediately detected by censors.

In the 1950s, during the changes imposed by the communist regime, theatrical practice returned to traditional forms, marked by realistic acting, in contrast to the avant-garde and experimental tendencies of earlier years. The principles of socialist realism promoted accessible art for the masses, reflecting class struggle, communist ideals, and the achievements of the working class.

Censorship played a dominant role in this process. Dramatic texts were scrutinized by censors, who modified them to align with party ideology. Decadent or subversive elements were eliminated. As a result, we can speak of a standardization of theatre, limiting creativity in favor of "educating the masses" through counterfeit, simplistic performances, usually centered on the communist hero devoted to the party's cause. Aesthetically, these works were null, subservient to aggressive conformism based on social norms and rigidity.

Yet we must not ignore the isolated but notable tendencies of certain directors and playwrights who are remembered as precursors of innovative ideas for theatre, later considered emblematic for the so-called stage of "retheatricalization" of Romanian theatre. Several articles published in 1956 — Liviu Ciulei's *Theatricalization of Painting in Theatre* (*Teatrul*, no. 2), Sorana Coroamă's *Audacity Is Where Art Begins* (*Contemporanul*, no. 12), and Radu Stanca's *Authenticity and Creation* (*Contemporanul*, no. 22) — marked the beginning of fruitful debates, recorded in controversial essays arising from polemics between young creators and the establishment (Aurel Baranga, Ion Șahighian, Sică Alexandrescu), as Miruna Runcan noted in her article *The Moment of Theatricalization* (*Dilema*, July 8, 2020).

All these debates targeted the phenomenon of directing itself and the role of the director in conceiving the performance. Particularly revealing in the 1960s was the impact of the idea of "generation" and "team." George Banu emphasized the "idea of group," distinct from the traditional "company," as it included a new political dimension: "through collective adventure, they sought to participate in and maintain social effervescence with a view to global renewal."

European influences continued to be increasingly felt: Romanian theatre borrowed elements from epic theatre, laboratory theatre, and avant-garde theatre, adapting them to the national context and shaping its own distinctive style.

Portraits of Masters

Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Pintilie, Vlad Mugur, and Radu Penciulescu — four directors to whom I will refer — contributed decisively, along with Dinu Cernescu, David Esrig, György Harag, Horea Popescu, and Valeriu Moisescu, to the process of re-theatricalizing the dramatic text, adopting an attitude of rejecting stage approaches stripped of aesthetic substance.

1. Liviu Ciulei

The aesthetic category claimed by Liviu Ciulei's productions revolves around the balance between past and present. He believed that "there are no irreconcilable contradictions between tradition and innovation, that genuine novelty can graft itself harmoniously onto the legacy of predecessors." Ciulei did not delimit the historical context; on the contrary, he gave it a contemporary dimension, dynamically and subtly grafted on multiple planes, anticipating through his own theatrical practice a new stage in Romanian theatre — an alignment with future theatrical aesthetics and languages.

Productions such as *As You Like It*, *Leonce and Lena*, and *Danton's Death* introduced a sophisticated visual language and an innovative directorial vision, rejecting the "beautiful" of interpretation "marked by classicism" and "ornamental declamation." In essence, Ciulei refused beauty as an ordering principle corresponding to a photographic reality, but not beauty as an element demanding theatricality, inventiveness, originality, and authenticity.

His work thus converged with that of other prestigious Romanian directors, aiming — as far as censorship could be deceived — to ensure the evolutionary process of the performing arts in Romania, situating it within the contemporaneity of up-to-date theatrical aesthetics, experiments, and languages practiced worldwide by illustrious personalities (playwrights, directors, actors), especially in the first half of the 20th century, if not earlier, and acknowledged as such by renowned theorists.

Whether poetic theories preceded or followed his productions, their merit was to have fixed in posterity's memory significant, reforming moments in theatre history. His productions displayed a re-reading of texts, classical or contemporary, often in consonance with the realities of Eastern countries, including Romania. Using a wide range of devices—from symbols and metaphors to satire and the grotesque, from layered lines spoken by actors to dissimulated analogies with the immediate present — Ciulei and his peers converted the message of theatre into themes of moral and political attitude, expressed in unconventional and authentic artistic visions.

2. Lucian Pintilie

From his very debut at Bulandra Theatre, with *Children of the Sun* (Gorky, in collaboration with Ciulei), *Fools Under the Moonlight* (Mazilu), *The Cherry Orchard* (Chekhov), *A Stormy Night* (Caragiale), and culminating with *The Government Inspector* (Gogol), Lucian Pintilie revealed his vocation as "an anti-sentimental director but an uncompromising examiner of the human condition," as George Banu observed, who considered himself the "companion" of Pintilie's international career.

His last show in Romania, *The Government Inspector*, became a landmark for the aesthetics of the 1970s and 1980s, but was banned after only three performances by a communiqué published in *Scânteia*, sealing its fate by announcing its suspension and banning it from all Romanian stages — thus creating the still-discussed "Government Inspector case."

Despite the scandal, Pintilie did not sever ties with Romania, unlike colleagues Vlad Mugur, Radu

Penciulescu, or David Esrig. As he later confessed in *Bricabrac*, he was granted "a passport with extraordinary privileges that allowed me to work seventeen years in the West, while colleagues from other socialist countries sank into alcoholism or struggled for years to obtain a passport." He concluded: "No, I was never a classic victim of the Securitate (censorship). I was a royal exile, a privileged dissident."

A champion of raw realism and a grotesque carnival style, his films—*Reconstruction*, *Sunday at Six*, *Why Are the Bells Ringing, Mitică?* (banned until after the revolution), *An Unforgettable Summer*, *Niki Ardelean, Retired Colonel*, among others — also interrogated the legitimacy of ideology, social norms, and power itself. His unmistakable artistic signature combined sharp efficiency, black humor heightened by caricature, and characters caught in situations that laid bare the ridicule, hypocrisy, and absurdity of the Romanian social system—transfigured by an extreme lucidity and artistic tension.

3. Vlad Mugur

Vlad Mugur described himself as "I was and remained a director of actors," one who created "metaphors through acting." His nonconformism owed much to his intellectual family background, where "homogeneity as style, analysis, and synthesis" became atavistic markers of a solid aesthetic.

After establishing himself in Bucharest and Craiova, in 1964 he moved to Cluj, becoming artistic director of the National Theatre until 1971. There, he revitalized the artistic quality of productions, staging *Iphigenia in Aulis* (Euripides), *The Master Builder* (Ibsen), *Caligula* (Camus), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Shakespeare). The latter two, staged just before he left Romania in July 1971, remain landmarks in Romanian theatre history.

Although his career in Romania ended in 1971, it was symbolically renewed in 2001, when he returned to mount a stunning *Hamlet* (Shakespeare) — a moving artistic testament that brought together a very young generation of actors with veterans of the stage. His credo in simplicity, essence, and the cult of the actor defined and consolidated his aesthetic program, enriched by life experience.

4. Radu Penciulescu

The name of Radu Penciulescu is tied to the founding of Bucharest's Teatrul Mic (The Small

Theatre) in 1964, where he was director until his resignation in 1968. Productions such as *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (John Arden), *The Deputy* (Rolf Hochhuth), *Two for the Seesaw* (William Gibson), and *Woyzeck* (Georg Büchner) secured his reputation as a leading director, "leaving the image of a creator full of energy, challenging yet lucid, amiable and non-aggressive, never cynical," advocating for "an ethical and political theatre."

He left Romania intending to complete his PhD but never returned, devoting himself mainly to pedagogy. His former students at IATC — Andrei Șerban, Petrică Ionescu, Alexandru Tocilescu, Alexa Visarion, Mircea Cornișteanu, among others — went on to become renowned directors in Romania and abroad.

Thus, in a totalitarian regime where theatre, stage languages, and art in general were subordinated to oppressive politics, suppressing freedom of expression and distorting artistic concepts, the subtle dynamics, coded languages, and personal artistic confessions of creators like Radu Penciulescu became a stimulating force. A "key" through which audiences could still encounter unvarnished truth and authentic art. The unifying banner of the artistic guild was solidarity in outwitting censorship. Theatre of this period became a space of cultural resistance, where audiences actively deciphered hidden messages, and the theatre hall, transformed into a space of inner freedom, acted upon them with a singular, powerful force.

Censorship and Its Impact on Creation

In Romanian theatre, too, the idea of the "collective adventure" functioned — the adventure of a team brought together in the creative process, prioritizing the collaboration between director, actor, and set designer, with the goal of achieving success, an artistic result of quality, in stage practice. But unlike the European stages — marked by experimentation, artistic innovation, and creative freedom — in Romanian theatre, where politics was the organizing factor, the director was forced to find subtle ways of navigating restrictions.

Today we regard as reformative the first generation of directors, all trained in the arts, which included figures such as Liviu Ciulei, Vlad Mugur, Lucian Pintilie, Radu Penciulescu, David Esrig, Dinu Cernescu, Valeriu Moisescu, Horea Popescu, and György Harag. Except for the last three, the others left the country one by one, returning only after the fall of communism in December 1989.

In the context of relative cultural openness, of years of creative effervescence, but also under the continuing political constraints — especially after the July Theses of 1971 — each director

contributed to the modernization of theatre by experimenting with new aesthetic forms and exploring profound themes that targeted realities other than those promoted by the authorities.

Unlike Western directors, who enjoyed great freedom in treating dramatic texts and in experimenting with performance spaces freed from traditional barriers between stage and audience, Romanian directors remained bound to the text, to its letter, still confined within conservatism, sometimes even to a form of realism with evident illustrative traces. Censorship affected not only the content of performances but also their forms of artistic expression. Directors were compelled to resort to metaphorical language, visual symbols, and ingenious staging solutions to avoid prohibitions. Paradoxically, this constraint stimulated creativity, fostering a theatrical style that was profound and subtle.

Though the paradigm remained unchanged, the means of expression diversified. Stage directors began to explore metaphorical, more poetic theatrical languages, emphasizing visuality and allegory as a subtext of narrative. Despite political pressures — or perhaps because of them — Blaga's words seem to capture the paradox precisely: "The paradox is of interest to us because it shows that we carry within our unconscious certain horizons that strive so much to express themselves that they do so even with means that seem inappropriate to the purpose."

The 1970s and 1980s were therefore a vibrant period for both the performing arts and Romanian dramaturgy. Through a selective bibliography, associating, synthesizing, and distinguishing, we attempt to define, vertically and in relation to the artistic style of visible personalities at home and abroad, the specific character of the investigated period.

Cătălina Buzoianu (1938–2019), Aureliu Manea (1945–2014), Alexandru Tocilescu (1946–2011), Alexa Visarion (b. 1947), Silviu Purcărete (b. 1950), Mihai Măniuțiu (b. 1954), Alexandru Dabija (b. 1955), Tompa Gábor (b. 1957), Victor Frunză (b. 1958) represent a succession of directors who, in a spirit of defiance, asserted their propensity for modernity and originality. Alongside socially coded language — often interpreted and received differently — they relied on the possibility of making the spectator their accomplice. From traditional to modern, harmonizing experience with experimentation, assuming creation as a mode of self-expression, these directors, as Ion Cocora notes, "liberated the performance, as much as possible, from facile convention, revitalizing its language and discovering its energies."

Theatrical Practice after 1989

The disappearance of censorship brought total freedom, but also new challenges. In the absence of a central authority, theatre became a space of extreme diversity, where classical productions coexisted with experimental and alternative forms. This openness encouraged innovation but also raised the issue of coherence in artistic directions.

The 1989 Revolution marked the beginning of an era of freedom and artistic effervescence. Romanian theatre opened to Western influences, and directors experimented with new forms of expression. Independent theatres appeared, offering alternatives to traditional institutions and tackling contemporary themes: corruption, migration, identity, power relations. Young directors explored minimalist means, multimedia, and performance, while established masters continued to stage large-scale productions. This diversity created a complex theatrical landscape, where tradition and innovation coexisted in constant dialogue.

Cultural phenomena in general, freed from the tutelage of those invested with the power to guide and control, regained their lost dynamism; evaluation became purely aesthetic. In other words, political interference in the creative process disappeared as a restrictive dogma. Politics became merely a thematic option, of interest only as a subject for plays or as raw material for documentary theatre. What mattered was revealing its tragic consequences for human existence, not using it as propaganda.

The post-December changes in society gradually showed their face. In the unleashing of creative energies —diversified on multiple levels — in the recovery of lost dynamism, long confronted with prohibitions on truth-telling and limits on inventiveness, at least four decisive factors played a role:

- The disappearance of censorship;
- The return of directors from exile;
- The high professionalism and competitiveness of those who had remained in the country;
- The continual emergence of young directors eager to assert themselves.

The results became increasingly evident in the way repertoires were built, in the modes of expression of directors, actors, and set designers, in the integration of dance and music into

performance discourse, in the use of cinematic projections, in frequent recourse to technological effects, eccentric costumes — some emphasizing sensuality, others nearly undressing the body. Nudity became a component of theatrical language, sometimes heightening eroticism, pleasure, and ecstasy, at other times descending into obscenity, grotesque naturalism, or caricature.

Added to this was the preference for texts devoid of verbal modesty, saturated with references to sexual organs and curses, which — being not even truly pornographic, as they did not express real states but remained falsely decorative — cancelled themselves out through overabundance, provoking no reaction.

Stage conventions diversified as well. Situations underwent extreme dilations, creating spaces where the imaginary, the parodic, trance, the oneiric, the grotesque, the visual, or the non-verbal reached paroxysm. Famous plays suffered radical interventions, ceased to hold supremacy in performance, and were subjected to unprecedented operations, appearing like disposable objects. Nobody was slapped for infidelity anymore. Nobody reproached anyone for mutilating Shakespeare or Caragiale.

Denying dramaturgy today the status of a literary work — supported by fanciful contemporary voices — means transforming it into a disposable object, reducing it to raw material for performance and nothing more. Of course, a performance can be made out of anything: a text considered a masterpiece, but also a newspaper article, a document, or an everyday event. We often see performances with scripts written or rewritten by directors, or weak improvisations by occasional playwrights.

Hundreds of pages theorize postdramatic theatre, even usurping the myth that theatre is based on a play. Performance itself now varies radically from one director to another. Traditional forms of communication, even those visibly outdated, alternate with the latest modes, establishing palimpsestic relations — old traces remain visible, but the manner of presentation and interaction with the audience's taste differ.

George Banu is right to remark pertinently, in drawing a parallel between yesterday's theatre and today's: the former derived from adapting to norms — verified poetics and languages — while the latter grants exclusivity to the object, apparently ignoring method, though in reality reinstating it in a new sense.

Young Directors

Felix Alexa carries an aura of the *classical* among his generation of colleagues, favoring gravity and rigor, where inventiveness and stage writing derive from an in-depth reading of the text, materializing in a balanced discourse, rigorously constructed, and focused on the dramaturgical fable and the relationships among characters. Felix Alexa reads each text he stages as an object of meditation on existence and destiny, on history and the present. In fact, these four dimensions are not approached separately but subordinated to an integrative directorial discourse. They form a unified body, in full harmony with his stylistic means of expression.

At first glance, Felix Alexa does not seem the type of director to experiment formally on the outside, but rather within the text itself. Avant-garde experiences in the evolution of theatre or in current practices are not ends in themselves, designed to shock at the level of stage writing, but rather are shaped according to what he wants to say, not how he says it. His modernity comes from the substance of the text. This is where he works and seeks novelty. In one word: authenticity. He favors stylistic balance and rigor, supported by direct or indirect analogies with his own thinking and sensibility, both existential and philosophical. This is why one leaves his performances with the awareness of having participated in a theatrical ceremony solidly built as vision and language, with admirable acting.

Radu Afrim experiments in his productions at every level. Yet his experimentation is framed by searching — it is not an end, but a means, marking both existential and aesthetic evolution. He works with a wide range of typologies, affirming originality, vigor, and dramatism, doubled by sarcasm and biting satire. He stands among the most representative voices, at home and abroad, establishing a singular direction, turned — as an Eminescu verse says —toward "Forever the day of today." From this perspective, in his productions the issue of the self coexists with universal human concerns in various guises (social, political, familial, erotic, etc.).

Although not always comfortable, his works are ultimately received thanks to their coherence and transparency. Each of Afrim's productions carries, in my view, a double meaning: first, as a standalone work of art. This does not mean, however, that they are of equal weight. Their scope varies. At times, the overload of ideas and symbols, of ambiguous subtextual connotations derived from rewriting the text into personal theatrical languages — often baroque-metaphorical — can strangle clarity of message, pushing it onto a winding, imprecise path. But this also represents a set

of discoveries and accumulations that cannot be ignored in future stagings, a revalorization in other contexts, on other dramaturgy. This does not stem from creative exhaustion leading to mannerism, but enriches a theatrical language that proves its vitality in continual renewal and strengthening.

Afrim's theatre always reveals an unreality that becomes reality, and a reality that becomes unreality—as Jung (in contrast with Nietzsche) puts it: "for what I had in mind was this world and this life." The everyday transcends, subjected to the passage of time, both forward — into the future — and backward — into the past, into the imaginary, with maximum effect. Complex though it may be, Afrim's mechanism unfailingly reaches its goal. This represents the essence of theatre for Radu Afrim, shaping substance, themes, performance form from one text to another, vision, and metaphors unfolding in unpredictable alternation: from abundant imagination to stark realism, from terrifying emotions to discretion and lyrical tenderness, from minimalism to excessive baroque, from technological means (projections, devices) to elements of other art forms (dance, music, circus, acrobatics).

Gianina Cărbunariu, about a decade younger than Felix Alexa and Radu Afrim though debuting around the same time as the latter, works consistently and with excellent results exclusively in the realm of documentary theatre—both as *witness* to the present and the past. She dives with passion and imagination into political and social realities of today as well as history. In an earlier interview with *Yorik* magazine, she clearly expressed her credo: she does not make documentary theatre, but uses documents to create performances. It becomes evident that her absolute obsession is to promote a dramaturgy of the real, based almost exclusively on documentation.

In her scenarios, she focuses on events circumscribed factually to specific times and places. It does not matter whether they are lived experiences, cut from immediate reality without the necessary distance to avoid subjectivity, or historically documented. In both cases, they are recounted according to a non-restrictive logic, ensuring a fictional dimension with metaphorical virtues. Thus, the message generalizes, no longer subordinated exclusively to its source. The situations presented, existential and philosophical, highlight transformations that tragically and emotionally alter the status of individuals. The spectator learns not only of terrible acts of injustice, oppression, and shocking errors but also of crises and degradations of humanity.

Her characters, whether suffering atrocities (sometimes fatal) or appearing in collateral situations, never remain mere victims, regardless of unjust circumstances shaping their destiny. They appear

as distinct identities with notable psychological depth, far from being mere vessels for bitter truths. Admittedly, playwright Gianina Cărbunariu sometimes fails to avoid discursiveness or literary heaviness inherent in documentary material. But director Gianina Cărbunariu compensates with imagination and mastery, charging every scene with tension and projecting it into a sequence of steadily escalating accumulations. Though programmatically rooted in documentary and minimalist theatre, her directorial discourse is not exclusive, often embracing elements of baroque or even oneiric styles.

Catinca Drăgănescu, Andrei and Andreea Grosu, and Botond Nagy are early-career creators offering incisive, often shocking stage approaches. They start from classical premises but overturn and expand them, aiming to stress the idea of the biological cycle.

For example, *The Seagull* (Chekhov), staged at the Odeon Theatre by the Grosus, though received reluctantly by traditionalists, defied prejudices. Their directorial reading and staging emphasize disintegration of the individual, life's precarities, and vanities, reinterpreting both society and its mirror—theatre. Their *Seagull* grinds and grates, perhaps even irritates—their vocalizations are unlike the familiar ones.

The same play, staged at the "Ioan Slavici" Theatre in Arad by Catinca Drăgănescu, became *[zǎ] Pescăruş*, a hip-hop vision where she overloads ideas, themes, and wild solutions, clearly using Chekhov's text without inhibition. Botond Nagy, at the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre in Sibiu (German section), applied a similar practice to *Macbeth*. Shakespeare is the one sacrificed. By reducing the play without altering the diegesis, cutting characters down to four—Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Witch, Banquo, and Macduff—surprisingly all performed by the same actor distinguished through costume elements, he built an interdisciplinary performance linked to imagery of the war in Ukraine. With a symbolic opening, the play suggested history's implacable repetition, confronting fictional and documentary time.

His *Macbeth* is cruel, devoid of emotion, a parable-installation overflowing with symbols and cultural references, not always justified, but articulating the ideologies tormenting this young director.

Unlike his colleagues, Bobi Pricop seems especially drawn to contemporary playwrights who address social issues questioning identity, relationships with others and the self, rights and freedoms, and religion. He integrates new technologies — multimedia, video, live camera feeds —

into minimalist theatre formulas, but with the skill to avoid clichés, discovering theatricality beyond words, capturing energies from unexpected places, reformulating convention through expansion, and imposing a theatre-debate structure within experimental frameworks.

Shakespeare Rewritten by Directors

An important chapter of the thesis is devoted to the reinterpretation of classical texts, especially the plays of William Shakespeare. *Hamlet* becomes a testing ground for Romanian directors such as Dinu Cernescu, Liviu Ciulei, Alexandru Tocilescu, Tompa Gábor, and Vlad Mugur — the order reflecting the premiere dates — each of whom brings a personal vision to the play's universal conflicts. In the memory of Romanian theatre, for example, the prince's famous line "To be or not to be" continues to challenge generation after generation of actors. Great names — Constantin Nottara, George Vraca, Gheorghe Cozorici, Ștefan Iordache, Ion Caramitru, Adrian Pintea, Marcel Iureș, Sorin Leoveanu, Andrei Huțuleac, and many others — have, over time, tested their talents by performing such a complex and ambiguous role as Hamlet.

I will not attempt to foreground performances from the first half of the twentieth century or earlier: these risk appearing anachronistic to us because we lack the codes needed to fully understand the reception and mentalities of those times. As readers of Jan Kott's legendary *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (written in the 1960s), we inevitably return to that work; of course, our perception has undergone significant changes — not only regarding the playwright Kott studied, but also in the way we approach and read the classics. Their contemporaneity becomes a basic imperative, the key that opens the doors to their oeuvre. "Is Shakespeare still our contemporary?" asks — and answers — John Elsom in his book of the same title.

From this perspective, and referring to well-known Romanian stagings of *Hamlet*, I believe it is reasonable to attribute to each production, in terms of artistic vision and interpretive method, a certain belonging to the spirit of its time — to the coherence and originality of particular national realities as staged. Under the influence of communist ideology in Eastern Europe (and here as well), historical plays "unleashed the dams of political metaphor" in the 1970s–80s, in Jan Kott's sense. In this political context, Dinu Cernescu staged *Hamlet* (with Ștefan Iordache) at the "C. I. Nottara" Theatre. The scenography was by Helmuth Sturmer — the same designer who, years later

and under different political and social conditions, collaborated with Vlad Mugur at the National Theatre in Cluj on a new vision of *Hamlet* in the early 2000s, this time as the expression of a direct, existential meditation and as a kind of testamentary act for the director.

In Ciulei's *Hamlet* (Bulandra Theatre, early 2000s), the aesthetic vision is subordinated to a temporally delimited context recognizable as nineteenth-century — particularly through Octavian Neculai's set and Nina Brumuşilă's subtly personalized costumes, without excessive localizing detail. The cast, composed of generations of actors at the peak of their careers and featuring Marcel Iureș as the prince, delivered impeccable performances. One question that has haunted me since watching the production online — and perhaps one I overlooked at the time — is why the director cast an actor whose biological age approached fifty as Hamlet, while Horatio, the prince's friend, was played by someone only slightly older than half that age. Was it accidental, or intended to communicate a specific message? In an interview, Liviu Ciulei said he was constantly interested in the "image" and the "pulse of our time." From that credo he proposed a poetics of passage whose general climate is one of doubt and existential unrest. In my view, the chronological age gap is intentional: it gives the two Shakespearean figures archetypal value, situating them within a repetitive history in which one's memory is projected into the other. Ciulei allows for the hypothesis that Horatio might also be perceived as Hamlet's double, not merely as witness and narrator of events.

A comparison among five stage versions of this monumental Shakespearean text radically alters the performative discourse as substance, returning the text's philosophy and meanings to universality and removing both strict "here-and-now" local aggiornamento and particular staging language, sign, and character configuration. These stagings shift the emphasis decisively toward a non-conjunctural tragic. If Ștefan Iordache is recognized as the Hamlet of the 1970s, the gallery of portrayals can be completed by Ion Caramitru's Hamlet at the "Lucia Sturza Bulandra" Theatre in the 1980s. In a dense essay-commentary *Hamlet: from Lucidity to Sacrifice,* devoted to the directorial visions of the 1980s, Cocora argues, among other things, that the "Tocilescu impulse" was received by Tompa as a provocation; Tompa's first *Hamlet* at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj (season 1987–1988) either took up and developed some of those suggestions in new terms or rejected others, and it also had visible implications for form, especially in how collaborators worked together to elaborate the directorial vision.

The esoteric, often nonverbal language — translated into meaningful images, paroxysmal

reactions, silences, and allusive conspiratorial details — is incorporated into a distinctive aesthetic that, in both directors, surpasses not only traditional visions but also those officially sanctioned at home. Tompa Gábor does not aim for an absolutely radical or definitive artistic statement; he does not intend to close the book on *Hamlet* once and for all. Rather, as time has shown, he treats Shakespeare's masterpiece as an obsession to which he returns in multiple productions that provide evidence of originality, offering new approaches and shades, and demonstrating that reading and interpreting a classic dramatic text — its existential and philosophical references — speaks deeply to contemporaneity and aligns with the director's lived experience at the moment of creating. After 1989 Tompa returned to the play with versions at the "Marin Sorescu" National Theatre in Craiova (starring Adrian Pintea) and, more recently, with a 2021–2022 production at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj. In each variant, viewed through the lens of the present, the direction nuances fundamental themes — life/death, love/hatred/betrayal, psychological crises, socio-political events — reactivating the energies and issues of Shakespeare's play. Whereas in earlier productions Tompa was interested in tragedy at the level of the individual, in the later versions he extrapolates the center of gravity toward the tragedy and decay of a world, demonstrating the text's vitality and its capacity to reflect contemporary realities. Shakespeare thus becomes a dialogical partner for modern society, and the production a provocative landmark for audiences and critics alike.

General Conclusions

The thesis demonstrates that the director is the central figure in contemporary theatre, responsible for creating a unified vision and for developing stage languages capable of expressing the complexity of the modern world. From the first modest experiments of the nineteenth century to today's grand productions, Romanian theatre has undergone a continuous process of transformation and adaptation. Thanks to the contributions of major directors, the Romanian stage has integrated into the international circuit while retaining its national specificity. The director is not merely an artistic coordinator but a visionary who shapes audience perception and influences cultural evolution. The study thus highlights the theatre's importance as a space for reflection, dialogue, and social transformation.

My double artistic vocation places me simultaneously inside and outside the theatrical process: as an actress I understand the intimate mechanisms of stage creation; as a critic I adopt the analytic distance necessary for objective evaluation. The methodology derived from this dual training entails a constructive tension between empathy and distance — between the lived experience of the creative process and the need for detailed, argued analysis. With a methodology founded on combining artistic sensitivity and evaluative rigor, I seek to deconstruct the internal mechanisms of theatrical creation and to analyze them lucidly. When I investigate theatre's historical time, I strive to become aware of, understand, and capture — in the act of reading — the aesthetic intentions contextualized within a particular reality. The dual vocation is not a source of conflict but rather an instrument for enriching the critical perspective: a form of knowledge that associates artistic intuition with theoretical discernment in the service of theatre.

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