

Miruna RUNCAN, *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea în România (1920–1960)* (Theatricalisation and Re-theatricalisation in Romania [1920–1960]) 2nd Edition (Digital) (Bucharest: LiterNet, 2014), 200 p.

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At the end of last year, the online publisher LiterNet.ro, hosted by the digital platform of the same name, made available to the Romanian-speaking readers, free of charge and in .pdf format, the second revised and completed edition of Miruna Runcan's volume *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea în România (1920–1960)* (Theatricalisation and re-theatricalisation in Romania [1920–1960]).¹ Since the first (hard copy) edition of the book, published in 2003 by Eikon Publishing House in Cluj-Napoca, was very well received by the theatre scholars, it sold out quickly and, therefore, it did not benefit from the dissemination it deserved. Three years earlier, the author had published another volume of "theatre criticism and anthropology," called *Modelul teatral românesc* (The Romanian theatre model) (Bucharest: Ed. UNITEXT, 2000), which became an almost mandatory point of reference in the discourse of the new generation of theatre critics, playwrights and directors trained in the first decade after the fall of the Romanian communism. On the one hand, the book gathered the young generation's concerns, questions and especially their discontent regarding the state of the Romanian theatre, by accurately identifying its "ailment," which she named the "exclusive theatrical model" (a phrase that denounced the absence of the actual performance alternative, regarding both the construction of the work and the level of addressability); on the other hand, it became the (theoretical) spearhead of those who wanted to disrupt the domination of the "theatrical model" described by the author – a real statement against the patrimony-oriented manner of making theatre in Romania and its backing institutions (the repertory theatre, the national theatre, the higher schools of theatre). However, the author was not satisfied with this first "swift description of the exclusive model" (in her own words) and she returned to *Teatralizarea și reteatralizarea...* with a considerably wider perspective of the issue and with a history of the said model. Therefore, the book traces the "evolution of an aesthetic idea," starting from its emergence, meaning from the interwar period, when several directors and writers initiated the movement of "theatricalization" of the Romanian theatre, to its reaffirmation, toward the end of the 1950s (the movement of

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¹ The book is available for download at: <http://editura.liternet.ro/carte/314/Miruna-Runcan/Teatralizarea-si-reteatralizarea-in-Romania-1920-1960.html>

“re-theatricalization”), when “the idea,” developed late because of history accidents and because of the ultra-conservative mentalities of the place, settled in the performing arts pattern to be established throughout the communist period, and has since continued to dominate the Romanian stage (even if its prestige – at least the critical prestige, if not even the “box office” one – has shrunk visibly since the publication of *Modelul...*, in 2000). Writer, theatre critic and professor at the Faculty of Theatre and Television of the Cluj-Napoca “Babeş-Bolyai” University, Miruna Runcan has organised her volume rigorously academically (in fact, to help students and others, the author has significantly extended the reference apparatus in this second edition of the book), but with disguised sympathy for the promoters of the movement of theatricalisation and re-theatricalisation of the Romanian stage in the described time interval. Polemic emphases are also present; in fact, like in *Modelul teatral românesc*, they target – an aspect now obvious – not only “the model” as such, but also the “tardiness” in the shifts of place-specific mentality, which considerably hindered its gestation and subsequent assertion and which equally hinders, nowadays, the efforts of surpassing it and/or the birth of the authentic theatrical alternative.

In the interwar period, theatricalisation, “a distinctive phenomenon of our slow modernity” (which struggles to survive even if its “evolutional cycle” has been completed a long while ago, according to the author), was a relatively fragmented and hesitating movement, theoretically speaking, for the affirmation of the primacy of setting and direction over the dramatic text; in other words, the primacy of performing arts autonomy over dramaturgy, literature and the other arts. Re-theatricalisation, however, was a form of resistance to the interference of the political in art rather than a new theatrical charge. Thus, at the end of the “obsessive decade,”² the advocacy of the autonomy of the performing arts became a barely disguised protest against the ideological pressures exerted by the communist authorities on theatre. The autonomy of the performing arts was defined and negotiated in (conflicting) relation with the commandments of the single party, on matters of artistic creation, and against the famous doctrine of the Soviet-inspired socialist realism doctrine, rather than in relation to the other arts.

The first part of the book (nearly three quarters of it) is dedicated to the theatre between the two world wars. The author archives and comments on the Romanian artists’ contacts with the Western theatrical world (direct contact or contact via readings), the attempts of synchronisation with the newest tendencies of the performing art in France, Germany, Austria, Russia, Italy or England, the standpoints of the most important directors, playwrights or scholars (sometimes all three in one) interested in the theatrical phenomenon related to the issue of the modern stage art, as well as a series of representative performances signed by the main artisans of theatricalisation (Victor Ion Popa, G. M. Zamfirescu, Soare Z. Soare, Aurel Ion Maican, Ion Sava). The subsequent conclusion is that, at the dissemination of ideas, the Romanian theatre and culture specialists were perfectly linked to the Occidental theatrical mind-set in the interwar period, being acquainted with what was happening in the field. For example,

² The phrase, coined by prose writer Marin Preda, went a long way in the Romanian literary sphere; it concerned the 1950s, during which a considerable part of the first and most brutal phase of Romania’s communisation took place.

Haig Acterian, writer, director and at the same time a remarkable theatre reviewer, exchanged correspondence with Gordon Craig, on whom he also published a book of familiarisation (*Gordon Craig și ideea în teatru* [Gordon Craig and the idea in theatre], 1936), while the English scholar wrote the preface to Acterian's paper *Pretexte pentru o dramaturgie românească* (Pretexts for a Romanian Dramaturgy), also published in Bucharest, in the same year. However, the best reference to this end is *Modalitatea estetică a teatrului* [*The Aesthetic Modality of Theatre*] (1937), a very original "treatise on the aesthetic making of modern theatre" written by Camil Petrescu³ – admittedly, with a theoretical scope unique in the Romanian space. Thus, despite the aforementioned aspects, the author is bound to note, at a point, "the categorically eclectic, 'culturalist' manner in which theoretical and practical influences enter" the local theatrical environment. Even at some of the most eager partisans of theatricalisation, who were part of the avant-garde of the Romanian theatrical movement,⁴ the author detects more than once a distinct reluctance in the assertion of the full autonomy of the performance over the text; she explains it by their double training: as theatre scholars AND as men of letters – amongst them some of the most valued playwrights. They were represented by Camil Petrescu, Victor Ion Popa or G.M. Zamfirescu. Even though other "theatricalisers" did not lack a penchant for the visual arts (for example, Victor Ion Popa, a skilled drawing artist and scenographer, in addition to being a director and a playwright), it seems that in the case of Ion Sava, his vocation as a visual artist seems to have been predominant and it decisively influenced his view of theatre in the direction of the total emancipation of the performance from the domination of the word. Therefore, the author sees Sava as *leader* of the movement of theatricalisation which coincided, she notes, with the rise of setting and of scenography in the hierarchy of the arts that participate in the making of a representation. Thus, more often than not the supremacy of the representation over the text was disputed starting from the setting-related issues; even more frequently, the discussions regarding the setting (scenery) were marking, in fact, the real background problem of the autonomy of the performance. The interwar theatre practitioners and reviewers' or theorists' increasingly marked interest in scenography and scenery is explained by the fact that theatricalisation and, later, re-theatricalisation meant, according to the author, "both conceptually and practically (...) the gradually revealed and installed primacy of the image-metaphor"; Radu Stanca, one of the frontrunners of the movement of re-theatricalisation in the post-war period and an excellent poet, playwright and director, would write a vivid essay called *Metafora în arta regiei* [*The Metaphor in the Art of Directing*] on this image-metaphor (1957). Unfortunately, Sava's generation, i.e. the generation of the inter-war "theatricalisers," was shattered much too early, their searches being suppressed brutally, by the premature physical disappearance of some of its most important representatives (Sava himself, not long

³ Camil Petrescu (1894–1957), important Romanian novelist, playwright, theatre theorist, philosopher, poet and journalist. Director of the Bucharest National Theatre from February to December 1939; left his mark on this institution through the Seminar of experimental directing he taught in there in 1945–1946.

⁴ We note that avant-garde theatrical experiments were a strictly marginal, non-essential phenomenon, although two of the most important representatives of the Dada movement, Tristan Tzara and Marcel Iancu, came from Romania.

before he put on stage, in 1946, a memorable representation after *Macbeth*, with masks; Soare Z. Soare, Mihail Sebastian or Victor Ion Popa). But even without these disappearances, the war and then the installation of the communist regime would change their crumbling world forever.

In the second part of the book, Miruna Runcan mainly approaches the 1956–1957 “theatre moment” which coincided with a short-lived period of relative ideological “relaxation/thaw,” allowing some degree of emphasis, by public stances, in the journals *Contemporanul* and *Teatrul* (the latter being founded in 1956), and then the January 1957 Counsel of the theatre specialists, of the representatives of the second generation of “theatricalisers” or the Romanian theatre. After a very useful introduction to the new political, social and cultural context created after the end of the Second World War, the author succinctly describes and analyses the points of view regarding the various aspects of the post-war Romanian theatre – such as the organisation and functional errors of the theatre institutions, the role and meaning of stage directing, the deficiencies in the Romanian theatre education or the condition of young practitioners of the theatre art – expressed in the aforementioned journals by a number of then recently affirmed theatre scholars, along with the corresponding “adjusting” reactions of the “former masters”. The debates prompted by young directors such as Val Mugur, Mihail Raicu, Sorana Coroamă, George Rafael and Radu Stanca, who were later joined by Liviu Ciulei, Lucian Giurchescu, Miron Niculescu, scenographer Toni Gheorghiu or poet Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, concluded with the Report of the “V.I Popa” Circle of Young Directors, presented within the aforementioned Counsel and “signed, in order, by: Liviu Ciulei, Sorana Coroamă, Gheorghe Jora, Lucian Giurchescu, Vlad Mugur (son of the director Val Mugur, *my note*), Dan Nasta, Horea Popescu, Miron Niculescu, Mihail Raicu, George Rafael, George Teodorescu”. The young directors’ challenge was answered (on opposing positions) by the prolific writer and playwright Victor Eftimiu (several times director of the Bucharest National Theatre), by the directors Ion Șahighian (peer and rival of Ion Sava, who did have some real professional qualities and who later joined the side of the “reaction”), Marin Iorda and, especially, Sică Alexandrescu, and then (cutting a distinct figure) the literary critic G. Călinescu, the actor and pedagogue Ion Finteșteanu or Aurel Baranga, the star of the new official, party dramaturgy. Sometimes surprisingly, they were defended by characters such as Ion Marin Sadoveanu (prose writer and fine theatre scholar, one of the important promoters of theatricalisation in the interwar period, but ready to compromise with the communist power and appointed director of the first stage of the country in 1956; he thus became one of the targets of the young generation’s more or less direct criticisms), N. Massim, theatre scholar Simion Alterescu, young theatre critic Valentin Silvestru, director and pedagogue G. Dem. Loghin and, a fairly relevant fact, literary critic and historian Paul Cornea who, at that time, was director of the General Directorate for Arts in the Ministry of Culture. These polemic discussions, triggered by the collective initiative of the young generation, had a threefold impact: first, through the theoretical clarifications they prompted, they contributed to resuming the “thread of theatricalisation,” in the author’s words, i.e. the restoration of the relationships with the inter-war theatre attitude, which “gave to the definition (of theatricality, *my note*) at least its natural finality, if not even the prospective scope”; then, regarding the director’s role, they drove “the assertion, within the possible limits, of its freedom of

creation in relation to all the forces engaged in the representation and to the ideological-aesthetic dogmas of the age”; last but not least, they encouraged the artists who had already taken the path of “re-theatricalisation” of the Romanian theatre and those who would follow them. “The auspicious circumstances of this moment would not remain unexploited – says the author –, which proved that the natural evolution of an artistic movement cannot be stopped, it can only be decelerated, briefly, by the chains of the repressive system”. At the end of the book, following the analysis of some of the stage representations by the members and followers of the Young Directors’ Circle from the perspective of the theatricalising poietic practised by their creators, the author reiterates the limitations of the representation model they proposed and which is furthered by their imitators, in line with a “synthetic and poetic realism,” because “re-theatricalisation establishes (...) a kind of ‘traditionalist’ version of theatricalisation, the one in which the performance is a channel and its text is a message; but this temporary establishment is also joined by a smooth and gradually more widely acknowledged aesthetic and functional autonomy of the text-performance pair, represented as a standalone creation”. Or, systematically fostered, autonomy has come to mean more and more often the isolation, the “enclaving” of the theatrical performance in relation to contemporary dramaturgy (the interwar representation did not communicate too consistently with it either, notes Miruna Runcan, despite the dramatic directors’ and authors’ freedom of expression) and, perhaps an even more severe reality, in relation to its own audience.

The second edition of the book also includes an addendum, a text published by the author in 2007 in the journal *Observator cultural*, after she read, eight years into its publication, the volume *Istoria critică a filmului românesc contemporan [Critical History of the Contemporary Romanian Film]* (Bucharest: Meridiane, 1999), signed by the film critic and historian Valerian Sava. Coup de théâtre: the reading of this book prompted the author to discern a new possible scenario, in which the 1956–1957 ideological opening and relaxation, marked by press debates and similar meetings of theatre and film experts, appear to be directed by the authorities of the age. Even though the participants to these seemingly **arranged** debates, scheduled by the leaders of the moment, were generally honest minded (meaning mainly those from the “liberal” side of the young directors), the rights they had gained at that time could hardly be considered, from this less glorious perspective, rights they had earned with great efforts; instead, they look like rights “allowed by the police”. Thus, “in retrospect, what looked like a natural reflex of defence and reassessment of their own tradition, be it a reflex limited by the heavy chains of the ideological-repressive apparatus, seems in fact an official form of ‘synchronisation’. With the East rather than with the West, this time.” Therefore, this could be a reform driven first in the upper levels of the power and later felt at the basis – apparently, as the author believes, in the wake of the convulsion triggered by Khrushchev’s revealing report, which had condemned the “excesses” of Stalinism. However, since history does not allow its classification, and critical approaches and revisions such as those written by Miruna Runca or Valerian Sava are exceptional in the Romanian culture, new revelations are imminent.

Translated from the Romanian by Magda Crețu