

New Romanian Drama&Film – mirror of the society or hammer to shape it?

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motto: "Art is not a mirror to reflect reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.

Bertold Brecht

Curtains and Iron Curtains: West-East, WE

Alex Drace-Francis, professor at School of Slavonic and East-European Studies writes in his essay “Sex, Lies and Stereotypes: Romania in British Literature Since 1945”:

On the scholarly level, interest in Romania is apparently extremely healthy. On the everyday level, the presentation of Romania in Britain is considerably less consistent. The launch of a new Romanian helicopter may make the news if it is named after Count Dracula; of ten articles treating Romanian politics published in 1996, five featured the former tennis player Ilie Năstase; all three articles on the Romanian economic situation in 1998 concerned the sale of former President Ceausescu’s possessions in order to raise funds. Orphanages, gypsies, drug-trafficking and murders all get a mention. (...)

Romania is portrayed synecdochically as a helpless, victimized woman, equally let down by the sympathetic but uncommitted West and the brutal, abusive man that is the communist state.”

What then is the role of the Romanian writers and scholars? Aren’t we responsible for offering a more complex and nuanced portrait of that “victimized woman”, Romania, so that Romanian hi/stories can be seen and understood beyond stereotypes, labels, compassion and sex-appeal?

And how can we proceed to have more impact in the Western world – now, when the dichotomy West-East is gradually fading away as more countries that were part of the former soviet block have joined or will join the European Union and NATO? Now, when

we all are, more or less, global foreigners traveling from one country to another, in the real world and cyberspace? Now, when we have internet, and *google*, and *facebook*, and *myspace*, and blogs, and so many other instant tools of communication.

One of the answers to the question of making impact while expressing a profound inner truth is: with impeccable professionalism and a little bit of humor. Of FUN. Gallows humor, dark humor, bleak humor – whatever you want to call it. It is still humor. It makes people laugh while swallowing the bitter comments on the socio-political reality.

The New wave of Romanian filmmakers has learned very well this lesson. Their films share a grim reality captured with lucid intelligence, a radiography of the society which informed their identities as people and artists. They also share the dark humor of the insightful dissections into the recent history of Romania. As the new wave of playwrights does too.

In the spring of 1990, in the aftermath of the Romanian revolution, British playwright Caryl Churchill ran a ten-day research workshop in Bucharest, that led to her play *Mad Forest*—a fast and brilliant response to our recent history and a perspective from outside on a major socio-political event. However, one could wonder why there aren't any Romanian plays written in the early '90s to deal with the same issues. One possible answer is that Romanian writers and the potential playwrights were at that time too busy with dramatic living to be able to focus on dramatic writing.

Much like in other countries of Eastern and Central Europe, Romanian theatre culture has been a director-driven one for the past few decades. The director-author, with a “unique” and powerful vision, still dominates the theatre scene and critical discourse is generally centered on analyzing directorial accomplishments. One of the reasons for this situation is of course the fact that, during the totalitarian regime, censorship operated mainly on the level of words and texts, so an encoded visual language could be more easily developed. Hence the so-called “retheatralization of the theatre,” an aesthetic approach that involved imaginative stage metaphors and symbols, used in the '70s by major directors such as Andrei Serban, Liviu Ciulei, and others.

Playwrights like Teodor Mazilu, Iosif Naghiu, or Dumitru Solomon who wrote non-propagandistic plays in communist Romania drew their inspiration from the theatre of the absurd of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, as well as from the classic Romanian

playwright Ion Luca Caragiale. The same absurdist vein nourished Matei Vişniec, who emerged in the late '80s and had to flee Bucharest for Paris after his play *Horses in the Window* was censored. He became the most prolific playwright of the '90s and his plays are still produced very often in Romania and France.

Although poetic, surreal, and absurdist elements are still to be found in plays written after the fall of communism, there is an overall tendency to ADDRESS reality rather than ESCAPE from it. However, in the absence of a school of dramatic writing in the Romanian universities, the newly emerged dramatists were self-made playwrights like Vlad Zografi with a PhD in Physics from Sorbonne; Ştefan Caraman, an investment banker still living in Tulcea, a Danube Delta town; Horia Gârbea, a professor of engineering; and Radu Macrinici, a graduate of literature who runs a theatre festival in Transylvania.

At the same time, the Western European theatre scene of the early and mid-'90s witnessed the appearance of a new wave of British, German, and Scandinavian playwrights who shared a dark, desperate, depressive, yet humorous view of humanity at the crossroad between millennia. All of them provoked controversy and shock but grew to become very popular among young theatregoers and progressive audiences. Eventually they became icons of the so-called Generation X or E-generation: the generation of internet, ecstasy, fast food, fast connection, and fast love.

They shared certain undertones from the historical avant-garde and the theatre of the absurd, but proposed a stylized and often extreme naturalism. In the UK, their work has been referred to as “New Drama,” “Sperm and Blood,” or “In Yer Face” theatre.

Through their summer international residencies and workshops led by representative members of their community of artists in various countries, the Royal Court's aesthetic has arguably represented a major influence for the new Eastern European dramatists.

One of the first Romanian playwrights to participate in the Royal Court Theatre residency program was Alina Nelega, who was subsequently inspired to create in the late '90s a new initiative called Dramafest, in which writers were paired with directors and encouraged to write for theatre in process-focused workshops.

As big theatres managed to survive due to their prestige and ongoing subsidies from the state, new theatre companies emerged in university cities, generating a popular

"alternative theatre" movement. Independent privately owned companies took pride in doing their own fundraising and producing contemporary plays.

And step by step their audiences grew to enjoy theatre as a mirror of the society rather than a place for elevated escapism in a symbol-wrapped reality.

roMANIA after 2000

1: The Exchanges

The beginning of the millennium found Romanian theatre in a state of European effervescence. Young artists were more and more present in workshops and festivals in the UK, Germany, Austria, France, Spain, and even in the countries of the Balkans.

In the summer of 2001, both Vălean and I were selected to participate in the Royal Court summer residency. Valean went to London and I chose a Fulbright fellowship at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts.

After her return to Bucharest, together with her directing colleagues Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Apostol and Alexandru Berceanu, Vălean founded dramAcum (drama Now or drama How), a competition dedicated to selecting and promoting new Romanian writing. Since then, dramAcum has become an important organization that has discovered and supported many innovative artistic voices.

Romanian and American theatre exchanges have had a unique history since 2000, with Fulbright specialists who have taught in Romania and promoted young Romanian playwright-directors.

In 2005, thanks to a TCG New Generations fellowship, John Clinton Eisner and I were able to initiate the American-Romanian Theatre Exchange program, intended to bring American playwrights to Bucharest and Romanian artists to New York. The production of Doug Wright's Pulitzer Prize winning play *I am My Own Wife* at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest was one of the outcomes of this program-

The Play Company (artistic director Kate Loewald) was impressed by the force and energy of the new Romanian writing and produced six short Romanian plays at the 59E59 Theatre in New York in the fall of 2006, under the title "Romania. KISS ME!"

Jason Zinoman writes about the show in the New York Times:

“Red Bull”, a cagey Romanian drama by Vera Ion about two bored young people who find common cause, could have been written by any number of American purveyors of suburban angst. (...) In this tautly organized work, He (John Boyd) and She (Julie Jesneck) narrate their own lives in alternating monologues that detail the grueling and mundane process of making a living. He works three jobs; she works four. And there is a deep, melancholy irony when she says, “I feel so free I could do anything,” right before she steals a car while drunk on vodka.

The critic notices the irony and dark humor in Vera Ion’s play, a good sign that the message and style of the new Romanian Drama can come across for American audiences. And why wouldn’t it, when we think of Tarantino’s movies or Neil LaBute’s plays with their cynicism and bleak appeal?

*“The narratives have a shape, but they seem less like plots abstracted from life than like segments carved out of its rough rhythms. The characters are often in a state of restless, agitated motion, confused about where they are going and what they will find when they arrive. The camera follows them into ambulances, streetcars, armored vehicles and minivans, communicating with unsettling immediacy their anxiety and disorientation. **The viewer is denied the luxury of distance.** After a while, you feel you are living inside these movies as much as watching them.”* writes A.O. Scott in an impressive essay on the new wave of Romanian filmmakers, in The New York Times Magazine. The same critic who stated that *“The auteurs of post-Ceausescu Romania are reinventing the European art cinema.”*. Indeed, we are denied any sort of Brechtian distance when watching films like Mungiu’s “4Months, 4Weeks and 2 Days” or Cristi Puiu’s “The Death of Mister Lazarescu”. We are swept inside the story and can’t do anything else but follow it. It’s not necessarily the intensity of the situations what takes us prisoners, but their honesty in capturing the “truth”, the reality. “Neo-neorealism” or just unadorned realism, the stories told by film-makers like Puiu, Mungiu, Porumboiu, Nemescu, Zenide (who also write their screenplays) are gripping slices of Romanian reality, shown and told with a touch of intrinsic dark humor, with compelling characters caught in some un/glorious fight for survival. The prestigious awards the new Romanian movies have won finally brought us

into the attention of the world, thanks to the cumulative merits of our own artists. Although the theatre industry is less prominent than the film one, the new Romanian dramatists deserve the same caliber of recognition as the filmmakers.

2: The Plays

The anthology *roMANIA AFTER 2000*, published by the Martin Segal Theatre Center with the support of the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York, is the first professional anthology of new Romanian drama published in the United States. Its goal is to introduce the American readers to the new playwriting in Romania as well as to the Romanian society at large.

Alienation, dark humor, generational gaps, dysfunctional families, strenuous adjustments to the consumerist society in post-communist Romania, dislocation, exile, immigration, and fascination with the Western world are a few of the topics that unite the plays in the anthology, drawing a map of dramatic living and dramatic writing in an emerging democracy.

Cărbunariu's *Stop the Tempo* tells a story of anarchy and rebellion: three twenty-something guys in Bucharest, alienated by the chaotic invasion of the consumerist society, are trying to find an outlet for their despair, lack of love, and feelings of helplessness. They come up with a "terrorist" plan that fills them with excitement and reveals hidden passions, frustrations, and desires. It is a strong play that gives a poignant glimpse into the psychology of young Romanians, struggling in search of identity and truth.

Paula's monologue about working in advertising in the new consumerist society is a powerful example of bleak humor combined with irony that addresses issues of identity and alienation while being a strong piece of tragic-comedy:

***Paula:** Three years ago I got a job in an advertising agency, sorry consultancy. So I've been a creative director, brand manager, executive creative artistic director assistant senior manager group chief executive artistic creative director WHATEVER (...) I couldn't take it anymore. For three years I had been 'selling': the clean, dry, protection sensation mother, the wrinkle-free mother, the dandruff-free mother, the orgasm shampoo mother, the terrorizing her husband for a piece of chocolate mother, the firm breasted mother, the care-free mother, the zero percent interest mother, the food dancing*

around the kitchen mother, the doesn't have to do a thing mother, the I'm fucking Mr. Proper mother, la la la la la la la, la la la la la! The mother, the mother sells!

Vera Ion's *Vitamins* has the same alienated youth at the center of the drama. It explores generational gaps through the daily life of a dysfunctional family living in a media-dominated and money-obsessed world. In both plays, an individual's personal life is shattered by the socio-political changes induced in the post-communist society. The generation of the parents seems unable to cope with the new world while the children blame them for the mess in their own lives.

Ștefan's *Romania 21* is a musical parody on similar issues: the post-1989 way in which Romanians negotiate between the old values of living under a totalitarian regime and the new values of the capitalist lifestyle. A political point of view is attempted in depicting this "transition period," but irony and mockery undermine a realistic take on the matter. The result is a hilarious and juicy farce-with-songs that says a lot about politics and policies in present day Romania.

"Of course, everybody in Romania wanted to integrate in the United States, as the newest American state, but that wasn't possible because we're not Hawaii or Iraq, or located in America somewhere... and so we got stuck with Europe. But that's alright, I guess, I never wanted to be an American anyway."

In *Romania. Kiss Me!*, Georgescu expresses the same cynicism and disappointment with his country, using gallows humor in a very specific dramatic situation. Scoffing at the classic unities of time, location, and action, he places his characters in a train that is supposed to take them out of their homeland. Stylistically, Georgescu surprises through the use of a chorus that conveys noises, smells, and screams: a whole atmosphere that wraps the plot in a vibrant and colorful package.

In my play *Waxing West (a hairy-tale in four seasons)*, a Romanian cosmetologist arrives in the United States as the mail-ordered soon-to-be bride of an American computer engineer. As she seeks to adjust to her new life in the land of dreams, Dictator Nicolae and his wife Elena Ceaușescu return as vampires to haunt her and make her life miserable. This comic yet socially and politically relevant drama journeys between New York and Romania, between past and present, between the American Dream and a reality far closer to an American nightmare. The chorus is in this case composed by voices from the past

that won't allow the heroine to move on and start a new life. It is as if Romania is still there, under her skin, ready to show its hidden head.

DANIELA: I've been trying. You can't say I haven't tried. I've got all these self-help books. I've written down the main ideas. (looking down to her notes)

"Choose your Tomorrow: BEFORE—perfectionist, misunderstood, love junkie, over-reactive, self-effacing. AFTER—flexible, good communicator, self-accepting, in control, assertive."

I read them all: "I'm Dysfunctional, You're Dysfunctional," "It's Not as Bad as It Seems," "Master Your Panic and Take Back Your Life," "Twenty-One Ways to Stop Worrying," "How to Control Your Anxiety Before It Controls You," "How to Make Yourself Happy," "How To Stop Destroying Your Relationships," "Why Men Marry BITCHES," "Men Are From Earth, Women Are From Earth," "What to Do When He Has a Headache," "The Six-Second Shrink," "Fun as Psychotherapy," "Let's Get Rational Game," "Three-Minute Therapy: Change Your Thinking, Change Your Life," "Dating, Mating, and Relating," "Unconditionally Accepting Yourself and Others," "Resolving Your Past"... Read them all... (nervously) But I'm afraid I'm still in the BEFORE stage. I still have emotions, feelings, confusion, anger... Those AFTER people! They must be so happy. So peaceful. So empty... Okay! Breathe deeply! Start counting to ten. Prepare yourself to relieve your anxiety. To relax. To talk. Okay. Here we go...

Dammit, this is gonna be difficult! You don't have the references to our complicated Romanian Dacian Tracian Roman Ottoman Byzantine Balkan communist post-communist anti-communist pro-American history, all you know about us is Dracula-the-vampire, Ceaușescu-the-dictator, and Nadia Comaneci—the-gymnast! Anyway, Nadia is cool, she never comes into my dreams with her perfectly fit body, so forget about her, she's not in this story. I have more important, heavier, issues on my mind! Stuff like life and death. No time to worry about my cellulite. Unless a bullet stops by IN it...

The funny and sad conclusion of all the plays in the anthology is that no wax in the world is able to pluck off someone's past: his/her ethnic, familial, sexual, historical, and socio-political background.

The playwrights in *roMANIA AFTER 2000* convey the drama of being Romanian today with vitality, force, humor, and a refusal to look at life through rose-colored glasses.

They want to “zoom” around and describe the grim reality of everyday life, they want to be artist-citizens who respond to the immediate history and are ready to shout their worries and stories. While their colleagues, the filmmakers, are doing the same thing without shouting, because images play a very powerful role – they are visual screams.

Romanian dramatists and filmmakers are transforming their art into a mirror of the society AND a hammer meant to shape the new identities of Romanians. Brecht was wrong. The mirror and the hammer can co-exist in art. As the sickle&hammer shouldn't be ignored or forgotten. They are part of us, of our hi/story, of our identity.

We can look at ourselves in the mirror and laugh, we can take a hammer and break the mirror in millions of pieces, we can read self-help books on anger management, we can write books, essays, plays and screenplays. We have many options to deal with our past and our present. And this multitude of options, this freedom to choose, is what indeed matters.