# A BRITISH PERSPECTIVE ON THE ROMANIAN REVOLUTION OF 1989: CARYL CHURCHILL'S *MAD FOREST*

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**Abstract:** *Caryl Churchill's* Mad Forest: A Play from Romania *is written in the aftermath of the revolutionary events that ended Ceaușescu's regime. Having had only a few weeks to do research in Romania in the spring of 1990, the British playwright structures the text in three acts that render not only the tumultuous atmosphere of those times, but also capture the defining features of a nation in crisis. The characters stand for an entire society faced with a crucial historical moment. A very ambitious project and the result of intense collaborative work, the play was staged in London and New York, also reaching the National Theatre in Bucharest the same year. The current study investigates Churchill's approach to Romanian history and culture as well as her preoccupation for finding the appropriate ways to engage theatre-goers around the world. Even if Brechtian and absurdist influences are often noted by reviewers and critics, the play is the original expression of Churchill's creative talent and theatrical experience.*

**Keywords:** *representing history; human communication; (un)translatability; dictatorship; the Romanian Revolution of 1989; Caryl Churchill; contemporary British drama; Bertolt Brecht; Eugen Ionesco; Harold Pinter*

The current study aims at analyzing the ways in which a major British playwright represents the events that ended Ceaușescu's regime and that are commonly known as the Romanian revolution of December 1989. Caryl Churchill conducts research in Romania in the spring of 1990 and creates a series of scenes that present not only the upheaval in December, but also the distrust, dissonance and disillusionment that defined Romania afterwards. The characters are a cross-section of Romanian society, which is faced with a crucial historical moment, whose reverberations are still perceived today, thirty years later. A very ambitious project, the play emerges as a collaborative process that involved the playwright herself, director Mark Wing-Davey and students from London Central School of Speech and Drama as well as staff and students from Institutul de Artă Teatrală și Cinematografică "I. L. Caragiale"[1], Bucharest. The play is first staged in London in June 1990 and performed in Bucharest in September the same year, receiving its off-

[1] Currently the same instution is known as Universitatea Națională de Artă Teatrală şi Cinematografică "I.L.Caragiale", after having undergone several waves of expansion and reform.



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Broadway production in New York a couple of months later. Testimonies about the reception of the play attest to its triumph: "*Mad Forest* has been very successful in England and in the United States, where productions in New York and various regional locations including Berkeley, California, have provided audiences with a detailed, compelling representation of the aftermath of Romania's revolution" (Reinelt 106). This comes as no surprise, given the playwright's already established reputation in the theatrical world by the end of the 1980s.

Known for her capacity to balance feminist politics and popular appeal (Tycer 3), Caryl Churchill, born in 1938, is a major voice in contemporary British Drama. Starting her career in the 1960s, she achieves recognition with *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982), two of the plays that are most anthologized and celebrated to this day. *Mad Forest* has also drawn critical attention. Books analyzing Churchill's entire playwrighting career discuss it either as part of a series of plays devoted to examining political unrest, such as Mary Luckhurst's "On the Challenge of Revolution", an essay included in *The Cambridge Companion to Caryl Churchill* (2009), edited by Elaine Aston and Elin Diamond, or as part of the projects that best illustrate the author's propensity for teamwork, such as R. Darren Gobert's "The Aesthetics and Politics of Collaboration", a chapter in *The Theatre of Caryl Churchill* (2014), a Bloomsbury Methuen Drama title. Thus Churchill's initiative with this play is treated as consistent with the major preoccupations of her career. Furthermore, in *The Raping of Identity. Studies in Physical and Symbolic Violence* (2006), Radu Surdulescu is more interested in approaching the play from a Foucauldian perspective, while in her contribution to *Betraying the Event: Constructions of Victimhood in Contemporary Cultures* (2009), a collection of essays, Ludmilla Kostova views the text as emblematic for British representations of South Eastern Europe[2]. In her turn, Elizabeth Sakellaridou compares Churchill's play with a couple of others that tackle the changes in the Eastern bloc in 1990. Even if harsh on *Moscow Gold* by Howard Brenton and Tariq Ali and *The Shape of the Table* by David Edgar for their inconsiderate approaches to other cultures[3], she finds *Mad Forest* redeemable due to its "polysemic presentation of history" (147) and "mistrust of television tactics" (147). Moreover, the critic underlines the fact that "*Mad Forest* resorts

[2] Kostova's essay, "Victimization and Its Cures: Representations of South Eastern Europe in British Fiction and Drama of the 1990s", pairs Churchill's play with David Edgar's *Pentecost* and also discusses two novels: Julian Barnes's *Porcupine* and Malcolm Bradbury's *Doctor Criminale*.

[3] Relying on Churchill's explanation in Jim Hiley's "Revolution in Miniature", published in *The Times*, Gobert also insisted that the playwright herself experienced "discomfort with seeing Eastern Europe from a position of Western privilege or cultural authority" (156) and searched for an alternative way to approach her subject matter.



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to a number of strategies that stress cultural heterogeneity" (148), which saves the play from the mistakes the other two made. These very features along with the fragmentariness of the play and the sense that the project is unfinished have been applauded by critics who consider them revealing of contemporary drama's search for techniques that can mirror the postmodernist condition.

The origins of the play's title, *Mad Forest*, are disclosed by the playwright herself in a note that appears before the text proper. Quoting a history of Romania, available in English at the time, Churchill underlines the fact that the capital city was raised on muddy grounds that hosted a forest, "impenetrable for the foreigner who did not know the paths"[4] (Churchill 7), and that came to be known as a "mad forest". The obvious critical interpretation that has been given is that the playwright points to "her own sense that she managed to catch only glimpses of what she was trying to write about" (Luckhurst 64). The limits of an outsider's perception seem to be acknowledged and assumed from the very beginning, thus turning the (un)knowability of the subject into one of the themes of the whole theatrical exercise. Moreover, dwelling on Churchill's involvement with socialist feminism, another critic has seen the play as the author's "coming to terms with the failures of the implementation of socialist communism" (Bahun-Radunović 455). Indeed, finding out the details of the clash between socialist ideals and Romanian everyday realities must have added to the sensation that the task at hand poses more difficulties that initially expected. Along these lines, starting from the discussion of the phrase "mad forest", the current study demonstrates that Churchill captures the complexity of Romanian cultural identity, reflecting on its geographical, historical and political specificities, and that the play illuminates the entanglement of affiliations and affinities that the Romanian people embodied in 1990.

As readers and audiences realize at once, scenes are introduced by sentences in Romanian, followed by their English translation: "Each scene is announced by one of the company reading from a phrasebook as if an English tourist, first in Romanian, then in English, and again in Romanian" (Churchill I p. 13). These foreground the (un)translatability of the project that Churchill and her team embarked upon. Bahun-Radunović connected them to Eugene Ionesco's legacy of using an English textbook (460) to demonstrate the artificiality of the type of human communication found in such manuals and the absurdity of formulaic communication in general. However, Churchill's interest in featuring the Romanian language is an intelligent and respectful move, given the subtitle "A Play from Romania", the collaboration with local colleagues and students as well as the urgency of making the text culturally

4 All quotations are from Caryl Churchill, *Mad Forest: A Play from Romania* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1996) and hereafter cited in the text.



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specific. Also borrowed from the theatre of the absurd and most revealing for exposing the impossibility of communication in the context of a dictatorship, silence becomes a theatrical strategy that Churchill uses most skillfully. Throughout the play, the importance of this strategy cannot be overemphasized, as the analysis will show: "Silences are cavernous and might be assenting, dissenting, at odds with the surrounding action and words of the scenario; they edge towards the treacherous, or even the murderous" (Luckhurst 66).

The play focuses on the story of Florina Vladu and Radu Antonescu, whose relationship confronts obstacles in the pre-revolution period (Act I) and concludes with a wedding in the post-revolution months (Act III), the middle act being devoted to documentary style interventions of various Romanians who testify on their experiences during the incendiary events of December 1989. In the opening of the play, one important obstacle is represented by his family's opposition to Florina because of her sister's marriage to an American citizen. On the surface Radu's parents fear the repercussions that this marriage, which is considered unpatriotic by the regime, might have for all the members of the Vladu family and insist on their son's dissociating himself from such misfortune. At a deeper level, there is a problem with Florina's belonging to a lower social class.

The first act, "Lucia's Wedding", introduces the two families that are central to the play, the Vladus and the Antonescus, in the pre-revolution period marked by severe food shortages and restrictions of civil liberties. The very first scene, in which the audience can see Bogdan Vladu, an electrician, and his wife, Irina, a tramdriver, reveals aspects in the ordinary lives of Romanians living in the communist regime. The characters talk sitting close to each other and playing loud music in order to make the sound of their voices inaudible to the recording devices that might be spying on them. The suspicion that they are under surveillance contributes to a sense of tension that emerges within the couple and the entire family. Lucia comes in, bringing luxury goods. The stage direction "Lucia produces four eggs with a flourish" (Churchill I.1 p. 13) speaks of the difficulties Romanians had in procuring basic food products and of the value they placed on them.

When moving to Mihai Antonescu, an architect, and his conversation with his wife, Flavia, a teacher of History, the second scene tackles the arbitrariness of decisions taken by the authorities such as the height of an arch. As Radu notices, the design has to be modified a third time without apparent reason. The interference of politicians in professional fields that they know little about is presented as having been normalized under Ceaușescu's dictatorship. Also, the ordinariness of power cuts at the time is revealed. When the lights go out, the characters do not complain, showing that they are used to candlelight: "They are resigned, almost indifferent" (Churchill I. 2 p. 14). But



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more importantly, the scene introduces Radu's persistence in hoping that he could be with Florina and his parents' obstinacy in opposing such a prospect. Mihai's pronouncement "There are plenty of other girls" (Churchill I. 2 p. 15) must be very painful for Radu. Although raised in a family that seems to benefit from complying with the official rules, he resents the political regime's absurdity, oppressiveness and intrusion in his private life.

Churchill manages to construct a microcosm of Romania in the 1980s after just a few weeks of conducting interviews and interacting with theatre students and professionals in Bucharest, her efforts and achievement being remarkable. As noticed by audience and critics alike, the first two scenes strive to render the essentials of the communist regime as it affected individual lives: "Churchill sets up an atmosphere of isolation, silence, mistrust, alienation and deep divisions both within and between the families" (Soto-Morettini 107). These tones are intensified throughout the first act. In the scene in which Bogdan is approached by a representative of the secret police agency, the type of arguments used to persuade or rather blackmail, a prospective collaborator receives full attention: from an appeal to show patriotism to a threat that his family members' careers might suffer, if he does not agree to report on dissenters confiding in him. The perverse logic of the *securitate* services is exposed in the following lines, which seem far-fetched now, but which had their effectiveness in the context of the political pressure to conform as well as of the fear that characterized the communist regime: "Your colleagues will know you have been demoted and will wrongly suppose that you are short of money. As a patriot you may not have noticed how anyone out of favour attracts the friendship of irresponsible bitter people who feel slighted" (Churchill I. 6 pp. 18-19). Churchill underlines the way it worked: the system pushed a person in a desperate position (most of the times, artificially) and then forced him or her to become an informer in order not to fall even further towards the bottom of the social ladder. The tenth scene captures a new account of an encounter with the *securitate* people. Bogdan's son, Gabriel, an engineer, claims to have managed to find a line of argument, the need to concentrate on his work, which is in keeping with the party leader's teachings, and assures his family that he saved himself from the dubious mission proposed to him: "And because I'm a patriot I work so hard that I can't think about anything else, I wouldn't be able to listen to what my colleagues talk about because I have to concentrate" (Churchill I. 10 p. 24). There is no suggestion in the play that he is not a reliable narrator. His attitude and choice contrast with those of his father, the play emphasizing once more the rifts created within the same family by the intrusion of the state apparatus.

The thorny issue of abortion is also featured in the first act, when Lucia goes to a gynecologist in order to get rid of an unwanted pregnancy. Doctor and patient are submitted to acts that go against their beliefs and needs.



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Because of anti-abortion laws, the doctor is forbidden from helping the patient officially, even if his profession should be about medical assistance for those requiring it: "There is no abortion in Romania. I am shocked that you even think of it. I am appalled that you dare suggest I might commit this crime" (Churchill I. 7 p. 19). Accepting her bribe suggests that the doctor will find an illegal way to perform the surgery, but that he does not do it only for the patient's sake, but also for the financial reward this implies. In her turn, the patient seems to be repentant, "Yes, I am sorry" (Churchill I. 7 p. 19), but the communication through writing between the two indicates that she is in fact pursuing her objective. The visit to the doctor's office, which might be recorded, is probably about getting instructions in connection to the time and place of the abortion procedure. As Surdulescu aptly notices, body and mind are policed by the regime: "Violent constraints on the body parallel the violent twisting of the mind" (153), the characters here being forced to rely on "double language".

The first act continues to present the realities of the communist regime, the queues for buying food as in the section titled "Cumpărăm carne. We are buying meat" (Churchill I. 5 p. 17), people's attempt to vent their anger and frustration through jokes often with a political subtext – "Sticla cu vin este pe masă. The bottle of wine is on the table" (Churchill I. 8 pp. 20-21) – and the type of indoctrination that was going on in schools through distorted history lessons, often praising the president, "this great son of the nation" (Churchill I. 4 p. 16), as visionary leader with mythical powers – "Elevii ascultă lecția. The pupils listen to the lesson" (Churchill I. 4 pp. 16-17). For many, the contrast between everyday drudgery, privation and sham, on the one hand, and a desired normality, on the other, leads to death-in-life or a sense of postponed fulfillment. In a talk between Flavia Antonescu and her dead grandmother, apparently the only context in which the former can speak her mind, the latter says: "You're pretending this isn't your life. You think it's going to happen some other time. When you are dead you'll realize you were alive now"[5] (Churchill I. 12 p. 26). Flavia's hiding behind the sensation that everybody goes through the same experience, as her statements "Everyone feels like that" (Churchill I. 12 p. 25) and "But nobody's living. You can't blame me" (Churchill I. 12 p. 26) show, does not justify her lack of action. She exemplifies a dangerous sort of acceptance of the dictatorship's impositions on Romanians' private lives, which ultimately proves self-annihilating. Churchill demonstrates mastery in capturing the state of mind of an entire society in this brief exchange between a History teacher torn by doubt and the ghost of her grandmother. The scene echoes the famous opening of *Hamlet*, as a similar

[5] This is reminiscent of Milan Kundera's *Life Is Elsewhere*, known for having borrowed the slogan of the 1968 Sorbonne protests as a title.



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dialogue between the living and the dead probes the meanings of this world. Apparently, revelations are bound to emerge in such eerie circumstances.

The same issue of silence, inaction or incapacity to make a stand against the repressive authorities is discussed in one more notable episode in the first act. This time an angel's visitation prompts a priest to reflect on the cowardice of the Church. The playwright reflects on the shame certain members of the Church must have felt for not opposing the communist regime that demolished historical church buildings and had the secret police infiltrate its ranks. The angel tries to comfort the priest by talking about the "inner freedom" (Churchill I. 9 p. 21) that can never be stolen and by saying: "Don't be ashamed. … it's not the job of the church" (Churchill I. 9 p. 22). However, by exposing the angel as naively apolitical, "I try to keep clear of the political side" (Churchill I. 9 p. 22), she is throwing his reasoning into question. The angel confesses that a certain association with a fascist group in interwar Romania can be traced: "The Iron Guard used to be rather charming and called themselves the League of the Archangel Michael and carried my picture about" (Churchill I. 9 p. 22). The playwright uses this opportunity to refer to the Iron Guard, an episode in the country's not-so-far-way past which needs to be confronted by Romanian society for what it was. Despite the claim of promoting Christianity, the Legionnaire movement, as it was also called, committed crimes that are abominable, the priest being well-aware of that when mentioning facts he had learnt from his father: "The Iron Guard threw Jews out of windows in '37" (Churchill I. 9 p. 22). Therefore, the play implies that there is no such thing as an apolitical position for the Church and silence is often a disgraceful act of condoning. Moreover, there is no sense of peace for priests as long as parishioners suffer in a tyrannical state.

The first act closes with the wedding ceremony uniting Lucia and Wayne. As the ritual is performed and the words are uttered in English, the Romanian (in the) audience clearly experiences some sort of distancing. Everyone is invited to borrow Wayne's perspective for a minute and empathize with him. The play offers international audiences a chance to perceive the American bridegroom's sense of novelty when faced with the Orthodox way of doing and saying things. But going beyond the intricate issues of linguistic and cultural translation, the episode clearly marks a moment that is recognizably joyous and unifying, a textbook wedding so to speak, very much unlike the one that appears at the end of the play.

The second act, "December", comprises various testimonies from Romanians who explain what they saw, did and felt from the 21st to the 25th. This cross-section of Romanian society is made up of a painter, a translator, a doctor, a bulldozer driver, a flower seller, a housepainter, a soldier, a *securitate* man and three students. Their raw statements, sometimes containing English errors, express fear, confusion, contradictoriness, doubt, despair, sorrow,



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exhilaration, as the playwright tries to capture the madness of those moments. According to Janelle Reinelt, this section of the play is one of the most Brechtian:

> The middle section of the play also calls up an impression of isolated individuals, struggling to find a position in relation to the revolutionary events taking place around them. In performance the group of isolated individuals giving their different perspectives creates a Brechtian interlude, or break in the action. The audience is invited to consider the differences between perspectives and the epistemological questions it raises: What did happen, and what is the "truth"? (104-5)

Getting the pulse of the crowds was the playwright's undeniable merit. As a matter of fact, the play identifies the obsessive question(s) that appeared in the first months of 1990 and continued to plague Romanian society for thirty-years. But as historian Peter Siani-Davies explains in his book about the Romanian revolution, finding the truth, a problem for the Romanian people, the various administrations since 1990 and the various journalists, historians and other writers that tackled the events should be discussed along with the need to raise awareness about the existence of "a plurality of truths" and history's working with "multiple conflicting interpretations" (5). Taken one step further, the very debates at the heart of rethinking history and historiography in the twenty-first century should be imported in discussions about the revolution if the public is to get closer to understanding the depth of the issues involved and come to terms with the impossibility of a monolithic vision that can no longer be held on to.

In "History in Postmodern Theater: Heiner Müller, Caryl Churchill, and Suzan-Lori Parks", Sanja Bahun-Radunović dwells on three playwrights' grappling with the issue of representing history today, given the fact that history itself as a discipline is experiencing deconstructive tensions and re-positioning tendencies at the moment. In connection to *Mad Forest*, the critic astutely remarks: "Churchill's experimentation with dramatic form should be understood as a means of reinforcing 'unrecorded' alternatives, of professing the simultaneity of optional histories" (456), one example being the device of cross-casting. The actors from the first act receive new names and display new positions that force viewers to acknowledge the relativity of one individual's stance and the ever-shifting nature of collective consciousness. Moreover, Bahun-Radunović details the priorities and strategies the playwright uses in the second act par excellence:

> Eschewing description of politically recognizable figures and their actions, Churchill approaches the axial historical event from the



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> perspective of ordinary Romanians whose lives and dreams are shaped by history. The pronounced absence of any direct depiction of 'recorded' political events, events that nonetheless dominate the everyday life depicted in these vignettes, emphasizes the opposition between the 'recorded', 'official' history and personal memory. (456)

Thus, in the opening of "December", the first to speak is a painter. He starts by referring to his main interest and his dreams in connection to art and moves on to reporting not only the events proper, as they developed from his point of view, but also his psychological and emotional response to them: "When we heard shooting, we went out, and we stayed near the Intercontinental Hotel till nearly midnight. I had an empty soul. I didn't know who I was" (Churchill II p. 34). His insistence on feelings of emptiness when experiencing danger and witnessing death hints to his being a keen observer of both the outer and inner worlds accessible to him. Interestingly enough, he reflects on the revolution as ground zero for seeking not only a Romanian identity, but also an artistic identity.

Highly articulate, the translator capitalizes on the utterances that came from the crowds in those December days, as he shares both their Romanian and the English versions: "I heard people shouting, 'Down with Ceaușescu', for the first time. It was a wonderful feeling to say those words, 'Jos Ceaușescu'" (Churchill II p. 36). By reproducing the slogan in Romanian on stage, he seems to recapture the iconic phrase that is recognizable to Romanians in the audience and that stands for the December 1989 revolution itself. Also, he confesses that the happiness animating him rendered him speechless, "There were no words in Romanian or English for how happy I was" (Churchill II p. 37), this being the ultimate expression of shock in the case of a person whose life is dedicated to working with written and spoken words in more than one language.

The female doctor's testimony is a piece of uttermost importance in the puzzle or broader picture of the events in Bucharest. In the fashion of a cubist painting, her angle, though limited and subjective, helps viewers get a sense of the whole. She mentions the casualties, describes the unhealable wounds that are caused by "bullets that explode when they strike something and break bones in little pieces" (Churchill II p. 35), narrates an episode in which a teenager breaks down upon discovering his brother's death, but also finds the strength to talk about the sense of liberation that the fall of the dictator brought: "For the first time in my life I felt free to laugh" (Churchill II p. 38).

Different from the previous interventions, the statements coming from the bulldozer driver, the flower seller and the housepainter are marked by English errors and a camera-like focus on narrating events rather than on introspection. The voices are individualized, as each speaker introduces



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himself/herself by name, gives personal details about his/her home and work place and shares a particular vantage point on the revolution. All three talk about the shootings, confirming the life-threatening dimension of the street demonstrations and confessing their sheer terror. Concern for the family, especially their young children, is recurrent.

In being consistent with the general sense that a significant percentage of the people on the streets were young, the playwright includes three students, two boys and one girl, to contribute with their own memories to the patchwork of monologues. The girl student expresses rage and frustration at her parents' not allowing her out of the house for a long time, then shame and guilt at not having participated in the events directly and finally joy and a sense of new beginnings: "For the first time I saw the flag with the hole cut out of it. I began to cry, I felt ashamed I hadn't done anything" (Churchill II p. 36). Self-justification for one's previous collaboration with the system and inaction when urged to join the crowd in one student's case clashes with the determination "to be of some use" (Churchill II p. 40) and the courage to get a gun when given the opportunity in the other's case.

The confusion that characterized the army at first and trickled down to the lowest ranks appears in the speech of a young man who was just doing his military service at the time. He mentions how contradictory the messages were and how in one particular key location, the airport, it all ended tragically: "We guard the airport. We shoots anything, we shoots our friend. I want to stay alive" (Churchill II p. 39). The soldier was on duty in December just as a *securitate* officer was. The latter testifies to receiving Rosetti Square to report on the events and thus confirms the involvement of the secret police, which sent undercover agents among the demonstrators on the streets. He claims that he is not able to see why his behavior is to blame and he defends his choice to the very end: "Everyone looks at me like I did something wrong. It was the way the law was then and the way they all accepted it" (Churchill II p. 42).

The playwright's explanation that all the characters in the second act address the audience and that they are not aware of one another, "Each behaves as if the others are not there and each is the one telling what happened" (Churchill II p. 29), is quintessential. The confessional tone is akin to a police interrogation or press interview. By breaking the monologues in the fashion of the cross-cutting technique used in cinematography and by reassembling the pieces to recreate a tableau of the revolution as perceived by the people, the play does a necessary exercise in corroborating evidence and in capturing details that help with outsiders' understanding not only of the outward layout of the events, but also of the way the events affected the participants.

Pursuing the same interplay between fact and affect, the third act, "Florina's Wedding", does not provide a sense of closure, even if Florina and Radu manage to get married at the end of it. In moving from the description of



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people's lives under one political system to the examination of a new order, the play reiterates a structure that Churchill had used before, as Reinelt explains:

> *Mad Forest* is structurally rather like *Cloud 9* in that the analysis of Victorian society is superseded by an analysis of a new, "free" society that has its own ills and shortcomings. Similarly, *Mad Forest* shows the oppression of Romanian life under Ceausescu regime to be superseded by a complicated and dystopic version of modern life in a free, "democratic" society. (105)

Indeed, the novel period is characterized by disillusionment as Romanians confront the difficulties of coping with older (caused by the dictatorship) and newer (caused by the revolution) traumas as well as the bitterness of the political climate that feels like a betrayal of the aspirations defended in December 1989: "dissatisfaction with the newly established power elite and therefore with the outcome of the 1989 revolution in Romania was particularly high among the educated urban strata" (Petrescu, *Explaining the Romanian Revolution* 77).

An important section in this final act of the play is dedicated to Gabriel Vladu's hospitalization. It opens with the scene entitled "Toată lumea speră ca Gabriel să se însănătoșească repede. Everyone hopes Gabriel will feel better soon" (Churchill III. 2 pp. 47-49). Wounded during the events, he recuperates in the same hospital in which his sister is a nurse. His visitors include not only his parents, but also Radu Antonescu and his family. Radu's father feels the need for justifying their visit: "Radu wanted to visit his friend Gabriel so we thought we'd come with him" (Churchill III. 2 p. 49). Embodying the typical communist with a newly cosmeticized face, he shrewdly tries to adjust to the new times, but the result is awkward. Rather than admit to refusing to be associated with the Vladus in any way and to opposing the wedding between Radu and Florina previously, he places the blame elsewhere: "We're so glad the young people no longer have a misunderstanding. We have to put the past behind us and go forward on a new basis" (Churchill III. 2 p. 49). Eagerness to erase guilt and responsibility for one's mistakes is also sounded in Bogdan Vladu's reply, "Yes, nobody can be blamed for what happened in the past" (Churchill III. 2 p. 49), not only because he wants to believe in the young couple's chance to start anew, but also because he would feel much better if his discomfort with having been a secret police informer could go away.

While still in hospital, Gabriel is also visited by Lucia, who has recently returned from the United States of America. Sharing her reactions to the televised events in Romania gives the audience a glimpse of the expatriate experience: from the urge to see everything shown by the National Television



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and taken over by international media agencies, and therefore have access to the events as completely and closely as the medium allows, to the frustration of not seeing enough of what was happening in Bucharest, from the pride connected to having a heroic brother at the heart of the events to the embarrassment of being absent: "I was crying all the time, I was so ashamed not to be here" (Churchill III. 2 p. 51). When asked to report her impressions of her host country, she first mentions plentifulness, which contrasts with the privations Romanians used to know: "There are walls of fruit in America, five different kinds of apples, and oranges, grapes, pears, bananas, melons, different kinds of melon, and things I don't know the name of" (Churchill III. 2 p. 51). And no matter how simplistic this might seem, it is the most striking difference between a capitalist context and a communist one, the food shortages in Ceaușescu's Romania being augmented by his obsession with paying off the country's debt to the West. Historian Dragoș Petrescu explains that the objective of eliminating Romania's external debt was achieved by means of reducing imports and this had negative consequences: "beginning with 1981–1982 Romania entered a period of chronic shortages of foodstuffs and other basic things such soap, toothpaste and detergents" (*Explaining the Romanian Revolution* 52).

Capitalizing on the hospital as a location for much of the last act, the play suggests that, in the wake of the revolution, Romanians need to heal both physical and mental wounds. Initially incapable of visiting Gabriel, her hospitalized husband, Rodica suffers from what can be diagnosed as severe anxiety. The audience finds out from other characters that she is "frightened to go out" (Churchill III. 2 p. 48) and later in the play gets acquainted with the type of nightmares she suffers from. The feeling of panic comes out in an episode (Churchill III. 3 pp. 55-56) in which she is a threatened figure whose money and bodily parts are taken away from her by soldiers whose promises of rescuing her do not materialize[6]. The nightmare sequence imparts a sense of menace reminiscent of Harold Pinter's early plays, especially of *The Birthday Party* scene in the which Goldberg and McCann torment Stanley (Act II). Just like the soldiers in Churchill's text, the two intruders attack their prey viciously (Pinter 40-52). Identity dissolution is all-pervasive in both cases, the victim characters manifesting symptoms that have long-term effects.

An unnamed patient "wounded on the head" (Churchill III. 2 p. 52) is another character whose sanity is questioned. He asks the hard questions that everyone in Romania was struggling with at the time. Florina's excuse "he's a bit crazy" (Churchill III. 2 p. 52) is contradicted by Radu's conviction that at least one of his questions is "not a crazy question" (Churchill III. 2 p. 53) and

[6] In Siân Adiseshiah's interpretation Rodica identifies with Elena Ceaușescu, "experiencing the betrayal of her soldiers" (285), the play focusing on the lingering presence of the former dictators in people's consciousness.



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so each member of the audience has to decide for herself/himself how justified the patient is, when asking

> Did we have a revolution or a putsch? Who was shooting on the 21st? And who was shooting on the 22nd? Was the army shooting on the 21st or did some shoot and some not shoot or were the Securitate disguised in army uniforms? If the army were shooting, why haven't they been brought to justice? And were they still shooting on the 22nd? Were they now disguised as Securitate? More important of all, were the terrorists and the army really fighting or were they only pretending to fight? And for whose benefit? And by whose orders? (Churchill III. 2 p. 50)

Trying to find the truth is perceived as a form of madness not only because the political forces who have seized power consider postponing any formal investigation to be in their best interest, but also because there is no one single absolute truth that would answer all the questions Romanians were already formulating as the events were unfolding in December 1989 and during the months that followed.

Upon Gabriel's returning home from hospital, the young people accompanying him, Florina, Lucia, Radu, Ianoș and other friends mockingly re-enact the trial which brought about the dictator's execution (Churchill III. 6 pp. 68-71). It is a form of performance with specific functions. Once again, as in the rest of the play, Churchill chooses to foreground insights coming from common people in connection to occurrences in which prominent historical characters are involved and on which the media reported extensively. The collective hatred for the dictator is translated into acts of verbal and physical violence, supposedly cleansing the performers. This metatheatrical device is intelligently used to demonstrate the playwright's prioritizing the effects big events have on small peoples' trajectories.

As the play advances, the two families' shifting and conflicting allegiances are revealed gradually. Mihai Antonescu reassures his wife that his job is not threatened since he defines himself as "a supporter of the Front" (Churchill III. 5 p. 65), that is of the National Salvation Front, the newly formed party which seems to be continuing the legacy of the former regime, despite its claims of mild democratization. Flavia desperately tries to justify her former activity as a teacher of (distorted) history, "All I was trying to do was teach correctly" (Churchill III. 5 p. 65), and fears for her position since her name was added to a black list of "bad teachers". She does not feel she should be blamed for teaching the textbook and she insists that informing on pupils and taking bribes are the offences that should be punished. At the end of the play she confesses to Florina, her daughter-in-law, that she supports the Liberal Party (Churchill III. 8 p. 78), a political gesture that unites them in their



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search for personal and public renewal. Radu defines himself as a revolutionary, accusing his parents of complacency and unethical behavior. He seems to be one of the intellectuals who embraced an interpretation that was already taking shape in the spring of 1990: "the popular revolt was confiscated by second- and third-rank nomenklatura members who benefited mainly from Soviet support" (Petrescu, *Explaining the Romanian Revolution* 79). Such an interpretation of Romania's situation made further protests imperative in order to determine real change and radical reforms possible.

In the third act of the play, disorientation, suspicion and impatience characterize all human exchange. Radu fights even with Florina over his ideals and his choices: "You're betraying the dead. Aren't you ashamed? Yes, I am hooligan"[7] (Churchill III. 7 p. 73). As a nurse, she works incessantly to provide medical care to the wounded in hospital and believes that people still demonstrating on the streets of Bucharest in the spring of 1990 are evading more urgent action that needs to be taken and this is sounded in her reproach to Radu: "You just want to go on playing hero, / you're weak, you're lazy" (Churchill III. 7 p. 73). These two lovers' conflict shows how the tumultuous public sphere at the time affects people's private lives, having unprecedented potential to influence their psychology, their relationships and even future trajectories. Yet, somehow, the two make peace behind the scenes, the wedding taking place at the end of play.

The final scene, subdivided into three units, records the conversations that take place at the wedding party, tracing the group's gradual advancement into inebriation as well as dissonance and open conflict. The supposedly joyous occasion, which should have been about reconciliation, can only make the diverging views of the characters come out even more strongly. The disputes between various wedding guests end up in a fight in which physical violence becomes the ultimate expression of frustration and powerlessness. Although the post-revolution political climate should have allowed transparency and exchange of ideas, communication is still obstructed. This time the sources of obstruction are mostly internal, not external: obsolete mentalities, resentment connected to the past, dissatisfaction with the form of government that has emerged and that is supported by some and contested by others in the play, the political affiliations following no class, gender or age boundaries and therefore turning out to be unpredictable.

One major source of conflict that seems to magnetize the characters is ethnic prejudice, as one of the earliest critics of the play pointed out: "Before the revolution the opposition was external and was expressed in Cold War terminology (capitalist vs. socialist). After the revolution the opposition is

[7] Ceaușescu used this specific word, referring to the protesters in Timișoara, in his speech on December 20th (quoted in Petrescu, *Explaining the Romanian Revolution* 98), in an attempt to discredit the upheaval started in the Western part of the country.



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internal and is expressed in nationalist terminology (ethnic prejudice)" (Reinelt 103). Back in Romania, Lucia rekindles her romantic relationship with Ianoș, who is Hungarian. But this brings about her parents' disapproval. At Florina's wedding, dormant thoughts explode. Gabriel, now a hero of the revolution, and Ianoș's long-time friend, expresses his fear that Hungary might claim Transylvania: "The only reason we need an internal security force is if Hungary tried to invade us" (Churchill III. 8 p. 83). Ianoș's reply, "it's ours", is reductive and problematic, but consistent with a certain misguided approach to the matter at hand. Further he continues, exposing his sense of superiority and offending everyone, including Lucia: "the Hungarians started the revolution. Without us you'd still be worshipping Ceaușescu" (Churchill III. 8 p. 83). The exchange shows that even friends can fall in the nationalist trap set by politicians to divide Romania's population and divert attention and energy away from urgent economic and political problems. Petrescu offers a thorough analysis concerning "the way in which ethnic nationalism was a major hindrance to rapid democratization in post-communist Romania" ("Can Democracy Work" 279) as early as 2001. As the historian explains, the violent events that occurred in Tîrgu-Mureș and involved the Hungarian minority in the spring of 1990 are detrimental to Romania's image:

> Apart from the way in which the Iliescu regime treated the democratic opposition, the minorities' issue and the violent events of Tîrgu Mureș led to the international isolation of Romania and the loss of the widespread international support gained in December 1989. March 1990 was a crucial moment in diverting and delaying political and economic reforms, and therefore hampering a rapid transition to democracy in Romania. ("Can Democracy Work" 284)

Once again, Churchill manages to capture the essential, in this case the ethnic unrest, not only because she is in Romania at the exact moment that news reports tackle Tîrgu Mureș, but also because this particular situation has far-reaching echoes abroad.

The last words in the play belong to a vampire, introduced at the beginning of the third act. He points to the never-ending thirst for blood, "You begin to want blood. Your limbs ache, your head burns, you have to keep moving faster and faster" (Churchill III. 8 p. 87). If the vampire stands for the type of leader Romania had for decades, the play capitalizes on the circularity of the struggle for absolute power on the part of those who climb to the top of a corrupt and self-perpetuating system. In another reading, the same supernatural being is identified with "Romania's Vlad the Impaler or capitalism come to feed" (Gobert 157), which are equally destructive forces. As Gobert demonstrates, "when it refuses to reconcile real with surreal or to



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integrate its disparate sections" (158), the play confirms its Brechtian influence. But beyond its being associated with Brecht or absurdist playwrights such as Ionesco and Pinter, the play does not follow any previous formulas, Churchill's own dramaturgical vision, appetite for improvisation and technical innovation helping her create an original work of art. With inquisitiveness, empathic propensity and a keen eye for detail, the playwright presents the ways in which the revolution of December 1989 affected the Romanian people and makes this intelligible to audiences worldwide, as this study has shown.

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