Who's this Playwright I.L. Caragiale Today? The Presence of Caragiale's Plays on Romanian Stages in the Last Ten Years

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An overview on the past directorial decade

Probably on a lower scale Caragiale is to the people of the Romanian stage what Shakespeare, Molière or Chekov represent to the creative minds of the world theatre. Staging Caragiale in the 21st century, speaking either of his dramatic texts or of dramatizations after his sketches, moments or short stories, is or has become to the Romanian director a compulsory point in his repertoire, or – if not compulsory – at least a valuable point.

But before exploring the past theatrical decade, it is only natural to ask the question referring to who the inhabitant of this world is and what he looks like. Here is an answer:

> I am a very complex being! Whimsy and constant; impressionable like an uncultivated child, blasé like a tired philosopher, tittle-tattler like and aristocratic; here primitive, here ultra-refined, I laugh off the most serious of circumstances, and I am serious about whatever twiddle. I'm crazy about sensational events, be they merry or funeral, parades, accidents, crimes, suicides, scandals… Oh! (*voluptuously*) Calumnies, gossips, scandals! A scandal – no matter how little monstrous – is to me more than a terrible sinister! In the morning, as I open my eyes, I need thrilling news, if not true, at least … different! Their denial in the evening saddens me out of proportion and I cannot find my comfort but in a worse fabrication the following day (Caragiale 2000: 142–143).

These are the words of Mrs. abstruse who stomps suddenly, with great confidence, laughing shrilly among the actors and theatre men before the performance of *Începem!* ['Let's Begin'] (1909). She is not only – as the author describes her – the representative of the audience, an active and extremely diverse receptor of the theatrical act, she is not only a case that can be analyzed from the psychological and sociological points of view, but also the exponent of Caragiale's world, as along with Mrs. abstruse we seem to behold Ziţa reading *Dramele Parisului* ['The Dramas of Paris'], Mr. Leonida searching for the news in *"Aurora*

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democratic" ['Democratic Aurora'], Miţa Baston who "would hit the roof worse than at the «Universul» Newspaper", the waiter Victor who is taking lessons from *Edgar and Fridolina sau victimele inimii* ['Edgar and Fridolina or the Victims of the Heart'], or Fifina writing out of her head novel pages for the magazine *Cimpoiul* ['The Bagpipe']. They are all possessed with impressionability, with the pleasure for what they seize in, with amazement, and lead their existence inclined rather to the unreal, to fantastic or fantasy, than real, and the dash of the two dimensions renders them both comical and tragic. The self-portrait the character depicts in a certainly subjective manner is a synthesis of Caragiale's hero. Being unable and unwilling to save himself from mediocrity, finicky and shallow by excellence, he is not as inhuman as some might think he is, he is neither a primitive nor an individual of impulses. On the contrary, words such as "politeness", "principles" or "manners" are familiar to him, but he is completely lacking the capacity of refining such terms. Do the people about which we say nowadays that they are Caţavencu, Ipingescu or Didina show signs of knowing these words?

Caragiale and his characters have been conceived along time by each generation on a different landing, depending on the mentalities that crossed the epochs. He had both appreciations and calumnies during his lifetime, but his figure was too much sweetened by some critical voices of the interwar period[1], and after 1945 the communist authorities used his name to cement their own ideology, presenting him as an author that attacked the outrageous manners of the bourgeoisie, in the society without essence of the end of the 19th century. Starting 1965 the absurd lode recognizable in his work has been manly discussed, and in 1988 Mircea Iorgulescu published his essay on the presence of kitsches in Caragiale's writings, through which – as it is well known – the communist political system from Romania was incriminated under a mask. After the '90s, other terms interfered in the discussion: "modernity", "topicality" or "perennity", which complicated or simplified the fate of the dramatist for the period of time after 1989, then for the one after 2000.

The national stage could not remain outside the sphere of problematizing and offered us year in year out, in all regions of the country, opportunities of seeing Caragiale, non-Caragiale, anti-Caragiale, politicized, militarist, experimental or feminist Caragiale. Memorable performances and modest performances create – as it is normal – a panorama of the state of the theatre either in long periods of crisis, or short periods of energy and effervescence. If for the '90s the actor and the director would rediscover free to express themselves in a transition period *O scrisoare pierdută* ['A Lost Letter'] or *Conul Leonida faţă cu Reacţiunea* ['Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries'], starting 2000 it has been felt what today is heard more and more often as a meaning exhaustion, namely a "non-topicality of Caragiale's work". And this original impression turns into a certainty during the crisis years, given that this

[1] A quote from Mihai Ralea's article has become a reference point: "It is wonderful, it is a paradisiacal world, free of concerns and free of – as how we say today in a mystical language – free of inner problems. People laugh, party and rejoice. […] Caragiale, the most typically national writer, who understood best our nature, left us this aspect as well. The Romanian who does not lose his temper before crisis. His literature is tonic and full of consolation today" (Ralea 1931).

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is how things are between 2010 and 2012. For this reason, the Romanian theatre – used to taking advantage of any type of contextualization of the classical plays, used to employ any type of key in staging them, bearing the inheritance of the so-called handicap of a period in which the stage and its artists had "necrosed" in the non-art imposed by the communist authorities, actually came to believe that the work of art of that man who felt enormously and saw monstruously had to be saved right away. The sensation given by the past decade of the national stage is that the term "vitality" is read through its opposite and, being convinced of the audience's incapacity of reacting to the classic Caragiale, the directors and managers of theatres wish to resuscitate him in different manners.

Not all creators share the obsession of grafting the dramatist with images or ideas borrowed from other geographic areas, with the inevitable transplant of contemporary elements or with the type of Hollywood pigmentation. Mircea Cornişteanu is the director proclaimed – on his own responsibility as well as by the specialized criticism and the prizes he won – the most prolific theatre person who approached the spirit of Uncle Iancu. He tries to find the shortest and most equitable way to bring together the taste of an audience infected by the routine virus, the condition of a theatre that must be financially and aesthetically responsible and the destiny of a work of art that has been browsed until the letters were erased and the meanings degraded. The man who achieved the first integral series of performances after I.L. Caragiale's plays at Craiova stated in a TV show dedicated to Caragiale's Year that the secret of the success of the stagings is that of showing the perfect resonance between *then* and *now*, between "La Belle Époque" and what theatre means today[2]. But from theory to practice, the distance implies turns and deviations. The stagings presented at the National Theatre of Craiova suffer because of this parallelism: then and now, two dimensions that – no matter how much we try, are not on the same level any more. *D'ale carnavalului*[3] ['During the Carnival'], for instance, re-enacts quite faithfully the furniture and the atmosphere of Nae Girimea's barber's shop and the touch of the fair, paying attention also to costumes and offering a true lesson of acting. Unfortunately, Caragiale's hallmark – so finely relieved – is deteriorated because of the low quality oriental-like songs on the background complementary to the scandals and hysterias emerging during the action. Nevertheless, the last variant of *O noapte furtunoasă* ['A Stormy Night'][4] uses a very ingenious trick at scenographic level: the house of Master Dumitrache is represented by a rather slummy wall built in the obvious style of the year 1900,

[2] Mircea Cornişteanu in the TV show *Anul Caragiale – Ediţii speciale* ['Caragiale's Year – Special Editions'], TVR Cultural, April 24th 2012.

[3] *D'ale Carnavalului* ['During the Carnival'], „Marin Sorescu" National Theatre, Craiova, 2002, directed by Mircea Cornişteanu, with: Mihai Arsene (Nae Girimea), Adrian Andone (Iordache), Ilie Gheorghe (Pampon), Nicolae Poghirc (Crăcănel), Sorin Leoveanu (the candidate), Mirela Cioabă (Miţa Baston), Gina Călinoiu (Didina Mazu) etc.

[4] *O noapte furtunoasă* ['A Stormy Night'], „Marin Sorescu" National Theatre, Craiova, 2002, directed by Mircea Cornişteanu, with: Ion Colan (Master Dumitrache), Valentin Mihali (Nae Ipingescu), Cătălin Băicuş (Chiriac), Cerasela Iosifescu (Veta), Raluca Păun (Zița), Dragoş Măceşanu (Spiridon), George-Albert Costea (Rică Venturiano) etc.

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which the audience realizes soon that will be renovated, as scaffolds are erected all around it, and beside it there is an iron fence resembling the ones we can see today in front of the mansions of the new owners. The words that come to mind when seeing this scenography, both from the perspective of the setting and of the costumes, are "kitsch", "poor taste", "disorder". Nonetheless the hidden satire taken to some extent from Caragiale's work and augmented in Cornișteanu's staging regards depreciation of the past. The wooden-door house, with old windows – maybe over one hundred years old – will be restored according to current standards. And by extending meanings, this wall with scaffolds seems to evocate precisely the face of Uncle Iancu, which the young woman or the old guard persist in sustaining in improvised scaffoldings, as if he has no power, ruining his paleness and eventually rendering him unrecognizable. What is disturbing and what cancels Caragiale completely in the variant from Craiova are a series of substitutions applied to the staging: Spiridon does not smoke cigarettes, but ethno-botanical substances, Master Dumitrache listens to a radio show similar to those presenting "gossips", and Chiriac crosses the yard on a red motorcycle.

Other directors, out of the wish of not walking in the common places of the theatre, come to make hasty statements and transform I.L. Caragiale's texts so much that maybe they would not even need to use them, but merely approach a play from the contemporary repertoire. Alexandru Dabija is at the border between consistency and forced reinterpretation. Lately he dealt with the texts of he who was called by Nicolae Davidescu "the last Phanariot of the Romanian culture" – *D-ale Carnavalului* at the Hungarian Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe, *O noapte furtunoasă* at the National Theatre of Iași, *O scrisoare pierdută*, at the Comedy Theatre. Depending on the attitude adopted as regards the reclamations of the classic authors, the performance may or may not question Dabija's visions. If the staging of *D-ale Carnavalului*[5] in Hungarian at "Tamási Áron" Theatre was based on the wish of approaching the Romanian dramatist to the Hungarian culture and of translating his work both at the level of language and at the level of scenic expression, the staging of *O scrisoare pierdută*[6] from 2011 emphasizes the absurd typical for Caragiale's work. Managing to escape the violent manner he had been approaching for a few years, Dabija explores the grey area of the characters from the town touched by the fever of elections. The text is kept faithfully, only the characters' natures and the relationships between them are seen in different shades. In these circumstances, again, the author suffers as the performance is rather tragic than comical, and beyond the actor's improvisation, the general atmosphere has nothing funny, really.

[5] *D-ale Carnavalului* ['During the Carnival'], "Tamási Áron" Theatre of Sfântu Gheorghe, 2009, directed by Alexandru Dabija, with Tibor Pálffy (Nae Grirumea), Lásszló Mátray (Iancu Pampon), Gábor Erdei (Crăcănel), Alfréd Nagy (the Candidate), Gizella Kicsid (Didina Mazu), Annamária D. Albu (Mița Baston) etc.

[6] *O scrisoare pierdută* ['A Lost Letter'], Comedy Theatre of Bucharest, 2011, directed by Alexandru Dabija, with: Marius Florea Vizante (Ștefan Tipătescu), George Mihăiță (Agamemnon Dandanache), Valentin Teodosiu (Zaharia Trahanache), Marcel Iureș (Nae Cațavencu), Dorina Chiriac (the Drunk fellow), Mihaela Teleoacă (Zoe Trahanache).

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On the opposite side, lacking both in tragic character and in subtleness, Ada Lupu Hausvater opens the season of 2011 at the National Theatre in Timişoara with *O scrisoare pierdută*[7], the director interpreting this time the adventure from the text according to the present. The universe of Zoe, Tipătescu, Trahanache and Caţavencu is cut out from the reality that the audience can see on TV, in tabloids, in newspapers, in columns such as "Mundanities", "VIP", "Politics". Nevertheless if this path had been traversed all the way and had not been so complicated with too many ramifications (vaudeville, soap opera, reality show), then maybe the author would not have appeared annihilated and could have coexisted with the director. Surprisingly (or maybe not so much), the specialized critics accepted gladly the reinterpretation "in plastic" of Caragiale's play and only the drama critic Monica Andronescu from "Yorick" magazine sensed and commented as such the mix of ideas from the staging of the National Theatre of Timişoara. It is amazing how the director mentioned in some interviews or in TV shows that if Caragiale had lived, he had accepted his proposal, forgetting or maybe ignoring the author's firm reaction from 1895, when *O scrisoare pierdută* was represented in the National Theatre of Bucharest without his acceptance: "the artists […] took the liberty […], against any tradition, to wear masks made after the faces of honourable and high-ranked persons, which injures me very much and against which my artist conscience must rebel, as my works are not harlequinades meant to mock in passing real persons, but works of art aiming to embody in a more durable way ideal types" (Caragiale 1963: 199).

Crossing the same border between the devotion to the text and his own poetic art – even more dangerous in "consecrated" artists – as well as the thin fault between success and unsuccess, Silviu Purcărete, in his turn, stages *D-ale carnavalului*[8], the play with most ambiguities, at "Radu Stanca" Theatre of Sibiu. Seen as a whole, the staging bears clearly the effigy of the triad Silviu Purcărete (direction), Dragoş Buhagiar (scenography), Vasile Şirli (music). Given that the text was put to good use and it was turned into a starting point, the spectacle impressed due to the ability of emphasizing both famous lines and lines usually less stressed. A slum carnival, a little unreal, with light effects, with live music, somewhat pathetic and extremely agitated, is built in detail at the National Theatre of Sibiu; likewise, a barber's shop, in which carpets and mirrors are "rented", becomes the precincts in which unbelievable events take place. The end of the 19th century does not shine through almost at all, and Caragiale is present only through the power of the comical text, otherwise the staging is grounded on theatrical signs, on the unexpected effects and on a very well paced rhythm. Just like Mircea Cornişteanu left a metaphor for the entire performance in sight but in the background, Silviu Purcărete's obsessions and

[7] *O scrisoare pierdută* ['A Lost Letter'], National Theatre of Timişoara, 2011, directed by Ada Lupu Hausvater, with: Claudia Ierimia (Zoe Trahanache), Colin Buzoianu (Ştefan Tipătescu), Romeo Ioan (Zaharia Trahanache), Ion Rizea (Nae Caţavencu), Vladimir Jurăscu (Agamemnon Dandanache), Victor Manovici (Tache Farfuridi), Cătălin Ursu (Iordache Brânzovenescu) etc.

[8] *D-ale carnavalului* ['During the Carnival'], "Radu Stanca" National Theatre of Sibiu, 2011, directed by: Silviu Purcărete, with: Nicu Mihoc (Nae Girimea), Constantin Chiriac (Iancu Pampon), Adrian Matioc (Crăcănel), Ofelia Popii (Miţa Baston), Cristina Ragos, Raluca Iani şi Serenela Mureşan (Didina Mazu), Liviu Pancu (Catindatul) etc.

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Dragoş Buhagiar's imagination make sure they place a key clue for the vivid-eyed spectator. *D-ale carnavalului* is supported on a sand plateau; rented carpets imitating Bukhara carpets are put over it and a plasticised fabric is unfolded around this platform to symbolise the carnival space. The world of Nae Girimea, Miţa Baston, of the lovers, of the mistresses and of the "magnetized" individuals is unstable, erected on a sand floor, leaning on its image reflected in the mirrors – all of these perimeters of appearance and outage. Maybe the metaphor can be extrapolated and we would be right that today I.L. Caragiale's work is placed in the theatre on a moving sand surface in which it sinks, from which it rises, needing every time more force.

Because of its aspects of fat prank, *D-ale carnavalului* is also the most problematic text as regards the attention it requires, since from the directorial point of view it is easy to load and turn the life of kitsch-people into something that exceeds all limits and it is even harder to maintain certain decency out of respect for the author and for drama. The spectacle of Mona Marian[9] is exactly a very obvious example for what it means to let oneself be carried away by the taste of the mass, by the desire of satisfying an audience segment quite large today – the mediocre one. Although the setting and the costumes are classical, the spectacle is more than noisy – the issue of forced utterance in theatre being general – counting on trivial gestures and lines, which fatally are not only addressed by the characters to one another, but also to the audience. It is hard to accept this violent break of the barrier between the stage and the audience, which cannot even be excused by being an experimental staging. It is hard to see that the national flag is spat on and that the characters walk around more drunk than sober – or at least this is what the interpretation suggests. The comical fades away quickly, leaving behind an aggressive spectacle of a completely illogical world.

The drama *Năpasta* ['The Bane'], by its nature, does not share the fate of the other very well known plays. Built in a grave tone, studying human psychology, representing rather a material centred on the actor's performance, the text is a bit shaded, demonstrating now, as on the premiere day in 1880 that the work team needs an interpretation technique of great finesse. As the subject is the exploration of the human power, the stagings from the past ten years focus on the work and presence of the actor as well as on atmosphere, trying to re-enact an image of the old Romanian village, easy to recognize in a vaster temporal landscape. The few most important stagings from the past period resemble one another, as directors such as Cristian Juncu, Ioan Sărăran or Elmér Kincses focus on the acting study, on the pace, which also involves the evolution of the action and on the presence of light, playing with the effects obtained through semi-darkness, deep shadows, and contrasts. The setting contains generally symbols, of which a recurrent element being the table, for the most part used as a material line of the conflict territory, as a place for confession and dialogue; other times, the cross and candle refer to a lost

[9] *D-ale Carnavalului* ['During the Carnival'], "Lucian Blaga" National Theatre, Cluj Napoca, 2012, directed by: Mona Marian, with: Cristian Grosu (Nae Girimea), Ovidiu Crişan (Pampon), Elena Ivanca (Miţa Baston), Romina Merei (Didina Mazu), Cristian Rigman (the Candidate) etc.

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sacrality. The drama "Năpasta" came to be, generally speaking, seen and rendered scenically in an expressionistic manner.

The short plays by Caragiale, true inspiration sources for directors, are generally in the shadow of the five famous titles. Professional directors and state theatres contribute to the forgetfulness of the four texts: *O soacră* ['A Mother-in –Law'], *1 Aprilie* ['April 1st'], *Monolog burlesc* ['Burlesque Monologue'] and *Începem!* ['Let's Begin!']. They were recovered by the Radiophonic National Theatre and very rarely by the provincial theatres or private companies. For instance, *O soacră* was staged by the State Theatre in Constanța and directed by Gavril Borodan, *1 Aprilie* was staged at the "Luni" Theatre of Bucharest, and *Începem!* was staged twice by the acting and direction students, at the Students' Culture House of Bucharest (directed by Cătălin Naum) and at the lecture room of the Academy of Economic Studies (directed by Mihai Brătilă and Mircea Gherghină).

Caragiale and the theatrical experiment

Often, in order to rediscover new sources of novelty, it is attempted to pass Caragiale's work to the experimental area. Abandoning the typical, not following the patterns of Jean Georgescu, Sică Alexandrescu or Liviu Ciulei – people who signed memorable films or spectacles of *O noapte furtunoasă* or *O scrisoare pierdută*, means taking steps on uncertain ground, which are important steps that the more they overcome patterns, the further from the essence they get. The effect of the anti-canonical spectacles reflects itself on the audience, who, is either vehement before the eeriness on the stage, or falls into a snobbism of appreciating dignifiedly new subjects à la Caragiale. In this experiment, several characteristics are under the risk of deviating. Eventually, the maintenance of the text is not even one of the purposes of the experimental area any more. Therefore, the performance can become rather tragic than comical, or, on the contrary, the comical can slide into grotesque, into harlequinade, laughter becoming visceral, without any connection to the laughter mentally filtered. In addition, in some cases, the text becomes a pretext for the bold demonstration of a director.

"Masca" Theatre of Bucharest, specialized in the art of improvisation, of dance-theatre, of community street theatre, brought to the audience's attention a less usual staging of *O noapte furtunoasă*[10]. Here, the actors embody characters in the form of living statues. The performance comes to be centred on non-verbal theatrical signs, in which the gesture, pantomime, costumes, lights and setting become the most important preoccupation, if there are no words, it does not mean that we cannot understand what is happening. Although it is in an obvious place of experimental pursuits, the performance from "Masca" Theatre responds unbelievably well to the Caragialian spirit: the vintage costumes are very well reproduced, the slow movements suggest an old mechanical theatre, and the characters brought on the

[10] *O noapte furtunoasă* ['A Stormy Night'], "Masca" Theatre, Bucharest, 2012, directed by: Mihai Mălaimare, with Sorin Dinculescu (Mr. Dumitrache), Anamaria Pîslaru (Veta), Dora Iftode (Zița), Valentin Mihalache (Chiriac), Mihai Mălaimare (Caragiale) etc.

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stage besides the ones in the text (Cupids, dancers from the Union garden) outline better the world of the kitsch and of the caricature-men. Wearing make-up and immaculate white clothes on the platform of a white pavilion, the actors show that the audience can also remember Caragiale by means of the new technologies, of the verbal and sound violence. The movements that show a very well learned and mastered technique, the action outlining by gestures, the comical expressed simply demonstrate that the actors' involvement does not need theatrical machineries to impress, to outline an atmosphere that enchains the spectator for a few moments.

On the other hand, the palette of spectators that do not follow the classic pattern is extremely rich and amazing, at the same time. Such staging are only meant to shock, draining the essence out of the original writing as well as the final production. Thus we could wonder what the mix of topics from all directions (American movie, Emir Kusturica's music, Romanian realities, the slum of the 19th century) is doing in a staging of *O noapte furtunoasă* signed by Alexandru Nagy in 2009. Or what did Cătălin Vasiliu want to express by moving the action from *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea*[11] to the circus, costuming the characters in circus costumes? And what would be the reason for the fact that, in the same staging, Efimița and Safta are both interpreted by men? Is this Caragiale by any chance too rough and sent to a confused area?

"A zany idea" (Ichim 2004), as Florica Ichim defined it is the staging of *O noapte furtunoasă*, half experimental, half willingly paranoid, achieved by Dan Vasile. The charge goes far, the director does not want to represent Caragiale, but to play with the text, consequently the *Stormy Night* becomes the *Typhoony Night*[12]. The original wish is to demonstrate that the dramatist can be intelligible even when the theatrical code is permuted, and that the fundamental meanings do not change regardless of the language to which it is translated. Using costumes, make-up, the setting of the Asian theatre, moments of dialogue in Portuguese, as well as the text in Romanian, the sequences that remind of the Commedia dell'Arte spirit, Dan Vasile reached a mixed outcome that results in the parody of the soap opera aspect of the commercial productions on the stage or on TV. Nevertheless it is not the true Caragiale who, placed between several cultures, is equal from one end to the other. This universality that the director wants to inculcate to him has nothing to do with the style of the Romanian dramatist. If we do not look manifestly for Caragiale, then the staging from "Nicolae Bălcescu" Cultural Centre may stay valid, offering a moment of relaxation and an opportunity if smiling to the humorous situations.

The one that had already raised sharp reactions from the critics at the premiere from November 13th 1884, *O scrisoare pierdută* is even today an inciting subject to

[11] *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* ['Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries'], "Fani Tardini" Dramatic Theatre, Galați, 2010, directed by: Cătălin Vasiliu, Gheorghe V. Gheorghe (Leonida), Cristian Gheorghe (Efimița), Aureliu Bâtcă (Safta).

[12] *O noapte taifunoasă* ['A Typhoony Night'], „Nicolae Bălceascu" Cultural Center, Bucharest, 2004, directed by: Dan Vasile, with: Daniel Iancu (Mr. Dumitrache), Alexandru Mike Gheorghiu (Ipingescu), Gabriel Răuță (Chiriac), Bogdan Dumitrescu (Spiridon), Claudiu Maier (Rică Venturiano), Bogdan Talasman (Veta), George Corodeanu (Zița).

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directors and further on, to chroniclers. The staging by Gabor Tompa from 2006[13] was a surprise, counting on at least two shocking elements: it reversed the masculine and the feminine and recomposed the scenic space, creating at the same time an atmosphere of absurd theatre. Therefore, as a consequence of the changes at the level of characters and space, the staging turned from a preponderantly male action into a female one, pointing out the idea that women not only do politics, but they are good at it, too. The only man on the stage is Miklós Bács, as Zoe, which emphasized in a certain way that the grotesque character of a reversed life in the matriarchate age has conquered the social hierarchy again. If until here the Hungarian director's attempt is supported, at least from the ingenuity point of view, transferring the events to the setting of a public restroom does not make any sense any more. Following a misunderstood principle, according to which the stage is the place of all possibilities, the experiment pushes the limit between the artistic and the commercial, between comical and mocking to the extreme.

Can Caragiale be approached to Goethe? Most theatre people would not agree to the formulated assumption. This is not the case of Mihai Măniuțiu, who, surpassing every imagination barriers, stages *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* on the background of a Walpurgis night[14]. The poster of the performance does not agree with the reality, as *Conul Leonida* is not by I.L. Caragiale, as specified, but after an idea of I.L. Caragiale, at the most. In brief, we will say where Măniuțiu's attempt goes: at the foot of a hillock two old men are sitting: Mr. Leonida and Ms. Efimița, two persons that do not have a roof over their heads, as if landed accidentally in the middle of nowhere; behind them, allegoric figures detached from the encyclopedic work of art of the dramatist from Weimar run wild, dance or recite. The prank, as the play is defined by its author turns into a circus representation that does not keep anything from Caragiale's spirit, which is not either in Geothe's, nor in Beckett's style, as it is intended, perhaps. Certainly, if the staging had used a newer text written on this very idea, it would have been more successful, than by rephrasing unreasonably a well known play.

Conclusions

Mihail Sebastian noted in 1939:

> As for us, we do not believe that the Romanian society grew out of Caragiale. Everywhere, in politics and in culture, Cațavencu-like and Farfuridi-like persons abound (Sebastian 1939: 272–273).

[13] *Az elveszett level/O scrisoare pierdută* ['A Lost letter'], State Hungarian Theatre of Cluj Napoca, 2006, directed by: Gàbor Tompa, with: Andrea Kali (Zaharia Trahanache), Skovran Tünde (Ștefan Tipătescu), Kezdi Imola (Nae Cațavencu), Melinda M. Kantor (Agamemnon Dandanache), Kati Panek (Farfuridi), Csilla Albert (Brânzovenescu), Bács Miklós (Zoe) etc.

[14] *Conul Leonida față cu Reacțiunea* ['Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries'] by I.L. Caragiale, The "Odeon" Theatre, Bucharest, 2002, directed by: Mihai Măniuțiu, with: Constantin Cojocaru (Leonida), Dorina Lazăr (Efimița), Oana Ștefănescu (Safta), Ionel Mihăilescu, Mircea Constantinescu, Laurențiu Lazăr, Dimitrii Bogomaz, Marian Lepădatu, Gabriel Pintilei, Ioan Batinaș, Eugen Cristian Motriuc (mute characters).

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We can hear and approve the echo of this thought even today, when we are seventy years away. And indeed, the more conspicuous this laughing-crying world is, the more clearly we see the portraits before us, the more we feel buried under the heavy earth of the lie, of individualism, of the lack of values and of raw models, and of the lack of meaning. But if the theatre will keep on increasing as if under a magnifying glass the Cațavencu characters, the Farfuridi characters and others, again and again, it will only produce a devastating effect, in which the work of art of the classical dramatist will turn into a masquerade, into a tragic world that will not have the chance of making the spectator smile any more. As long as the impression of the theatre people is always pessimistic, sliding into the nightmare of the certainty that the great writers of the world literature have been sapped and that they must by all means be connected to special devices for artificial respiration, the crisis of art will grow deeper and the vitality of true work of art will not be discovered any more.

With a clairvoyant eye and an age-crossing voice, I.L. Caragiale note in his correspondence on an almost deep tone: "We are beginning an age less merry than the past one; laughter and jokes will not comfort us as before in the events that will take place in our Romanian world. Our children will have reasons to cry maybe – we have laughed enough" (Letter from April 3rd/ 16th [1907], apud Manolescu, 2002: 288–289). Maybe the author felt a sort of a decline, not necessarily of his work, but of the manner in which it will be seen, we believe that I. L. Caragiale should not lose his humour on the stage, and the difficulty beyond hilarious situations must not be emphasized brutally. Not a tumble, but a carnival. If our century, the days we are living make us look down overwhelmed, then a correct positioning, wittingly and aware of the classical dramatist and the classical dramaturgy, would be the niche of overcoming the fear that the theatre is dead and its idols declined.

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Abstract

The "Caragiale" phenomenon in the theatrical practice of the past few years is certainly worth analyzing rigorously. If we take into account that no less than eighty-four performances have been staged in the country on the most important dramatic stages as well as in alternative theatres and companies for the past ten years, the premises seem definitely promising. We would be tempted to see in the multitude of shapes taken by Caragiale's work in the limelight precisely its stimulating depth. This generates our question – how efficient, how healthy is the perpetual reformulation, how favourable is the permanent search for the new and how favourable is the process of updating the plays in the context of the modern myths of the years two thousand? From this point on can the dispute of the principles begin, because some – spectators, but also practitioners – prefer the classic, and other feel the need to experiment, to doubt, to rewrite the patterns that are thought to be worn out. The landscape of stage directing formed around the work of the Romanian dramatist, especially in the last decade, is not only vast or simply different, but also inconsistent. From famous names of the national stage – such as Mircea Cornişteanu, Silviu Purcărete, Mihai Măniuţiu, Alexandru Dabija – to younger ones, or to tireless innovators such as Mihai Mălaimare, Mona Marian or Dan Vasile, the dynamics of the shows, of the messages or even of the texts of Caragiale, that have suffered considerable mutations, is surprising. As popular as the four comedies are (*A Stormy Night*, *A Lost Letter*, *During the Carnival* and *Mr. Leonida and the Reactionaries*), one avoids the smaller dramatic works, that represent the real source of Caragiale's spirit: *A Mother-in–Law*, *April 1st*, *Modern* and *Let's Begin!*. The potential of these texts can be exploited in the future with a real chance of success.

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