Gh. Asachi – Elements of Theatrical Theory

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Gheorghe Asachi's theatrical theory did not emerge as a series of dramatic theories based on an elaborate programmatic system. His viewpoint on theatre rules pervaded his whole work both implicitly and explicitly; his plays, prefaces and practical activity made him count among the most important contributors to the development of Romanian theatrical life in the town of Iaşi. His studies abroad and his frequent trips to Europe offered him the opportunity to get in touch with significant European cultures from which he borrowed tendencies that he accordingly adapted to the spiritual Moldavian specificity. He utilised these obvious European influences along with sustained efforts (and not only) to establish a national theatre in which the actors performing in Romanian would rely on appropriate language usage and stage speech that no longer resembled a dialect or a means of communication inferior to that of the European languages.

The scholar's theatrical theory is to be approached in the context of his efforts and his obvious accomplishments in achieving genuine Romanian staging. His initiatives are those of a pioneer in the field and proved fundamental to his successors (Vasile Alecsandri, Costache Negruzzi and Mihail Kogălniceanu) whose subsequent achievements derived from them.

1. Playing in Romanian – a means of developing the national culture

In their 'sitting rooms' the Moldavian boyars used French, Greek, Russian or German at that time as Romanian was considered a language for the servants. In this "age of foreignness" mentioned by Asachi himself, the theatre was supposed to be not only a means of entertainment, but also that of national pride, of developing one's national culture. Consequently Asachi initiated and directed the premiere in Romanian of *Mirtil şi Chloe*/*Myrtle and Chloe*, a one-act pastoral after Gessner and Florian that he himself translated and adapted. The performance was presented in ataman Costache Ghica's house on December 12, 1816. In the *Procuvântare/ Introduction* to the 1850 edition of *Mirtil şi Chloe/Myrtle and Chloe* we were informed that "It was a very brave act to break through the 'foreignness' of the times and use one's native language for those who cherished it" (Asachi 1991: 11). Even Metropolitan Veniamin Costachi took part in the event and blessed the audience. In

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a time when only foreign actors would play in our country the performance staged by Asachi stood out artistically as it was based on an accurately translated and adapted text and appropriate scenery as well as from the viewpoint of its organization (finding a space to play in, making the costumes and building up the scenery).

Musicologist Teodor T. Burada mentioned Asachi as a great promoter of the Romanian culture that had managed to talk the town boyars into hosting performances in Romanian in their houses. For *Mirtil şi Chloe/Myrtle and Chloe* for instance he founded a *society theatre*, he had the scenery painted by professionals and designed a curtain "following a Roman example that showed Apollo and the muses reaching out for Moldavia's hand to help her up" (Burada 1991: 79). The painting actually embodied Asachi's Illuministic creed that art can influence the progress of a nation. The actors were the boyars' sons and daughters, a number of amateurs dressed in national costumes trying to imitate the French, German or Italian actors they had watched performing in Iaşi or abroad. Asachi had justly predicted that the theatre as a form of living art could have the strongest influence on defining a national culture. According to him the theatre was a pleasant straightforward and effective means of building up a nation's spirituality. As a living art the national theatre would have a positive influence on other forms of literary expression. Asachi's achievements were by no means flawless, but his efforts as a promoter of the Romanian culture are nonetheless very valuable.

2. The need for trained Romanian actors

Gheorghe Asachi also aimed his attention towards training Romanian actors in specialized institutions to play in their native language. He cofounded the Drama and Philharmonic Conservatory on November 15, 1836. Students would be taught free of charge music and declamatory techniques in "the nation's language" as Asachi himself would write in a letter to Prince Mihail Sturza. The periodical *Albina Românească*/ *The Romanian Bee* would mention that: "this institution can have (…) a very beneficial influence upon the national theatre" (apud Burada 1991: 123). Asachi was deeply aware of the importance of creating individual structures and organized bodies to train actors for further acting in Romanian. His constant efforts eventually bore fruit on February 23, 1837 when two of his adaptations after August von Kotzebue – *Lapeirus* and *Văduva vicleană* /*The Shrewd Widow* – were staged in Romanian with a *Prolog/Prologue* by Asachi himslef. Three of the students attending the Conservatory – Neculai Luchian, Dimitrie Gusti and Gheorghe Stihi – played in Romanian on the French Theatre stage in January 1838. For the next season the Contract between the authorities and the French management of the theatre, namely the Variety Theatre, stipulated on Art. 9 that one day of the week except for Sunday the Romanian Conservatory acting team could play on the French stage free of charge making use of all the required scenery.

Asachi's cultural activity proved him a skilfull manager and a true founder. He started staging plays first with amateurs, he founded an institution in which they could learn the basics of this art, he encouraged them to play in Romanian in the European manner of the times, he both translated and adapted a series of plays, he

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wrote plays in Romanian himself that were later published and staged. However lowly regarded was acting at that time as: "coming onto stage was generally considered as a degrading act and the audience would look down upon those who would play" (Burada 1991: 141), one of the actors – Matei Millo – was bold enough to perform in *Piatra Teiului/The Linden Tree Stump* in 1835 at Horodniceni. Yet most of the officials' sons and daughters who dared to play would not mention their names in the theatre programme.

3. Poetry, rhythm and musicality in any theatre performances

Poetry was among the creative domains in which the playwright that had also a diploma in engineering expressed himself at his best. Experts would justly assert that this was the genre in which he excelled. This obvious inclination would show in his permanent combination of poetry and prose in his plays. Asachi considered that drama and poetry would make a perfect match and he favoured the latter under its musical form. In his opinion poetry confers the performance more sensibility and alongside with music they make it more accessible to the audience. His idyllic play *Piatra Teiului/ The Linden Tree Stump* reads as follows:

> Luceafărul ce lin ne-au adus lumină/Nu, nu au răsărit din sferă străină,/De el s-au luminat tot Carpatul munte/Şi s-au însăninat comele cărunte,/Păstorii răsuna a bucurii cuvinte,/În sânul lor sărbând pe a lor Domn Părinte [The morning star that shines on us/Our sky has filled with light/Our mountains glow/Their peaks are bright/The shepherds that assemble/Now glorify Our lord].

His inspiration from the country life and popular costumes is made obvious in his historical, rural or pastoral themes that are appropriate for the initiation of a national theatre. It would be interesting to notice that particular themes such as the stars, the fortune, the nature etc. are the expressions of a not yet defined Romanticism.

4. Music – the basic component of every performance

Asachi's lyrical inclinations were also manifest in the musical parts of the plays he intended to stage. In his *Înainte cuvântare*/*Introduction* to *Norma* he pointed out the dificulty of translating the lines of the musical parts, an observation that actually emphasized the need to perform opera productions in the language they had been initially written and composed. One of his observations on the above topic reads as follows:

> It is more difficult for our language that is not yet as cultivated as others to give accurate translations that should observe the number of syllables, the prosody and meaning of the original Italian text using appropriate words but we have striven to accomplish that in the present work. And despite the use of certain words that are unknown to our audience we were obliged to do so for the benefit of our performance (Asachi 1991: 9).

For instance the staged Kotzebue's *Lapeirus* was interspersed with songs as was *Ţiganii/The Gypsies* based on fragments from Verdi's *La Traviata* and Bellini's *Puritanii*/*The Puritans.* A daring idea even for the present times when hybriding arts

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is the current trend. The following lines accompanied by Bellini's music sound modern even these days:

> Auzi, române, sunetul,/Prin buciumul de-aramă!/Europa, a noastră patrie/O cheamă-n ale ei sân!/Acest apel a gloriei/Ni chemă la-nviere,/Lege, unire cere,/Prin care a triumfa Moldova [Hark, brave Romanian/The alpenhorn resounding/Europe desires our nation/Be closer to its bosom/This vivid wish now makes/Our hearts tremble with joy/Let us unite today/And hope Moldavia attains triumph].

5. Beauty and morality

"The national theatre should teach morality and innocent pleasures" (Rusu 2055: 17), said Asachi, thus expressing his conviction that arts should have a moral and educational dimension apart from that of entertainment.

In his *Înainte cuvânt/Foreword* to *Lapeirus* he clearely states that playwriting should aim at perfecting one's native language and acting in one's own language. He also writes that the theatre

> by pleasant means presents important aspects of mankind's life and teaches them the meaning of morality, virtue and good deeds, to fear bad deeds that do honour them not (Asachi 1991: 6).

In accordance with the classical ideas that he highly regarded Asachi promoted the educational, formative, moralising role of the theatre. "In one word the theatre plays a main role in the evolutuion of a nation". In his Introduction to Kotzebue's *Pedagogul*/*The Teacher* (Iaşi, 1839) he stresses upon the reforming value of comedy by using the Latin expression "*Ridendo castigat mores*".

6. The theatre – an important practical apprenticeship

Asachi showed an undeniable interest in staging various plays. Both his translations and his own texts were meant to be staged as he himself stated in February 1839 in a letter to the authorities in which he was asking for a subvention: "We desire to enrich our culture by the present play" (Burada 1991: 144). His attempts resulted in:

> An evolution of the national theatre, a growing interest for it among the playwrights and the audience as a good omen for literature and the consolidation of drama school through appropriate aesthetics, morality and language (Asachi 1991: 11).

A very objective person, Asachi knew well that the translation and the adaptation he had produced in 1817 were not perfect as he implied when using phrases such as "the modest muse", "Myrtle and Chloe's naive words", "a short yet interesting play for a start", "a play we aimed to be taken as a model by the citizens" (*Ibidem*: 11).

7. Gheorghe Asachi – artistic director and sets designer

For *Mirtil şi Hloe/Myrtle and Chloe* Gheorghe Asachi imagined both costumes and sets thus becoming the first sets designer of the Romanian stage. His

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production required actors to dress in national costumes as a means of pointing out the need for a national theatre.

The didascalies that accompanied all his plays proved his unmistakable talent as artistic director pointing out the idea that the playwright could act also as the artistic director of his own plays. In *Petru Rareş* for instance there are certain stage directions such as "hear hunter's horn, Budeu and Raban emerge from both sides", "silence, both listen", "emerges in a frantic run" that indicate the necessity for certain tonalities and gestures on the part of the actors and strongly prove his directing skills. They also demonstrate the playwright's intention that his plays should be staged. Europe was going through a period when a new character – the artistic director – was making its appearance. Asachi's stage directing somehow resembled that of George II Duke of Saxe-Meiningen considered to be the first modern director.

Conclusions

Gheorghe Asachi's stage and playwriting activity is to be approached from the viewpoint of the historical and cultural environment of his times. He can definitely be considered a pioneer and a path opener towards the foundation of the national theatre. Despite the obvious imperfections, the simplicity, the idyllism and recurrent patriotism as well as the abundant historical episodes of his works, his enthusiastic attitude was justified by the times he represented. He had a major contribution to the artistic life of the 19th century as the following lines clearly state:

> În un timp de ovelire, pe când limba cea română,/Din palaturi fugărită, se vorbea numai la stână/Nobili voi de neam şi cuget, sfărmând a sale fiare,/Vorbit-aţi întîi c-aciia ce ne dau pâine şi miere,/Pârga scenei naţionale cu drept vouă se cuvine./Suvenir ca să vă fie a juneţelor senine./Picătura, deşi mică, ce-o pe stâncă picurează,Face râului o cale, care după ea urmează… [When times come that our language/Honours not the noble tongue but the shepherds' loud talk/Bold hearts face this opposition/Breaking down this chained position/And defend the player's rights/Merry making the young people./And regardless how belittled be their effort by the crowd/ Their quest will forever be regarded as a proof for those to come] (translation by Ileana Ocneanu)

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Abstract

Gheorghe Asachi (1788−1869) is one of the Romanian National Theatre founders at the beginning of the 19th century. His plays, prefaces and practical activity made him count among the most important contributors to the development of Romanian theatrical life in the city of Iaşi and one of the first Romanian theatre theoreticians. He had sustained efforts and

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remarkable results to establish a national theatre in which the actors performing in Romanian would rely on appropriate language usage and stage speech that no longer resembled a dialect or a means of communication inferior to that of the European languages. The scholar's theatrical theory is to be approached in the context of his efforts and his obvious accomplishments in achieving genuine Romanian staging. His initiatives are those of a pioneer for whom performing in a means of developing the national culture. For that reason he translated, adapted and staged in Iaşi, December 12, 1816, the first performance in Romanian, *Mirtil şi Hloe/ Myrtle and Chloe.* Asachi's cultural activity proved him a skilful manager and a true founder. He started staging plays first with amateurs, he cofounded an institution in which they could learn the basics of this art, the Iaşi Drama and Philharmonic Conservatory (November 15, 1836), he encouraged them to play in Romanian in the European manner of the times, he both translated and adapted a series of plays, he wrote plays in Romanian himself that were later published and staged. He is also considered the first Romanian artistic director and sets designer.

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