THE 1956 DEBATE. SUBVERTING THE PRIMACY OF THE TEXT?[1]

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Abstract: the article presents a series of stage adaptations for Shakespeare's "As you like it" in order to show how the 1956 debate on "retheatricalizing the theatre" impacted theatre practice in Communist Romania. Shakespeare's play is seen here as a case study with the potential to outline the process of adapting classical texts to socialist realist performance rigors and to act as a conduit for transforming Stalinist theatre culture after 1956.

Keywords: socialist realism, theatricality, cultural adaptation, Shakespeare.

Theatre in Romania during the late 1940s and early 1950s, at the height of socialist realism, featured a naturalist stage design minutely reproducing the life and historical context of the play. Like a photograph, the set design had to have the value of a document that would instantly give the audience a clear idea about the time and place of the play as well as enforcing an ideologically sanctioned framework of interpretation. A classical play production had to be self-referential. All the needed information for the public to understand the drama from a Marxist point of view had to be contained within it. Even though with the great classics of dramatic literature the process of cultural adaptation started with the translation stage, the reshaping was completed and took full form only in performance.

Theatre performances had to have an "activizing result"[2] and much of this goal was accomplished through directing and stage design. Art had to inform and engender action not reflection or contemplation. The author of the performance was the playwright and the task of the production team (actors, directors, or designers) was to bring the audience his message as clearly as possible.

By late fifties and early sixties however a change occurs. Informed by political unrest and a sense of a new possible beginning (in the context of the wave of de-Stalinization across the Soviet bloc and the Hungarian Revolution in 1956), a debate ensued in specialized journals about the need for theatricality in the theatre. The debate unraveling in periodicals such as *Contenporanul* and *Teatrul* extended until 1958 when the Romanian Communist Party decreed a return to its old ways in terms of cultural policies. Nevertheless, the 1956-1957 discussion is essential for understanding the changes taking place in the theatre in Romania after high Stalinism (1947-1953). Stage production moves now from mere decoration and illustration of the dramatic text to taking a structural role. It becomes its supplement. Directors and production designers were free to explore and experiment, but their trials could not exist outside the finality of performance. According to the critics and theatre historians of those days, although stage design had found at the time a new suggestiveness, it

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[2] Norris Houghton, *Moscow Rehearsals*, (Octagon Books: New York, 1936/1975) p.229.

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was not and could not be autonomous, since that could bring it dangerously close to being identified as formalist.

In this article, I will flesh out a couple of instances in the history of Shakespeare stage adaptations in order to show how the theatricality debate impacted theatre practice after 1956. The two main examples follow the same play staged at the Bulandra Theatre, the former Municipal Theatre: *As you like it* (1951) translated for the stage by Lucia Demetrius and directed by W. Siegfried (with stage designs and costumes by the same artist)[3]; and *As You like it* (1961) with a translation by Virgil Teodorescu, directed by Liviu Ciulei with scene design by Liviu Ciulei and Ion Oroveanu.

During high Stalinism, theatricality was equated with formalism, with a retrograde theatre tradition. In her book on theatricality, theatre historian Miruna Runcan researches beautifully this debate surrounding the concept during the interwar years concluding that the discussion surging in the pages of *Contemporanul* and the journal *Teatru* in 1956 and 1957 was a first attempt for the young generation of theatre artists to go back to the very rich pre-communist theatre tradition exemplified by directors such as Ion Sava.[4] However, the author creates a bridge over the 1945-1955 period, making the 1956/1957 moment an appendix for the amply documented interwar theatre landscape.

To put it simply, the 1956 debate concentrated on the issue of the weight that the dramatic text should have in the economy of the performance. The central question was whether the text was a springboard for the performance or whether theatre practitioners were supposed to follow the text and the consecrated avenues of interpretation of the said text as closely as possible in production. The idea of theatricality, as Runcan points out, existed before the communist period with its opponents and proponents. But after 1948, a process of silencing this approach took place. Those in favor of a theatre that experimented with the dramatic text, in the tradition of Gordon Craig, Max Reinhardt or Ion Sava, were harshly criticized. However, I would argue that theatricality as a concept is carried through the years of Stalinism as *an other*, an element against which the very idea of a socialist realist theatre, and in particular of a socialist realist interpretation of Shakespeare, is defined. We might suggest instead of a process replacement one of reciprocal corrosion. So, how did the socialist realist theatre look like?

The 1951 *As you like it* stage adaptation was hailed as a successful application of the socialist realist method to staging a classic. However, this was an act of reconsideration since the play had its premiere during 1947/1948 theatre season. At the time, it is barely mentioned in the journal *Contemporanul*. Only in 1952, we discover that this particular stage adaptation was "improved" and presented satisfactorily again in 1951. This process of rewriting is

[3] W. Siegfried is listed by the *Romanian Theatrical Repertory beginning with 1944* hosted by the National Heritage Site with the surname Walter and his activity spans from 1948 up to 1957. It coincides with W. Siegfried's and Cella Voinescu's emigration date in May 1958. http://www.cimec.ro/SCRIPTS/TeatreNou/detaliu_Scenografi.asp?sq=SIEGFRIED,%20WALTER last accessed 09.03.2014. However in archival documents he appears as Wolfinger (see footnote 12). Also, historian Cristian Vasile points out that Siegfried received commendations from the Romanian State for his artistic merits under the same name (discussion with the historian, September 2014). Based on his performance track record it is safe to assume however that as in the case of Mihail/Mihai Raicu both names were used interchangeably.

[4] Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizare si reteatralizare in Romania 1920-1960*, (Cluj: Editura Eikon/Biblioteca Teatrullui imposibil, 2003)

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typical for the approach to history during communism and it is mirrored in the theatre by a constant need to make the past fit to current ideological turns.

Theatre productions are therefore always improved from the opening night throughout the entire run of the play. In fact, this action of "keeping the performance young" (menținerea tinereții spectacolelor), as it is called in the articles of the day, has at its core the idea that "critique and self critique are the development lows of socialist realism."[5] Going back to the 1951 stage adaptation, we find out that it was "improved" by the same director, W. Sigfried, this time with appropriate impressive naturalist sets[6] (Images 1 and 2), a toning down of the fairy tale character of the play and a rebuttal of Jacques' pessimistic utterances. It is important to mention that a stage adaptation of a classic was commended only if it met all the requirements prescribed by Soviet theatre craft.

One needs to underline that the level of monumentality and naturalism typical of the Soviet theater was not a staple of the Romanian stage before 1945. Excessive verisimilitude was not a must during the interwar period. First of all, theatre institutions did not have the technical means to master such spectacular feats and second, the theatre did not embrace a fully didactic or utilitarian agenda. These features were however central to the aims of the socialist culture as a whole. Theatre in particular was aligned to such directives, as it was charged with educating the masses in the spirit of the new social and political order.

The point of this grandiose theatre that came from the Moscow centre was to shape the citizens of tomorrow, not to engender reflection or contemplation. The theatre could not be ambiguous, experimental or open to multiple interpretations. It had to be thorough, clear, and impressive. An article published in the journal *Arts in the RPR* as early as 1952[7] presents in great detail this new way of making theatre and what it meant for the socialist realist reshaping of the classical canon. The text features the following quote from Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej : "The democratic and workers' conception of life constitutes by no means a violent breaking away from everything that was valid in the life and from the culture of the past…The democratic conception forms a bridge between that which was historically valid yesterday and that which will be valid tomorrow. It ensures a genuine continuation of mankind's traditions"[8]. The author of the article continues on this point by adding that putting to good use progressive cultural heritage is an important aspect of the cultural revolution. However, this appropriation is carried out in a critical spirit "by taking over whatever is of value and advanced in the works of the classics."[9] In the past, Shakespeare tragedies and comedies served as a mere pretext for the directorial tricks devoid of meaning and exaggerated formalistic stage designs. Shakespeare was thus turned into the object of vulgar

[5]Mihail Cosma, "Critică și autocritică în Teatrull sovietic," *Contemporanul*, no.75, 1948, p.8

[6] After studying painting with André Lhote in Paris, W. Siegfried specialized in décor painting for the theatre and other types of live entertainment at the Metro Goldwyn Mayer Studios in Bruxelles. Although this was not necessarily a recommendation for a theatre artist working in Romania after 1945, knowledge that could further the regime's agenda was always highly prized and Siegfried was undoubtedly a consummate production designer. Although he adapted to the socialist realist restrains like most of the artists working in the theatre, like most of them he hoped for a radical change after 1956.

[7] Simion Alterescu, "Shakespeare on the Romanian Stage", *Arts in Romanian People's Republic* no.4, 1952, pp.79-86.

[8] Idem.p.80.

[9] Ibidem.

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formalistic interpretation, whilst the text became just a pretext. In the context of constructing socialism, the men of culture (oamenii de cultură) had to struggle against decadence. The new public has proven to be an exacting critic since it has refused the anti-realistic furbelows which clouded the joy for life and optimism characteristic of Shakespeare's text. In short all this meant that directing and production design had to faithfully illustrate a Marxist reconsidered play text.

The approach implied a very different understanding of reception in the theatre. Performances were no longer open to various interpretations; they had a finite nature. There was just one correct way of interpreting, understanding a play and that was always achieved scientifically by applying the method of socialist realism. The worker did not need to be confused by directorial experiments. Theatre performances had to be reliable and clear. What this new theatre strived for was not critical distance, but the revolutionary sublime achieved on the stage by a didactically prescriptive naturalism that ensured a total illusion. In these circumstances, spectators become utterly absorbed and they left the theatre permeated by revolutionary ideas and the need to change themselves and the society they lived in. In fact, realist socialist theatre is closer to Tolstoy's idea of infecting the audience that to the vanguard revolutionary theatre proposed by Meyerhold.

This was the theory, in practice, theatre featuring period costumes, meadows, springs and life size forests tended to saturate the eye. Sanda Manu describes this naturalistic approach as a bad wedding photograph taken in an atelier near the Central Railway Station.[10] The scientific method of directing was intensive and extensive.

As stated above, the 1956 moment prompted a reaction to this ossified pseudo-stanislavskian method of performance production. In *Contemporanul*, and soon after 1956 in *Teatrul*, we read that there was *too much stage design* in Val Mugur's *Romeo and Juliet* at the Iași National Theatre. This production apparently reveled in color and stage architecture, a feast for the eye that left the social meaning of the play behind and concentrated on the love story. The 'correct', socialist interpretation in this case was that Romeo and Juliet were the exponents of a new world, the world of the Renaissance. This is the context in which Ciulei's well known article *Teatralizarea picturii de teatru* (*The Theatricalisation of Theatre Painting*), published in 1956 in the journal *Teatrul*[11], introduced the idea of theatricality back into the official discourse. He underlined that when it came to painted décor, theatricality stemmed from the stage designer's capacity to leave the spectator the space to appreciate the performance in all its complexity. He further points out that the desire to show everything on the stage establishes limitations for the spectator's ability to imagine.

In 1956 we witness, yet gain, a revised production of Siegfried *As you like it*. The retouched production is glossed upon in a review by Augustin Doinaș in the 1956 November Issue of *Teatrul*.[12] Doinaș points out that it is of the outmost importance for a play featured by the permanent repertoire of a theatre to be kept fresh. This is now achieved by Cella Voinescu's new costume designs for Rosalinda, Frederic and Jacques, by introducing an alternate casting for some of the roles and by throwing a melancholic note over the entire

[10] Valeriu Moisescu, *Persistența Mermoriei*, (București : Fundația Culturală Camil Petrescu, 2007) p. 10.
[11] Liviu Ciulei, "Teatralizarea picturii de Teatrul", *Teatrul*, no.2, 1956, p. 52-56.
[12] Augustin Doinaș, "Un Spectacol cu Melancolie" *Teatrul*, nr. 6, 1956, p.89 – 90.

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production. This time however, W. Siegfried's directorial choice to bring Jacques to the foreground spilled over the entire performance an "uncalled-for note of bitter skepticism." Commended for his enunciation skills, Dan Nasta is also cautioned for an affectation in tone and gesture that makes the "organic sadness of the character seem superior, contemptuous".

This flimsy review becomes relevant in the context of the theatricality debate. Although just a graft,[13] Siegfried's approach speaks of an attempt to turn the production in a new direction. The costumes and stage designs featured in this production were probably exhibited in 1957 at Theatre of Nations Festival in Paris at the Sarah Bernard Theater. The "Theatre in Romania" exhibition showed production sketches by both W. Siegfried and his wife Cella Voinescu. In their official capacity, the couple also had to arrange a production of Mihail Sebastian's paly "Steaua fără nume" in a Parisian theatre. Soon after this event however, at the beginning of the following year, the two asked for political asylum.[14]

Seen from this perspective the stage adaptation by Liviu Ciulei in 1961 becomes a necessity. The regime could not endorse a production that was associated now with undesirable names. As a staple of the Municipal Theatre (now renamed Bulandra) repertoire, the play needed to be redone. Although his seminal 1956 article on *theatricalizing theatre painting* became a point of reference for the theatre artists' community, it did not assure protection from strong criticism. The opposite was the case.

In 1958, G.B Shaw's *Saint Joan* [15] is adapted for the stage by Liviu Ciulei (directing, scene design and costumes) at the Bulandra Theatre (the former Municipal Theatre). The director followed with this production the new, rediscovered avenue in directing and staging. The official reaction was swift and criticism was harsh. In a review of the evolution of stage design during the first decade of constructing socialism, we read the following:

> In connection to the abstract and often precious character of the scene design in Saint Joan, we have to point out that running from naturalism and looking for a maximum of expression in highly stylized décor makes for an excess of symbolism in staging, which goes beyond the meaning of the text and remains hidden to the spectator.[16]

This discourse about theatricality or the *reintroduction* of the concept of theatricality (*of re-theatricalizing the theatre*) evolves in parallel, especially after 1958, with articles that feature a discreet criticism of the naturalist design used before. The articles stating the necessity to

[13] Looking over the photographs and sketches that document the evolution of this production (Bulandra Theatre kindly offered for research purposes visual documentation for the 1947/1948 production) we can notice décor and costumes changes through the years even though they are not necessarily extensive. Siegfried's directorial choice to centre the performance on Jacques' character, a definite point of departure from the prescriptive socialist realist interpretation of the play in performance is hard to document accurately in the absence of a production book or access to the performance text.

[14] Open Society Archives, *Communism and Cold War Fond, Romanian Unit/Subject Files* 1946-1992: Theatre /811, Item no.2525/1958 "Two prominent escapees: Siegfried Wolfinger and Cela Voinescu".

[15] Bernard Shaw was a well known fellow traveler (an open sympathizer and ardent supporter of the Soviet Regime) and his plays and persona enjoyed wide acclaim in the Soviet Union. For an introduction to the idea of *fellow travelers* see Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp.207-246.

[16] Anca Costa-Foru, "Scenografia originală în ultimii 15 ani", *Studii și cercetări de istoria artei*, no.1-2,1959, p. 144.

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educate the masses through theatre while pointing out the primacy of the dramatic text in performance and the accomplishments of the Soviet theatre in this direction continue to be a constant.

By the time Ciulei directs *As you like it* in 1961, he has experienced all the tribulations of the development of this new found idea in the theatre. Mindful of his earlier experience this production approach, although a far cry from Siegfried's, is in my opinion a prudent choice informed by past criticisms and a theatre culture that was still adhering to socialist realist values such as *popular character* and *humanism*. Greg Castillo[17] argues that the Renaissance period stood at the basis of what was understood by the socialist realist synthesis. Since the Renaissance was sanctioned by Engels as humanity's greatest progressive step up to that point in history and "Renaissance humanists had retrieved antique culture as *an ideological weapon* in the battle against feudal class powers"[18], it was quite obvious that Renaissance masters, "had pioneered the fundamentals of Socialist Realist synthesis and its characteristic pathos of optimism."[19] Needless to say, Soviet Shakespeare scholarship went to great lengths in casting the bard's work as a shining beacon of Renaissance values. It therefore seems that with this stage adaptation Ciulei follows a proven set of cultural coordinates. The production design shows a mélange of different styles, suggesting the Elizabethan stage but also costumes inspired by Italian Renaissance masters. Ion Oroveanu's designs (Image.3) clearly signal Sandro Botticelli's 1482 *La Primavera* as a source of inspiration.

Nevertheless, the production was criticized since the corroboration of stage elements and the choice of directing seemed to again overpower the text, making it lose its social poignancy. Not all the articles published at the time are so overtly critical. Interestingly enough, the overall reactions to his production were as much praise as criticism.

In articles from publications such as *Contemporanul*, *Teatru*, *SCIA*, *Flacara*, we are presented with arguments that support Shakespeare's intent to show the „seriousness" of this comedy.[20] In its own time, the play was perceived as a satirical pamphlet targeting the decadent world of the court, the clergy and their mysticism. Subsequently, the play boasted a considerable social value which the present adaptation placed in the background. Critics saw Ciulei's mixture of artistic styles as an antiquarian approach which could not deliver (or did not want to do so) the profound social meaning of the play. According to some critics, in terms of reception, the feeling of a mere experiment is all that remained after the performance. The Shakespearean "text" was hidden under the word "adaptation" used by Virgil Teodorescu to describe his translation.[21] In other words, Ciulei's directing prowess was not condoned, the main criticism being that he subverted the text and its pedagogical qualities. The direction and stage design were detrimental to the text. With regard to the director need to deliver his/her own vision of a classical text, in a review of the *Merry Wives of Windsor* at the National Theatre in 1964 we can read the following:

[17] Greg Castillo, "East as True West: Redeeming Bourgeois Culture, from Socialist Realism to Ostalgie." *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4, 2008.
[18] Idem.757
[19] Ibidem.
[20] Mircea Alexandrescu, "Regia în slujba textului sau demonstrație de regie, *Cum vă place* de Shakespeare pe scena Teatrului Municipal", *Teatrul*, no.8, 1961, p.74.
[21] It is worth mentioning that the word adaptation, "adaptare" is used now for the first time in connection to the process of translation.

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> We don't find it necessary to discuss the right the director has to use the blue pen (creionul albastru) on classic dramatic texts. It's a right won by the theatre for some time – even for Shakespeare's great work. However, the prerequisite of a directorial approach in this direction should be restricted to either the time frame within witch a performance can take place or the shortcomings of a dramatic text. Under no circumstances, the blue pen or the scissors should surgically alter the spirit, the meanings, the poetry since that would risk to deteriorate, to impoverish the content and maybe even the aesthetics (valorilor formale ale textului) of the text. [22]

Even though the classical text in its Marxist interpretation remains a discursive constant, the slow erosion it faces while being tossed and turned by theatre practitioners reveals the emergence of ideas that ten years earlier were unheard of, such as communicating an emotion to the audience and or stimulating their imagination.

What seems to be understood and approved by the critics as a merit of this new/old approach to theatre practice is the fact that it made the adaptation of classical drama for the stage, Shakespeare included, much more apt to visually bring to the public the nuances and subtleties of criticism. In this direction they seemed to favor experimentation. By the end of the 1950s the argument revolves around the way in which the performance may show the text of the author. The text can be modified to some extent but not so as to change the framework of Marxist interpretation. The debate, for example, around the 1961 adaptation of *As you like it* revolves around Jacques' melancholia: "Is he a positive hero, a carrier of social criticism pointed towards the court or is the author making fun of this character ill with spleen? Does this character mimic in fact melancholia and negativism, wearing it and discarding it like a fashionable coat?" [23]

To conclude we might say that the text was not destabilized in the wake of the theatricality debate starting in the late fifties. The theatre found a new balance with the introduction of the concept making production less prone to consider museum like reconstructions of the world of the play. For a short while, after 1956 the discussion tilted in favor of a dramatic text that brought to the spectator not only the message of the author, an idea that is still compulsory, but also a directorial vision. There is an undeniable shift from seeing the playwright as the author of the performance to accepting the director as the creative force behind the production, acknowledging him/her as the show's creator. However, de-emphasizing the text does not weaken the centrality of the original ideological coordinates conditioning theater productions. Ultimately, the audience should never just feel entertained or amazed, but be always in a position where they can internalize progressive ideas and lessons on the inevitable march of history into socialism.

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[22] Florin Tornea, "Anglia lui Falstaff – Măşti şi oameni, Nevestele vesele din Windsor, pe scena Teatrului Național I. L. Caragiale" *Teatrul*, no.1,1964, p.50.

[23] Western scholarship identifies Jaques as the only purely contemplative character in Shakespeare. A character that thinks, and does nothing, Jaques is a constant reminder that in the real world sorrow and death provide a counterpoint to all human joys. This view however, stood in clear contrast with the above mentioned correct Marxist interpretation of the character. Ana Maria Narti, "Cum îl jucam?" *Teatrul*, no. 4, 1964, p. 54.

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Image 1: *As you like it (1951)* at the *Municipal Theatre, reproduced by permission of the Romanian Academy Library*



Image 2: *As you like it (1951)* at the *MunicipalTheatre, reproduced by permission of the Romanian Academy Library*

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Image 3 : Left, *As you like it (1961)* at the *Bulandra Theatre*, direction and stage design by Liviu Ciulei with costumes by Ion Oroveanu. The image has been wildly reproduced in theatre journals and monographs such as *Scenografia Românească*, published in 1965 with an introduction by theatre critic Eugen Schileru. Right, fragment from Sandro Botticelli's 1482 *La Primavera*.

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