THE NATIONAL THEATRE IN CLUJ ON THE ROMANIAN AND (CENTRAL-) EUROPEAN MAP[1]

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Abstract: The paper focuses on the contribution of the National Theatre in Cluj in the inter-war span to defining the audience's cultural, national, and (Central-)European identity. To this end, its repertory is analyzed from 1919, the year it was founded, to 1945, when the institution came back from its forced exile in Timișoara. The theatre's frequent tours in Transylvanian – as well as other Romanian – cities are also taken into consideration. Comparisons with the repertoires of other theatres are also made. The audiences' response to the repertory policy is not neglected either.

Keywords: national identity, European identity, theatre, repertory policy, comparison

History in a nutshell

For well-known historical reasons,[2] no stable, permanent theatrical company *playing in Romanian* existed in Transylvania before the end of World War I. The first attempts at playing in Romanian were made in Cluj by several local *amateur* companies date from mid-nineteenth century,[3] more specifically from 1864. In the latter half of the 19th century professional companies from Romania occasionally visited Cluj; the first seems to have been Matei Millo's company, which played six performances in 1870. Another important tour was the one made by the famous company directed by I.G. Ionescu from Bucharest, which played in Cluj in 1881. The companies led by Mihail Pascaly and Grigore Manolescu also included Cluj in their Transylvanian itineraries. In the years preceding the outbreak of World War I, various famous actors from Bucharest made individual tours to Cluj; among them Zaharia and Olimpia Bârsan, Petre Liciu, Aristizza Romanescu, Ioan Brezeanu (cf. Lazarovici 1997: 79). The opening of the National Theatre was preceded by a tour of the National Theatre in Bucharest in fourteen Transylvanian cities. The tour's success proved that the existence of a National Theatre in Cluj was a long-expected necessity. The process of its foundation was sped up.

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[2] Until the end of World War I Transylvania and the Banat were part of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. The Hungarian Theatre in Cluj dates from 1792; since 1900 a Hungarian theatre and theatrical company also existed in Oradea. The "Franz Josef" German Theatre in Timișoara dates from 1875, although testimonies exist that German companies had played in the city from mid-eighteenth century. Hungarian and German companies had also been playing in other cities, towns, and boroughs in Transylvania and the Banat in the 18th and 19th centuries.

[3] In 1864, Ioan Baciu had the initiative of creating the "First Itinerant Romanian Theatrical Society in Transylvania;" the "actors" were students at the Piarist high school in the city. A couple of years later, in 1868-1869, Ioan Baciu and Vasile Rodoabă founded the "Romanian Students' Dilettante Dramatic Companionship from the Catholic High School in Cluj." These dilettante theatrical companies staged plays by V. Alecsandri and Iosif Vulcan, and played them in private residences and the Romanian casino. The "Dilettante Society in Cluj" lasted for seven years, and played 40-odd performances in the city of Cluj and in the neighboring boroughs; in some cases, the dilettantes were joined by a few professional artists from Romania.

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The National Theatre in Cluj was founded in 1919;[4] its first season was inaugurated[5] on the symbolic date of December 1st, 1919, exactly one year after Transylvania's union with the Kingdom of Romania.[6] The actors in the company had formerly played in other theatres in Romania, most of them came from Bucharest, Iași, and Craiova. Its first director was Zaharia Bârsan. In 1940, as a consequence of the Diktat in Vienna, the Northern part of Transylvania (including Cluj) had to be surrendered to Admiral Horthy's Hungary; therefore the National Theatre in Cluj moved to Timișoara, where it stayed until 1945, when this part of Romania was re-integrated. In the 1940-1945 interval, when it functioned at different headquarters, the theatre did not change its name, but it did have to make some changes in its repertory policy (cf. *infra*).

During the first 25 seasons (1919-1945), 388 first performances (423 plays, as some were grouped in *coupé* performances) were staged at the National Theatre in Cluj; 137 were performances of Romanian plays, 273 were translations, and 15 were adaptations. The company gave 3002 performances at its headquarters in Cluj and Timișoara, and over 900 were presented on tours in various Transylvanian cities; 3 performances were presented on a tour to Bucharest, and 35 were given on tours in other cities from the Old Kingdom,[7] while more than 800 performances were presented during several summer tours which artists made on their own expenses (cf. Buteanu [1945] 2005: 169).

The Romanian repertory

The status of belonging to a *national* theatre entailed certain obligations for the permanent company playing in Cluj. Their first obligation was towards the classical Romanian repertory, which had to be performed on a fairly regular basis. And so it was.
Naturally, I.L. Caragiale, the already acknowledged best and most popular Romanian playwright, held pride of place. Six of his plays were performed in the 1919-1945 interval, i.e. his four famous comedies, his only – and not less famous – drama, as well as one of the minor comedies, well enjoyed by the audience. But Caragiale's predecessors were not neglected either. Matei Millo was present in the repertory with one of his one-act comedies, whereas the well-known poet and playwright V. Alecsandri had five of his plays performed in Cluj and two in Timișoara. The first two dramas of Delavrancea's trilogy, B.P. Hasdeu's *Răzvan and Vidra,* and A. Davilla's *Prince Vlaicu* completed the picture of classic historical plays. The pre-World War I Romanian repertory was also represented by *The Comet*, a play by St.O. Iosif and D. Anghel.

It is worth pointing out that two Romanian plays created a long time ago and never represented on stage had their absolute premieres at the National Theatre in Cluj: *Prince Grigore Ghica* by A. Deparațeanu, and *Optum's Death* by Aron Densușianu.
As was only to be expected, the Romanian repertory was not confined to already classical, pre-World War I plays. Creations by almost all the inter-war, therefore contemporary Romanian dramatists held pride of place in the repertory.[8] All five historical dramas written by the historian, politician, and writer N. Iorga were staged in Cluj during the twenty-five years under discussion. Five dramas by Victor Eftimiu were also performed. The famous philosopher, poet, playwright and novelist Lucian Blaga was present on stage with four of

[4] The Hungarian-language theatre continued to exist in Cluj, in a different location, after the Great Union; so did the Hungarian- and German-language theatres all over Transylvania and the Banat.
[5] The inaugural evening presented one-act plays by Z. Bârsan.
[6] The Romanian Opera in Cluj was founded at the same time and by the same Decision of the Directory Council which functioned in Sibiu until 1920, when the Great Union was officially sanctioned by the Treaty of Trianon.
[7] This was the unofficial name given after the Great Union to the smaller Romania (which included only Wallachia, Moldavia, and Dobrudja), i.e. to the country as it was before December 1st, 1918.
[8] A notable omission was M. Sebastian.

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his best known plays. Camil Petrescu, T. Mușatescu, Mircea Ștefănescu, and V. I. Popa had two plays each, which were represented on the stage of the National Theatre in Cluj. One play was staged by each of the following successful writers: L. Rebreanu, A. Kirițescu, I. Minulescu, O. Goga, A. Brătesci-Voinești, Mihail Sorbul, Gib Mihăescu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, G.M. Zamfirescu, and I. Peretz (whose drama *The Fall* had its absolute premiere in Cluj; only a few moths later was it performed in Iași and Bucharest.

Plays by no less famous authors, however much appreciated at the time, were also included in the repertory. The list includes (but is by no means restricted to) four plays by Victor Papilian, two plays by A. de Hertz, two by V. Mardare, two by A. Ceaușeanu, one by Dan Botta (performed in Cluj the same year it was written), I. Valjean, Lucreția Petrescu, I. A. Lapedatu, Claudia Milian, Mărgărita Miller-Verghy, H. Furtună, G. Ranetti. A few of these plays are still occasionally performed.

It is not a negligible fact that two plays specifically meant for an audience of children were equally performed: *Ciufulici* by George Silviu, and *Lie Viorie* by C. Orendi.[9]

Local artists were also encouraged. Three plays were staged authored by Ion Tâlvan, an actor in the company. Two plays by Z. Bârsan, the theatre's director (three times during this interval) and one of its most famous actors was represented, too. So were two plays by V. Nicoar[, a local journalist. During the theatre's exile in Timișoara, plays by three authors from the Banat (T. Șoșdeanu, G. Atanasiu, and I. C. Merișescu) were well received by the audience.

During the four seasons of exile in Timișoara, the repertory consisted of very few first performances – actually, all the plays were first performances in the Banat. With very few exceptions, the repertory was almost entirely vernacular. This was only to be expected in times of war, when both the actors' and the audiences' patriotic feelings were reaching a climax.

During the twenty-five years taken into consideration here, the greatest success was enjoyed by Caragiale's *Lost Letter* (performed 56 times); this is an absolute record, since the next successful play – this time, a German one, i.e. Victor Meyer-Förster's *Old Heidelberg* – was performed only 40 times. Among the other successful representations of Romanian plays special mention deserve the following: *Titanic Waltz* by T. Mușatescu (performed 37 times), *Stormy Night* by I.L. Caragiale (35 representations on stage), *Avram Iancu* by L. Blaga (32), *Red Passion* by Mihail Sorbul (26), *Master Leonidas Facing the Reactionaries* by Caragiale (26), *Prince Vlaicu* by A. Davilla (24), *Fons Blandusiae* by V. Alecsandri (20), *Carnival Scenes* by Caragiale (19), *Strong Characters* by Camil Petrescu, *The Man Who Met Death* by V. Eftimiu (16), *Sunset* by Delavrancea (16).[10] With two notable exceptions, viz. the psychological dramas *Red Passion* by Mihail Sorbul, and *Strong Characters* by Camil Petrescu, the public seems to have preferred comedies and historical dramas.

The international repertory

The international repertory was obviously much wider than the vernacular one. Ten plays by Shakespeare were represented during the 1919-1945 span; this was the absolute record. Molière, present in the repertory with eight comedies was not far behind. Corneille was represented by two plays. The already classical French repertoire staged at the National Theatre in Cluj included Beaumarchais' *Mariage de Figaro,* Victor Hugo's *Ruy Blas,* Alfred de Musset's *Caprice,* and two plays by Edmond Rostand. From the Ancient Greek repertory the company chose to represent two tragedies by Sophocles and a comedy by Aristophanes. The classical German repertoire was represented by three dramas by Schiller and two by

[9] Both titles are rather untranslatable.

[10] A much more comprehensive list of the most successful performances from both the vernacular and the international repertory was made by Aurel Buteanu ([1945] 2005: 162-163).

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Goethe. As already mentioned, Victor Meyer-Förester's *Old Heidelberg* was the most successful performance from the international repertory; it was represented 40 times. The classical Austrian repertory was present on the stage of the National Theatre in Cluj by its best known representative, viz. Franz Grillparzer.

Two of the most appreciated British (actually, Irish) dramatists, G. B. Shaw (with five plays), and Oscar Wilde (with two), were equally included in the repertory; so was an adaptation from Dickens' *David Copperfield.* Four already classical Russian authors were performed in Cluj, viz. Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol, and the more recent Maxim Gorky, and Leonid Andreyev; texts by Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky were staged, too. But they also elected to present some more recent Russian authors, among which M. P. Artsybashev, and Osip Dimov

Calderon de la Barca's *La vida es sueño* had its Romanian premiere at the National Theatre in Cluj. The Italian classical (and "classicized") repertory was represented by Goldoni's *Loccandiera,* Alfieri's *Mirra,* and Giacometti's *La morte civile.* Among the Norwegian authors, it was only natural to choose Ibsen, from whose work they represented six plays; they also staged *A Bankruptcy*, a successful text by the Norwegian playwright Biørnstjerne Bjørnson. August Strindberg's *Miss Julie* was also performed. Interestingly, they also selected to stage a text by Rabindranah Tagore.

Horizons became broader and broader for inter-war Romanians.[11] The National Theatre in Cluj was the first theatre in this country to represent a play by Eugene O'Neill. They were also the first to adapt Somerset Maugham's short stories for the stage; six of his texts were adapted as plays and staged in *inter-bellum* Cluj. Other contemporary British playwrights which enjoyed success were J. B. Priestley, Jerome K. Jerome, and Brandon Thomas; a short story by J. Galsworthy was also adapted for the stage.

However, the most frequently staged inter-war playwrights were the German Hermann Sudermann (with 5 plays), and the Italian Luigi Pirandello (5 comedies). Texts by many other Italian writers, most of them entirely forgotten nowadays, were also performed. Among them: Luigi Chiarelli, Rosso di San Secondo, Massimo Bontempelli, Guido Morselli, a. o. From the Spanish repertory they chose to perform plays by Azorin, José Echegaray, and Gregorio and Maria Martinez Sierra.

Authors from the neighboring countries were also on stage. The Hungarian theatrical repertory was mainly represented by Two of Lengyel Menyhert's plays, and by a comedy signed Szanti and Szecseny. The already famous Czech playwright Karel Čapek was also present at the National Theatre in Cluj, so were the Czechoslovakian Mretic Brothers. The Yugoslavian playwright Bronislav Nušic's comedy *The Minister's Wife* enjoyed great success (it was performed eight times in a single season).

But it is no surprise at all that.the great majority of authors whose works were elected to be performed were French ones. Quite a lot of inter-war French writers have been famous ever since. It is also no minor detail that French culture had an over a century tradition in Romania, and playing French authors' texts in Cluj – besides their unquestionable literary and artistic value – was a subtle means of asserting the Transylvanians' *Romanian* identity; also, since French culture had been less present in Transylvania until the Great Union, by staging French texts both the actors and the audience aimed to fill a cultural gap. Obviously, the choice of the repertory was also a means of asserting the Transylvanians' *European* identity.

[11] Mircea Eliade made a similar remark both in his *Memoirs* and in *L'épreuve du labyrinthe.* He explained that in the aftermath of World War I the Romanians' national ideals having been fulfilled, they turned their full attention to cultural, spiritual, and scientific values, and tried to integrate them in a broad context; they went beyond Europe, they specialized in new fields, they founded new disciplines, while avant-gardes were *en vogue* in many cultural domains.

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Almost all notable *inter-bellum* French playrights were represented in Cluj: Jean Cocteau, Paul Claudel, Georges Duhamel enjoyed reasonable success. Stage adaptations of Romain Rolland's *Jeu de l'amour et de la mort* and of Jules Renard's *Poil-de-Carotte* were also performed in inter-war Cluj. Two Belgian authors, viz. Maurice Maeterlinck, and Alfred Hennequin were also *à l'affiche.*

Back to the French repertory, it was only to be expected for light comedies, i.e. *boulevard* comedies, *vaudevilles,* etc. to enjoy success in Cluj, as they did – and sometimes still do – nearly everywhere else. Two comedies by Robert de Flers and Gustave-Armand Caillavet, and two others by Robert de Flers and Francis de Croisset were dearly loved by the audience. So were the comedies by Paul Gavault, by Georges Beer, and, obviously, by Labiche. Other playwrights in the same category were so successful that several of their comedies were performed in *inter-bellum* Cluj. Victorien Sardou had four of his comedies performed, Tristan Bernard was *à l'affiche* with another four, A. Ch. A. Bisson was also successful with four comedies. Four plays by Jacques Deval, two by Alfred Savoir, and two by Henry Bataille enjoyed public suffrage.

Plays by quite a lot of other French writers – some still included in literary histories, others completely forgotten – were successfully performed in inter-war Cluj. They will be referred to in a future essay. For the moment, it is enough to know that French plays accounted for about half of the international repertory of the National Theatre in Cluj. They were also among the best enjoyed by the audience; this is not surprising since most of them were comedies.

On the repertory policy, the artists, and the audience

As can be easily inferred from the few data above, the repertory policy at the National Theatre in Cluj in the 1919-1945 interval was a well-balanced, realistic one, which tried both to "educate" and to amuse the audience. The repertory did not propose to be exhaustive; there is no way in which it could have been. It was also by no means faultless. A few performances were failures. Others reaped only what is termed *un succès d'estime,* were played only once or twice, and then abandoned for good.

At least in one case, the management tried to cheat. A chronicle published in the daily newspaper *Patria* in December 1926 explains: "Last night Lengyel Menyhert's drama *Typhoon* was presented as a *première,* although the play had already been performed four years ago. We wonder whether the theatre wishes to increase *ad infinitum* the number of first performances, or whether they believe the audience are likely to forget so quickly. […] Anyway, such confusion is entirely unjustified." (*Patria,* 16 dec. 1926: 3, *apud* Buteanu [1945] 2005: 30)

The audience in inter-war Cluj seems to have been both well-informed and exacting. At least, such is the opinion of the anonymous chronicler from the same newspaper: "The public in this city is extremely difficult to please, so the artists are compelled to work extremely hard […] If in some cases performances do not reach the wished-for quality level, it is no less true that in all cases one can notice a creditable desire to be up to the exacting requirements of the parts they are distributed in." (*Patria,* 9 dec. 1926: 3, *apud* Buteanu [1945] 2005: 36)

Instead of a Conclusion

The repertory of the National Theatre in Cluj in the 1919-1945 span kept an adequate balance between vernacular plays and international ones, between classical plays and contemporary ones, between historical dramas and sentimental ones, between comedies and tragedies. Caragiale and Shakespeare enjoyed the greatest success, and had the biggest number of plays performed. They were closely followed by Romanian historical dramas and

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light French comedies. Several modern psychological dramas were often performed. O'Neill and Tagore brought home the world beyond European boundaries. Local writers were encouraged. Plays from the neighboring countries were also on stage. Texts of no literary or artistic value – but sometimes fashionable – were also given a chance. Some remained in the repertory for a season or even a couple of seasons, others failed. To make a long story short, this brief survey has aimed to point out that the theatrical movement in *inter-bellum* Cluj was both sophisticated and simple, both high-class and average. It tried to fill past and present cultural gaps, it tried to be up to European cultural standards. In times of war or in the aftermath of war, it had a "militant" attitude. It contributed to asserting the public's Romanian identity and to strengthening their European background. It complied with the written and unwritten requirements of any National Theatre on the continent.

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