Dumitru Solomon: "Theatre as a metaphor" of life

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Resumen: Dramaturgo contemporáneo caracterizado por inconformismo, autor de esbozos dramáticos y de tragicomedias, Dumitru Solomon convierte el teatro en metáfora de la existencia humana. Las acciones cortas y densas, cargadas de símbolos de las obras de teatro, se distinguen entre los demás textos dramáticos de las últimas décadas del siglo XX por una inconfundible "personalización de lo problematico".

Haciendo referencia a algunas de las creaciones dramáticas de Dumitru Solomon, lo que nos proponemos es señalar que las tragicomedias *Socrate, Platon, Diogene câinele* (*Sócrates, Platón, Diógenes el perro*), la farsa pseudo-policía *Fata Morgana*, la comedia *Transfer de personalitate* (*Transferencia de personalidad*) y la comedia con elementos del absurdo titulada *Clișeu* (*Cliché*) representan las "metáforas" teatrales del hombre contemporáneo en conflicto consigo mismo y con los prejuicios, con los defectos de toda una sociedad, y la única salvación del ser humano solo puede venir de su interior.

Palabras clave*: teatro, metáfora, problematización, existencia.*

A well-known playwright in the contemporary Romanian literature, Dumitru Solomon has made an impact on the Romanian theatre starting with his debut, comprised of seven thespian sketches: *Neînțelegerea* (The Misunderstading), *Ignoranții* (The Ignorants), *Sentimentul* (The Feeling), *Insomnie* (Insomnia), *Liftul* (The Elevator), *Dispariția* (The Disappearance – radiophonic scene) and *Hoții* (The Thieves).

In the essay *Theatre as a metaphor*, he formulates the principles that he has respected throughout his entire career as a playwright: "Theatre comes back to metaphor through its own structure; it redeems the moments of naturalistic wandering, ascending from exactness's field to that of the essence of life. (…) If it cannot rid itself of philosophy, dramaturgy cannot know its own objective; all the less so this can happen in dramaturgy in our age of great circulation of ideas and intense philosophical agitation".

These aspects are revealed by the aforementioned plays – and by his entire oeuvre. Dumitru Solomon is a nonconformist writer who builds parables around existential

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symbols. For instance, in *The Disappearance*, the road becomes a symbol of human life, and one can walk only in one direction, towars death, to be more precise. The action is short and focused on the long and tedious travel of two people. One of them teaches the other how to hold up and is gradually shrunken and eventually disappears. The scene suggests the symbolic image of the life that has the germs of death in it and that is precisely why its route is irreversible and its destination is the inexorable death. Just like his symbolical character, the Number 1 Traveller, the author, cannot keep his mouth shut because he needs to support a "logical condition".

The playwright distinguishes himself from his contemporaries through the vocation he has for questioning, for "embodying the problematic" and his capacity to transform the abstractness of his ideas – as Lucian Raicu opines – in a space of humanity, "touchingly concrete, palpable and representative". For instance, in his tragicomedies *Socrates, Diogenes the Dog* and *Plato*, the author reveals problems that pertain to human existence and to this permanent actuality. Among his three symbolic characters, Socrates, Diogenes and Plato, the playwright represents the human being in rapport with itself, the others and with its own existence. In this way, the tragicomedy *Socrates* (published in 1971 but staged much later, after 1989) is a modern-spirited reenactment of the Greek philosopher's doom – essentially, no one can accuse him of whatever inexcusable deed. The capital punishment is not justified, since there is no accusation based on facts. The main ideas pursued in the text are presented to us in a preamble:

> "And yet this man has been sentenced to death by the Athenians. The trial was held at the Tribunal of the Heliasts from Athena in the first year of the 95th Olympics, i.e. after the calendar we use today, in the year 399 BC. Socrates was seventy at the time. What was Socrates's mistake? What had made him so guilty towars his country that he was given the maximum penalty? His friends and disciples say that their professor had been the victim of an atrocious injustice. Injustice, however, must have a basis, an explanation, a cause… Socrates had made no mistakes. But on mistake you mustn't die… It means that his had been grave, unforgivable… The sentence to death is usually given to murderers. WHAT WAS SOCRATES'S CRIME?
>
> And one other thing. Having been judged by Athenians, Socrates could have made a choice, could have opted for something and could have saved himself… Two times: the first time, by paying a fine, and then, after he was sentenced, by fleeing from Athens. However, he rejected both solutions. He preferred to die. Or WANTED to die! WHY DID SOCRATES WANT TO DIE?
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> Soon after the sentence was carried out, the Athenians changed their opinion about Socrates. They exiled the accusers, they sentenced one of them to death, a bronze statue was raised in honour of the philosopher in the procession hall. WHEN WERE THE ATHENIANS RIGHT? WHEN THEY SENTENCED OR WHEN THEY RECLAIMED SOCRATES?"

Socrates, not long before death, has the feeling that the Athenians did not quite grasp the meaning of his teachings, that he lived a useless life and that he must deal with a death "that leads nowhere".

The genuine dramatic thrill is the inner one, the one of the character that had militated for the freedom of the spirit and of the human being in a society that had been dominated by false rigors, egocentrism and superficiality.

In another sketch, *Plato*, the problem is the rapport between reality, possibilities and ideality. The Platonic state, thought magisterially and led by philosophers, proves to be impossible to accomplish. The debate does not concern Plato's socio-political projects, but the conditions to which these rapport. The main idea that the play reveals to today's

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reader/theatre aficionado is that any given ideal generates great deeds that can change what is antiquated and inequitable.

Diogenes the Dog revives the character of the thinker who, as it is well-known, would search by candlelight in mid-noon for the "man", that free being that is aware of its own becoming and capable of being itself anywhere and anytime. Living in a citadel that is "shiny, placid and weary with wars and pleasures, incapable of repairing its past and vigor, proud of its democratic, military and intellectual traditions", Diogenes scandalizes those around him through "cynicism", non-conformism, freedom of spirit and his capacity to defy privations, threats, as well as the military and political power. The explanation for the nickname of "Diogenes the dog" is quite revealing: "I fawn on those who give me anything, I yelp at those who refuse, and I set my teeth in rascals". His attitude is suggestive and prompts respecting the human values, freedom and dignity. Under the pale-cold light of reason's floodlight, ambiguity shrouds the philosopher in the barrel because one question still remains in the aura of the rhetorical: who was Diogenes? "Just a zany individual? A non-conformist or an *avant la lettre*snob? Freedom? Toward what? Society? History? Himself?" Everything is permeated by a permanent metaphor of reflection.

One of the author's most accomplished writings of is the comedy, "pseudo-crime story" *Fata Morgana*, which premiered at the Comedy Theatre from Bucharest in 1971. With respect to the genesis of the play, the author had testified:

> "Like the previous plays, Fata Morgana was born, I think, out of a polemic ambition. When more than ten years ago I decided with my friend Marin Sorescu – both of us editors of the critical section of a weekly literary paper – that we would dabble in dramaturgy, we wanted to prove that one can write "in a different manner". But we had been sickened by theater. A sickness that, as far as I'm concerned, cannot be cured.
>
> Afterwards, when each of us was carrying his cross on his own, I started to write dramatic sketches (that some may call parables, others fables and others may have ignored them completely), I made my debates with verbosity, dilution and with the urge to scatter the thespian word, to make a fine, equal and neutral powder out of a kernel of an idea. I had lost this time, too, because theaters have, as it appears, a horror of focus. […].
>
> When the Comedy Theater invited me to write a play for staging, I was just in the disposition to trigger another debate: against the "common" dramaturgy, absent from the simultaneous confrontation with the public. And I triggered it by writing a farce by the book, a pseudo-crime story even (another difficulty) without getting rid, of course, of the moralist duty of the satire.
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> I struggled to write a comedy in the spirit of tradition and dogma, with subject, predicate, attribute and complement because it is next to impossible to persevere in dramaturgy without making syntax exercises from time to time. And it is the first time when, after having written a play, I rewrote it god knows how many times in rehearsals, in intense discussions with the actors, with the stage director, with the prospective public.
>
> I presume that it's understood that these debates were all self-debates, a perpetual war waged against my own prejudices and weaknesses, a painful and hilarious state of contradiction with myself."

This farce with a weak aspect of crime story that does not lack satirical elements stands out through the zest of the lines and a well-dosed situational and linguistic comedy. The action, packed with surprises and plenty of *coup de théâtre*, is for the most part kept alive by the two central characters, Fifi (the police officer) and Teo (a young prosecutor lady), who try – in the funniest of manners – to find a university professor, the president of the baccalaureate committee from the provincial city in which the action takes place, a professor that had been missing.

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The playwright proves to be a fine observer of the human character, as well as a great moralist. The characters, taken from the everyday universe of the Romanian society under the communist regime, meet in a hotel room and are thrown in the most hilarious of situations.

Dumitru Solomon, "a playwright of new formulas" (Radu Popescu) uses the classical methods of the genre – the quid-pro-quo and the gag or the mechanical humor of the characters with an impossible diction – in order to emphasize human vices, as well as the vices of the society that the writer lived in. The humor, frequently containing elements of the absurd, is developed around a subject that is always a point of interest: the baccalaureate exam.

Without presenting any details pertaining to scenography, the author quickly suggests the background and introduces the reader to that atmosphere by means of a few spiritual lines, so that, afterwards, the characters are directed in a breakneck rhythm - through the insertion of the necessary elements of surprise – toward the point terminus, "a theatric culmination and conclusion simultaneously" (Virgil Brădăţeanu).

What is remarkable is the author's corpus of dramatic texts and the bitter comedy *Transfer de personalitate* (Personality transfer), written "with an idea from JaroslavHasek's prose as a basis", as the author himself testifies, in which the way that institutions work in a totalitarian state is stigmatized.

The central character, Josef Pavlickek, is found at night in his own store, without any I.D., is taken to the police station and subjected to humiliations and molestations in order to admit that he is a thief and a criminal. Living in a prosaic human micro-universe ruled by absurd laws, the hero starts to deny his own identity so that he can save himself because, as another character – Cetlicka – says, "*identity is a form. It's like a piece of clothing that you put on and off, that you change, sell, throw or give away as a present… You stay the same, even though you've changed it or it's been stolen from you".* In such a paradoxical situation, Pavlicek has to make use of a split personality. We think that eloquent in this sense is the Pavlicek – Cop 1 dialogue from the fifth panel of the play:

> "In solitary confinement.
>
> **Pavlicek** (speaking to unseen interlocutors): I am glad, gentlemen Inquisitors, that you've come to terms with the idea that the Earth is spinning. But first you burned me at the stake… An idea is like a steam, a smoke, and fire without smoke there is not… But make no mistakes, gentlemen! The Earth does not spin on the course that you want it to! It has its laws, and its laws do not obey to yours… What could you do? Change its course… But do you even know what course you'd want it to spin on? And who changes its course? Do not count on me… Do not count onCetlicka, either. Neither on Pavlicek… We will spin the other way around. No, not on the opposite course of the Earth, but yours! If you want to spin to the left, we, the others, will spin to the right. If you want to spin to the right, we will spin to the left. It's alright to always have an opposite. Because if you realize that you mistook the course and you'll want to come back, you'll find us as leaders… The ones who spun in the opposite way… and you will follow us… so that you don't fall… God forbid, a free fall… It's better, gentlemen inquisitors, if you listen to me. When you'll realize that you mistook the course and you'll want to change it in order to save your skins and ideas, you'll have someone as model… It would be a pity for you to fumble in darkness. You will guide yourself with the light of our pyres and you'll get where you must… And do not despise us. We're not stupid. We're just defenseless. And don't fear us. We don't start fires. We burn.
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> **Cop 1** (who had hid and listened, makes his appearance): You're talking to yourself.
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> **Pavlicek:** No.
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> **Cop 1**: But to whom?
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> **Pavlicek:** To you.

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Cop 1 (amazed): To me?!
Pavlicek: To you.
Cop 1: To us?!? And what, prithee, do you want to tell us?
Pavlicek: That it's time for you to turn around and to go in the opposite way.
Cop 1: Opposite?
Pavlicek: Lest you get too far on your wrong road and then you'll have to go in the opposite way quite a lot.
Cop 1 (to himself): He's mad! The commissioner is right… (to Pavlicek): Hey, man, you've lost your mind!
Pavlicek: Maybe, but I'm looking for it… You don't do even that… (the cop makes the sign of the cross and leaves)".

When eventually his true identity is determined with his fiancée's intervention, Pavlicek is given a fine for an alleged attempt to misguide the investigators and is freed.

As per the writer's original style, the lesson is included in the last line.

The play *Personality transfer* advocates for the salvation of the human being's identity and personality, for freeing it from the tentacles of the aggressive social mechanisms, often times absurd, that characterize the totalitarian regime.

The play *Clișeu* (Cliché), in two parts, is also interesting. The text reveals a significant aspect of the man from the modern/postmodern society, more precisely the ontological "malady": a suspended, paralyzed life, at least when it comes to inter-human communication. With other words, the "cliché", the everyday stereotypy of the language which reflects monotony and the being's lack of desire to communicate: "You see, we got accustomed to talking in clichés, to living in clichés, our words are starting to lose their content. And whatis the result? Empty phrases that we say to each other ad infinitum… Gestures and words emptied of any core…".

The title of the play is motivated from the very beginning, from the first dull, empty lines that make up the dialogue between two equally dull characters, Gicu and his subordinate, Mitică, with the first one realizing in a moment of sincerity that he is growing old in the same rut and boredom, while the second one, "stricken" and fearful, asserts that it is not O.K. for him to get bored on duty. In a closed space, devoid of perspective, just like the monotonous existence of the characters, an exotic, non-conformist character appears and amazes the others with his free and nonchalant gestures and language. The character, named the Breaker in the first part of the play and Sebastian in the second, introduces the others (Gicu, Mitică and Narcisa) to their main problem, none other but their lack of a genuine enthusiasm and involvement in a life that has to be lived in a different manner, not just in appearance. The entrance of this unusual character – truly created in the modern spirit of dramaturgy – generates a rupture of the monotony of the rhythm, a deviation from the mental blueprint that is enclosed in the tasteless ideology of the communist political system:

"**The Breaker:** There's a bit of exaggeration. Sympathetic, of course. I am by no means a scoundrel. A breaker, yes.But a breaker of what?Of clichés, dear madam… You see, we got accustomed to talking in clichés, our words are starting to lose their content. And what is the result? Monotony and boredom, superficiality and hollowness… Empty phrases that we repeat to each other ad infinitum… Gestures and words that are devoid of any core…
Narcisa (impressed): Yes?...
The Breaker (with new impetus): Instead of searching, thinking, imagining, discovering, we repeat what we've seen and heard from others, we make mechanical gestures, we copy what we did yesterday, the day before that and the day before that, without the slightest change.

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Gicu (through his teeth): What a scoundrel!

Mitică (impressed): He talks beautifully. By the book…

The Breaker: I look at you two (he looks at Gicu and Narcisa)… How many gorgeous things didn't you say to each other in your youth, when you were just comrade Gicu and comrade Narcisa? You had a language of your own, a code of love that no one could understand… You could understand each other with a look, with a gesture, with a discreet sign, like the acrobats that make deadly leaps… You had your own air, your own walls, your own benches… your own parks, fountains, trees, alleys, lamps…

Narcisa (sighs): Yes, it's very true…

Gicu (for himself): The scoundrel!

The Breaker: But now? All those objects that made up your world, so personal and intangible, are now like memories blurred by time, they've lost their contour and especially their content… and today… forgive me for saying it… everything seems to you dull, tedious, insipid… banality and platitude…".

Except for the Breaker/Sebastian and Carmen (the daughter of the professor Zidaru), who belong to a different generation and are capable to evade their dull existence, the other characters belong to a human micro-universe that is dominated by clichés. Through the Ionesco-inspired character The Neighbor, the author augments the absurd and the emptiness, the feeling of existential cliché. When she asks "What time is it?", the others are pretty conflicted: Gicu "shudders", The Mason "doesn't have a clue", Mitică "doesn't manage to tell what time it is", etc., which gives the impression that time is perceived as an individual, inner aspect.

The game that Sebastian proposes in the second part of the play, "a game of fantasy", named "the balloon" emphasizes the capacity or incapacity of each character to get out of his/her rut, out of the clichés. From the nacelle of the imaginary balloon, Carmen sees "a lot of tiny, tiny humans running around in all directions", the Mason sees "only dirt", Narcisa "a multicolored rainbow", Gicu "mountains of oranges. Rivers of oranges", while the Neighbor and Mitică, incapable to detach themselves too much, see small quotidian details: "a coffee stain on the carpet" – she, and he, the small subordinate, sees how "Gavrilă puts aside the best tomatoes. Reason for a fine".

Through playfulness, the playwright allows himself to contour a dimension, a perspective in the existence of his characters, for whom the future is not a certainty anymore, but a supposition.

An ample and unmistakable ontological metaphor, Dumitru Solomon's theatre, with and about philosophers, with and about simple people, triggers "an unusual dialectical confrontation" (Irina Coroiu) between constraint and freedom, power and dignity and between being and becoming, underlining that, regardless of the type of society, the real salvation of the human being comes through thought and reason, from within.

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