

Agatha Bârsescu – A World Class Tragedian

MIRCEA POPA¹

Abstract²: Following closely the lifetime theatrical vocation of the Romanian actress Agatha Bârsescu, the present article sheds light upon her love for theatre and her international carrier. After spending her childhood in Bucharest and after studying at the Conservatory of Dramatic Art, Agatha was encouraged to try her chance abroad, which she did when, at the age of twenty-two, she passed her admission exam at the Vienna Conservatory School of Drama.

Years of brilliant roles and extraordinary meetings followed with an enthusiastic audience in Austria, Germany, and later on, in the United States of America. She was loved, highly appreciated, as an artist and as a teacher, when she came back to Romania, at the Conservatory of Iassy where she instructed young actresses. A model of elegance and professionalism, she left behind a volume of beautiful *Memoirs*, an important correspondence (at the Vienna Museum of Art) and a large number of precious photographs and articles that critics consecrated to her work and life



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¹ Professor, Alba Iulia University, mircea_al_popa@yahoo.com.

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In the long line of great actors from the late 19th and early 20th century Romania, Agatha Bârsescu stands out as a point of reference. She was the first Romanian actress to transcend the boundaries of national art, becoming a universal figure through her performances. Due to her extraordinary innate qualities combined with her vast culture, prodigious memory, high class stage performance, velvety, wide-ranged voice and fluency in German, Agatha Bârsescu raised the bar for stage performance to an all-time high and made Romanian theatre famous, even in far-away countries such as the United States. She was not merely an excellent performer or enlightened creator of most diverse roles, but also a very soulful being, ready to empathize with fellow man's pain and suffering by initiating various charity operas and showing great interest in the formative and educational mission of art. Romanian theatre education is for ever in her debt for the time she spent teaching at the Iassy Conservatory, where she instructed Romanian youth on performance art for over a decade, advising students and guiding them on their career paths. She proved to be an excellent educator with immense talent.



Destiny saw that she would not remain hidden away in the same theatre or the same town, but that she would be a gift to the entire world, bringing glory and honour to her homeland. In the cultural ambiance of Austria, the country where she finished her artistic formation, she was destined to become one of the eternal stars of the Viennese stage, attracting countless crowds to the Burgtheater, the annals of which have her name written in gold.

Agatha Bârsescu saw the light of day on the 28th of August 1859, in Bucharest. She was the daughter of Lieutenant Constantin Bârsescu and Maria Bârsescu, closely related to Generals Cernat and Budişteanu. Her brother became a general himself, and her sister Zoe married Colonel D. Paleologu. It thus comes as no surprise that there was a strong fire arms tradition within her family. Young Agatha was initially sent to a boarding school in Sibiu, then to the Central School of Bucharest and to Ursulinen Kloster in Vienna. She enrolled at the Dramatic Conservatory of Bucharest in the autumn of 1876 after being invited to do so by Ion Ghica, then director of Bucharest National Theatre. She landed her first roles and began experiencing being on-stage. Her performances fared well with the press of the time. Motivated by the discovery of a new passion and encouraged by her family and good press reviews, she decided to go study in Paris in May 1880. During a stop in Vienna, she chooses to stay and begins taking canto lessons with Joseph Gansbacher at the end of May. On the 4th of October 1880, she became a student of the Conservatory in the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, specializing in canto and declamation. Because of creative differences between her and her academic coordinator, she gave up canto for theatre. Professor Altmann recommended her to his colleague, Joseph von Weiler, and on the 15th of September 1881, she passed her admission exam at the Vienna Conservatory School of Drama, where she took classes on literature, aesthetics, choreography, duel, costume and foreign languages. At the end of freshman year, she comes in first and receives a gold medal. Her success was so undeniable that the director of the Berlin Theatre offered her a six year contract with a progressive honorary and five thousand marks pay from the first year. She debuted on the Viennese stage on the 22nd of November 1883 as Hero from Grillparzer's *Hero and Leander*. Her astounding performance was widely written about in both German and Romanian newspapers such as "Binele public", "Curierul Capitalei", "La Gazette

de Roumanie”, “Națiunea”, “Resboiul” and “România liberă”. The actress was called “A young Wolter” in “Gazeta Transilvaniei” from Braşov and the Oradea based “Familia” dedicated entire sections full of praise to her³.



In the autumn of 1883, she joined the Berlin Theatre to fulfil her contract and here she was cast and played countless parts. Despite her newly achieved stability, her heart remained in Vienna and once Adolph Wilbrand, the director of the Burgtheater, came to see one of her shows, she used her mother’s precarious health as a reason to dissolve her contract with the Berlin Theatre and return to Vienna. Preparations for her return were made with the complicity of the director. When she debuted once more on the stage of the Burgtheater on the 22nd of November 1883, she called it “the most important

³ See the number of Journal issues which talk about her and make interviews with her in the list of References, at the end of the present study.

day of my life". She played Hera in Grillparzer's play with such astounding talent that the next day Spiedel from the newspaper "Neue Freie Presse" wrote about her as follows: "A young girl that just left the School of Drama walked out on stage for the first time in her life. It wasn't just any stage from Graz or Linz, but the hot floor of the Burgtheater. It wasn't just to recite a couple of words, but to play a big part, which can make or break a play. It wasn't in her mother tongue, learned at home with her parents, but in a language she acquired over time! This young lady leaves such a striking impression that, at the last curtain fall, everyone must admit: here is a powerful and real talent that must be well-kept, because it is a tremendously lucky addition to our charismatically impoverished Burgtheater. Miss Bârescu belongs to the Burgtheater. It's an honour for her and a lucky break for the theatre. The entrance of such significant talent in an institution where series of plays are kept under wraps can only be called luck, for through her those plays might yet be revived. Burgtheater has found its fortune! May it last."



For Agatha Bârsescu, this stellar debut was the beginning of a long theatrical career filled with incredible moments. The roles she played successfully showcased her talent and her ability to charm the public. On stage at the Burgtheater, she acted memorable parts that tied her name to the names of characters from dramas around the world. She played Deborah, Iulia of Schakespeare and Gretchen from Goethe's *Faust*, Judith and Mary Magdalene from Hebbel's tragedies, *Hamlet's* Ophelia, *Othello's* Desdemona, Parthenia from Halm's *Son of the Woods*, Amalia from Schiller's *Thieves*, Isabella from Calderon's *The Judge of Zalameea*, Judith from Acosta's *Uriel*, Myriam from Grillparzer's *The Dream is Life*, Sardou's Denise etc. To her, every role was an instance of creation, the discovery of a new way of embodiment. Theatre held no more secrets. She proved her prowess in roles such as Delphine from Guido Conrad's *Miss de Lary*, Octavia in Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*, Ghita from Paul Heisse's *Don Juan's End*, Clara from *Egmont*, Mirza from *Der Traum ein Leben*, Maria from Otto Ludwig's *Der Erbforscher*, the lady in mourning from *Minna von Branhelm* etc. She acted alongside famous counterparts, such as Adolf Sonnenthal, Fritz Krastel, Ludwig Gabillon, Halenstein, Emerich Robert, Karl Wagner, Joseph Lewinsky, Ernst Harmann, Stela Hohenfels, who were also beloved by the Viennese public in their own right. After a short while, Agatha became a public favourite and was enjoying the favour of the Imperial Court and the undivided attention of prominent journalists, politicians and official representatives of Imperial Vienna. Whenever she would appear in the balcony of her house on Schindgasse no.3 or go out with the carriage in Prater, "All of Schindgasse was on its feet, saying hello", she writes in her *Memoirs (Memorii)*⁴. When she went to shows alongside students, they organized and acted out scenes in her honour, singing martial hymns and celebrating her as a queen. They also dedicated many poems to her, such as the one by Heinrich Glücksmann, which begins as follows:

⁴ Agatha Bârsescu. *Memorii din Germania, Austria, Ungaria, America și România* (București: Ed. Adevărul, 1934)

Du stehst mit Fug am heiligen
Altare
Der Gotter weihen wurd'ge
Priesterin
Und dienen wilst du ihr mit
kuschen Sinn
Zum letzten Atemzug, bis an
die Bahre.



When she returned to Romania to act in a few shows, she was showered in love, invited to the Royal Court and decorated with a 1st class distinction for her work and “Bene-merenti”, decorations that came in addition to several others received abroad. Emperor Franz Joseph granted her a hearing and she was surrounded by the attention of princes, barons and declared an artist of the Court. She was hired for life in the Viennese Hofburgtheater, one of the world’s most astonishing theatres. She received a bonus for every performance, free costumes and carriage rides for all shows. For seven years, the fact that she was a multilateral actress, who starred in tragedies, dramas and comedies, truly shone through.

After spending seven years in this artistically charged atmosphere, touring Austria from one end to the other and performing shows in nearly every city, Agatha Bârescu felt like she needed a change. She gave up on her life-long contract with the Viennese theatre to go work at the Hamburg theatre instead. Her last performance took place on the 13th of November 1890, after which director Max Burkhardt signed her resignation. Her

severance from Vienna was painful, but the public expressed their undying admiration even more ardently during the final show: "It rained with flowers after every act and the actress' dressing room couldn't hold any more bouquets from co-stars, members of the Grillparzer Society, strangers or admirers who saw her now for the last time... miss Bârsescu came out for standing ovations over 12 times looking profoundly moved and barely managing to hold back her tears", wrote the "Fremden Blatt" newspaper from the 14th of November 1890. As she had chosen, she was now embarking on a new stage of her life, even if just a little while ago (the 14th of October 1888) the new building of the Burgtheater had been inaugurated in Vienna and she had been declared a permanent actress of the Imperial and Royal Theatre of Vienna, which guaranteed her a successful, life-long career. She had also taken part in the opening show for the inauguration of a new theater called Karltheater (which later became Volksopera), but there were several critical moments in her personal life that left a lasting mark on her. Her sister Zoe had died, and not long after, her mother followed. She had broken her engagement to the Ghica-Comănești Prince and was now responsible for the two children of her late sister.





She wanted to start anew in a different city and a different world. Her move to Hamburg brought on the much sought after changes. Prior to this, in a moment of desperation, she had tried to drown herself in the Danube. She concentrated on her work and soon became famous in Hamburg as well, later touring Germany. She stayed there for three years, after which she was forced to move again to be freed from the unwanted attention she had been receiving from an over-zealous admirer, as she confesses in her Memoirs.

It appeared that Agatha's transformative being was very well suited for pilgrimage. In April 1883, she began a long cross-country tour in Romania, starring in Schiller's *Intrigue and Love* and Sudermann's *Nation*. She returned to Vienna that autumn to participate in the opening of the Raimund Theater, after which she continued to tour Romania. Writer Adam Müller Gutenbrün, director of the Raimund Theater (born in Romania himself, in the Banat region) solicited her for numerous collaborations and Agatha honored his invitations every time. She then worked at the Deutsches Theater in Berlin. During these years, she became an actress of the German world, a pan-

European actress even, if we take into account her tours in London and Paris. In the latter city, she became close friends with actor Coquelin Aine, who tried to convince her to stay in Paris to no avail.

She began to kindle a dedicated collaboration with Romania, initially acting in a series of German shows and then also taking on plays in Romanian alongside artists from the Iași and Bucharest National Theatres. She performed in Berlin again, was extremely popular in Budapest (in her *Memoirs* she speaks of many Hungarian actors close to her heart such as the tragedian Maria Jasyay, Louise Blaha, Sari Fedák and the actor Uiházy; she also mentions her part in Madách's *The Tragedy of Man*, performed in Germany), then continued her theatrical pilgrimage in Cernăuți, Graz, Brunn, Innsbruck, Salzburg, Meran, Trieste, Lipsca and many other cities. It comes as no surprise that the immensely successful actress would decide to cross the Atlantic to go to the United States of America, a country that was in the middle of full-blown cultural expansion at the time. In 1905, she took a boat to New York. Her passage was no easy feat: a storm left her quite shaken and sick. She was nursed back to health by Lotte Sommer, the daughter of an American tycoon. Their friendship helped Agatha adjust to life in the new world. In New York, she was a part of 20 shows at the Irving Palace Theater, playing parts she loved, such as Hero, Sappho, Magda, Maria Stuart, Deborah, etc. In her *Memoirs*, she says the plays were "indescribably successful". She was offered a long term contract, but had to return to Europe to honor previous commitments. Agatha then performed in Hamburg, Berlin and Bucharest. Her marriage to actor C. Radovici in 1907 in Craiova re-naturalized her as a Romanian. The two lived together for four years in an "undisrupted bliss", according to her memoir. She tried to help her husband attain success at a European level. They moved to Berlin together in 1909, where they lived on Friefau Hauptstrasse no. 86, but in the 1911/1912 performance season, he returned to Bucharest, leaving Agatha behind. Subsequently, famous director Max Reinhardt asked her to play the part of Mother Superior in Karl Vollmoeller's movie, *The Miracle*. After this, Agatha decided to return to America. She starred in a series of immensely successful shows, but as she was preparing to return to Europe, World War I began.

She never limited her acting range, but instead performed in English and Romanian as well. Immigrant Romanian Jews would invite her to take part in shows and she maintained a great professional relationship with the

community (the New York Jewish Theatre hosted several of her performances in Romanian). She cherished the Jewish community's attitude towards her, writing in her *Memoirs*: "On the night of my last performance, hundreds of Romanian Jews came to me, most of them from Iași, Botoșani, Dorohoi, and several other cities of the Moldova region. They kissed my hand with tear-filled eyes, torn by longing for our homeland... Young girls hugged me. Some of them, overrun by nostalgia, asked me to send their best wishes back home, back to Romania- a country they hadn't forgotten and missed dearly... even if they were now better off living here. I was then convinced, and I repeat it now, that the Jews are a peaceful and grateful people who love their homeland. I had to admit that, at least while in America, my most devoted and affectionate friends had all been Jewish. They demonstrated great sensitivity to all that was beautiful, great, noble and sublime – they understood what true art was."



In her *Memoirs*, Agatha Bârsescu writes in detail about the 10 years she spent in America during World War I and about the instances in which fellow Romanians (be they embassy officials or Em. Lucaciu and others) helped her overcome the difficulties she faced. Alongside singer Runny Keyl, she organized an American tour in which her partner sang Romanian songs and she recited Romanian poetry. Furthermore, through a series of readings in which she familiarized the public with German or Romanian texts, she was a messenger of the Romanian cause in the United States. In an interview with "New York Times" reporter Alisa Franck, Agatha states: "The stage is by far the most splendid teacher. It taught me self-control, how to recognize beauty in life, how to work hard and be altruistic instead of just self-absorbed." This confession explains Agatha Bârsescu's career as a recitation and scenic arts professor, which she embraced after her return to Romania in 1923. She accepted minister Ion Petrovici's invitation to become a professor at the Iași Dramatic Conservatory, educating several generations of talented actors. Working as a professor brought her fulfillment during the final years of her life. The tours she went on throughout the country (including the Ardeal region) between 1923 and 1939 have not yet been studied adequately. The press of the time offers bountiful material regarding the roles she played and there are also many confessions which she made during interviews. It is the duty of our literary and theatrical researchers to write papers that will shed light on the lesser known moments of her life and career by 2009 (when 150 years since her birth will be celebrated). Her correspondence, kept in the Vienna Museum of Art, should be published, and commemorative plaques added to the sides of the Viennese houses in which she lived. The places that are irrevocably tied to her personal mythology are the Ursulinen Kloster, where she spent a few of her childhood years, aspiring to remain there as a servant of God; the house on Unter St.Veit Hauptstrasse no.254, which belonged to the countess Terlago and in which she lived whilst studying in Vienna; the house on Schwindgrasse no.3, in which she lived while working at the Hofburgtheater; the house on Doblhofgasse no.3, where she resided during her final years, as well as the Baden villa on Franzengasse which she had purchased. Our compatriot, the great Viennese actress, died in Iassy on the 21st of November 1939 at the ripe age of 70, leaving behind a rich theatrical inheritance.

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MIRCEA POPA (born in 1939), is a literary critic and historian from Cluj, Professor at the „1 Decembrie 1918” University in Alba Iulia. He is one of the authors of important collective volumes such as: The History of Romanian Theatre (Istoria teatrului în România) vol. III, 1973, the Dictionary of Romanian Writers (Dicționarul scriitorilor români) 2001-2002, the Dictionary of Characters in I.L.Caragiale’s Theatre (Dicționarul personajelor din teatrul lui I.L.Caragiale (2003) and the Dictionary of Characters in L.Bлага’s Theatre (Dicționarul personajelor din teatrul lui L.Bлага) 2005. He focused his research on Transylvanian Theatre history, (Tectonica genurilor literare, 1980), being the first to write about the oldest Romanian performance in the town of Blaj (A școlasticilor de la Blaj facere) and about the tour made in Transylvania by the famous actor Zaharia Bîrsan and Antonescu before 1918. He wrote special monographic studies about Victor Papilian, O. Goga, Lucian Blaga, L.Rebreanu and in his book Panoramic jurnalistic, 2011, focused his research on Romanian Theatre Journals. He is also the editor of a number of volumes of dramatic texts written by E. Isac (Teatru, 1986), Ionel Jianu (Intre teatru și literatură, 2004), V.Papilian (Scrieri. Dramaturgie, 2017).