

## *A Love Letter to Theatre*

**Book review: Robert Cohen. *A Director's Theatre. The Romanian Theatre from an American Perspective*. Translated by Carmen Borbély and Anca Măniuțiu. Cluj-Napoca: Casa Cărții de Știință Publishing House, 2017.**



Familiar to Romanian readers primarily as a renowned Acting professor (at UC Irvine), theatre theoretician (two of his works were partially translated to Romanian, *Acting Power* under the title *Puterea interpretării scenice*, Casa Cărții de Știință, 2007 and *More Power to You*, as *Eseuri despre Teatru*, Casa Cărții

de Știință, 2012), playwright (his plays *Machiavelli: The Art of Terror* and *Bzzap!* were translated to Romanian, published and staged at the National Theatre in Cluj in 2009 and 2016, respectively), and theatre director (his stagings of Brian Reynold's *Railroad* and *Blue Shade* were presented at Romanian theatre festivals in 2006 and 2007), Robert Cohen has prepared, in *A Director's Theatre*, another surprise for Romanian theatre specialists.

Consisting of a series of texts and interviews initially published in *Plays International* (London), *Alternatives théâtrales* (Liège), *Apostrof* (Cluj-Napoca), as well as letters and a transcript of his speech at the Professor Honoris Causa Ceremony (Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, 2009), this bilingual, English-Romanian volume, with a foreword by Anca Măniuțiu, manages to both represent an insightful and professional perspective on the Romanian stage "which is rapidly gaining recognition as the most exciting theatre in the Western hemisphere today" (p. 67) and bring forth an "unplanned" portrait of its author, "Robert Cohen – the enthusiastic spectator". From his first encounters with Romanian theatre, seeing Andrei Șerban's *Fragments of a Trilogy* in New York (1975), "a turning point in my own artistic life" (p. 48), a production that "completely changed my career, showing me a completely new way to think of theatre" (p. 55), to contemporary incursions onto the Romanian stage (detailed reports from 2006 to 2011, reviewing performances seen in Sibiu, Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca), the author assumes and successfully delivers a "double", juxtaposing role: on the one hand, the genuine spectator, excited and looking forward to the experience offered by the performance he is about to see, by the play whose "final repository is the minds and memories of its audiences" (p. 7) and, on the other hand, the specialist whose knowledge of theatre compels him to keep a certain professional distance, observe, evaluate, criticize if necessary ("Cute as it is at the opening, it has nowhere to go after the first twenty minutes, and the performance is two hours long", p. 94), refrain from uninformed commentary ("But other than noting that the production seemed bright, intense, amusing, and evocative, I can say little else with any authority", p. 81) and, first and foremost, to remain equidistant, fair to the production team and the theatergoers alike.

Perhaps due to its dated entries ("Sibiu, 2006", "Bucharest, 2008" etc.), or perhaps as a result of Cohen's accessible, affectionate writing style (he is unquestionably a storyteller!), *A Director's Theatre* leaves the impression of

an intimate diary and we, the readers, are invited to partake in the narrator's theatrical journey, to rejoice and wonder together with him at the fascinating metamorphoses of the theatre stage. "Lovely", "extraordinary", "provocative", "marvelous", "striking", "unforgettable", "lively", "breathtakingly performed" are just some of the attributes Robert Cohen gives Theatre when he considers it at its best. Restlessly, unconditionally immersed in the fictional world on stage and willing to accept its aesthetic proposal with an open mind, the author never hides his genuine enthusiasm. On the contrary, it represents a *sine qua non* condition of all encounters with artistic endeavors, the fundamental trait of a complete "theatrical experience" (p. 7).

Why a "director's theatre", one may wonder? The response rests, first and foremost, in the very purpose of the book. It is a radiograph of a theatrical quest to become familiar with Eastern European theatre, in particular Romanian theatre. It began with Andrei Şerban's "revolutionary" *Fragments of a Trilogy*, which "opened completely new ways for me to approach my directorial work" (p. 96), and continues to the present day, "avidly" seeking out "Eastern European productions" (p. 99) and desiring to become better acquainted with their approach to theatre, with "what the Germans call a *Regietheater*— a theatre of the director" (p. 100).

I consider Robert Cohen's book yet another one of his successful theatre textbooks, albeit an unintentional one, a useful tool for all theatre specialists, directors, actors and critics alike, as its clear viewpoint belongs to a professional who has managed to beautifully master and combine all these perspectives into a single, lucid voice. Anca Măniuţiu is right to observe in her foreword that "Cohen is open to *what he sees*, bracing himself for the sensorial, intellectual and emotional impact of the performance he witnesses" (pp. 7-8), and if the position of "Theatre Ambassador" is ever created, I have no doubt it should be modeled on Professor Robert Cohen's work ethic.

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