

The story of a story: the Grigoriu Theatre Company

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Abstract: At the beginning of the past century, tenor Constantin Grigoriu began gathering the outstanding members of the Romanian Lyrical Company, historically re-labelled „The Grigoriu Company” as an homage to its founder. Even if all its years of assiduous activity seem few when compared to the grand scale of time’s passing, the Grigoriu Company’s two decades of existence have left a mark upon the history of artistic life in Romania. This was due, in part, to its self-assumed status of „competitor” of the National Theatre, aiming to offer its regionally diverse public an alternative form of entertainment. Grigoriu also discovered and promoted grandiose performers the likes of Nicolae Leonard, Velimir Maximilian, Ciucurette, Carussy, Florica Florescu. The company contributed to the formation of an extraordinary generation of vaudeville singers too: Florica Cristoforeanu, Elena Drăgulinescu-Stinghe and Virginia Miciora were some of the most talented Romanian lyrical performers.

Key Words: Grigoriu Theatre Company, Romanian Lyrical Company

From a political perspective, the transitional period, between the 19th and 20th century and the beginning of the First World War, was dominated by sterile, small-scale confrontations, despite the hard work of the talented politicians of the time. There was notable progress in the economic sector, but due to its regretfully uneven effectiveness, it led to the preponderant development of agriculture and the extractive industry. Class division worsened, making the chasm between elites and masses painfully obvious. The most telling example in this case is the uprising of 1907, which hit Romanian society with the force of an earthquake, shaking it to its core. This schism was also observed by contemporaries, with Constantin Bacalbaşa

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pointing out that “in the midst of the uprising, the inhabitants of Bucharest are more preoccupied with the scandal of Elena Doamna Asylum or they peacefully strut to variety theatre shows featuring French cabaret, to the cinema or to Sidoli Circus, that advertises « Fights among Ladies »”.

Great changes took place in urbanism and local administration. Modernization manifested itself through local architectonic and urban regulations which unified specific aspects of the town. Thus, a planned expansion took place through the construction of new streets and the modifications brought to their previous arrangement, the creation of recreational spaces and the placement of buildings by taking into account their surroundings. The organization of a convenient urban lifestyle, featuring lighted streets, boulevards, a sewage system and public transport, was also taken into account.

Artistic life could not be left behind these profound changes in the fabric of Romanian society. Following the expansionist trend, theatrical movement evolved spectacularly. The administration of the Bucharest National Theatre was forced to readapt to new societal demands due to its frequent budget deficits by focusing more and more on the original plays of Romanian dramatists, which inherently led to a preponderance of shows held in Romanian. One of the densest regulation periods which led to the modernization of Romanian theatre took place during the directorship of Al. Davila.

Several theatre groups were created during that time, some of ephemeral existence, others responsible for the creation of alternative performance at the National Theatre. The competition between official theatre and private establishments could only pave the way for progress. The tours that took place all around the country, even in the provinces that were not part of Romania at the beginning of the 20th century, prompted cultural and social effervescence.

The Grigoriu Theatre Company

The information regarding the company’s inception is incomplete and, excluding memoirs, heavily sourced in a report forwarded by Constantin A. Grigoriu to the Administration of the House of Arts in the autumn of 1905.

Thus, we discover that the first lyrical Romanian troupe was founded in 1903, when 50 artists and their band united in the “Romanian Lyrical Company” for five years, taking full responsibility of the society’s administration costs. Among them were Constantin A. Grigoriu, I. Băjenaru, N. Leonard, Elena Leonard, N. Niculescu-Buzău, Ionel Cigallia, Madeleine Sion, Anna Grand, Cr. Ștefănescu, Al. Gheorghiu, M. Fotino, Olga Culitza, Luisa Ferari, Adela Marinescu, Zoe Orban, Vasilichia Dumitrescu, Anicuța Popescu, Elena Berlescu, Eliza Ionescu, Ștefania Călinescu, Paula Ionescu, Leontina Ioanid, Ch. Ionescu, V. Grigoriu, Sv. Picvan, D. Marinescu, E. Pethen, E. Nedelcu, V. Gh. Oboini, Eugenia Stelescu, D-tru Popescu, A. Luigi, C. Iliescu and others.

The artist N. Niculescu-Buzău recounts the tale of the company’s founding in his memoirs: “Right after the season ended, Mihail Stere came to me and proposed that I sign a contract for next summer. I told him I don’t want to become a part of such a deal with another fifty, sixty people. « You can gild me in gold and I wouldn’t do it. I’m used to a small group, but not this madness! ». Then C. Grigoriu offered to take Oteteleşanu Park for next summer.”²



Fig. 1: The Grigoriu Company, first decade of the XXth century

² N. Niculescu-Buzău, *Suveniruri teatrale*, (Bucarest: E.S.P.L.A., 1956), 113

During the epoch, the group's choice to perform at Oteteleşanu terrace was considered unwise. Over the years, Velimir Maximilian wrote: "Renting this place had many thinking that Grigoriu's idea is a stillborn. Oteteleşanu Park was unknown. It had only been used for a couple of parties thrown by Bucharest's aristocrats. There was also a rumor that the park's vegetation was a health hazard. The meaner-spirited said that alongside the park entry ticket, spectators should also buy a ticket for the Techirghiol mud baths. Rheumatism was a sure thing... People also said that the park was so damp and cold, that the owner of Tomek restaurant (that stood where Estrade Theatre is today) never bought ice in the summer. He would tie the wine bottles with rope, lower them into the park and lift them frozen after a minute."³

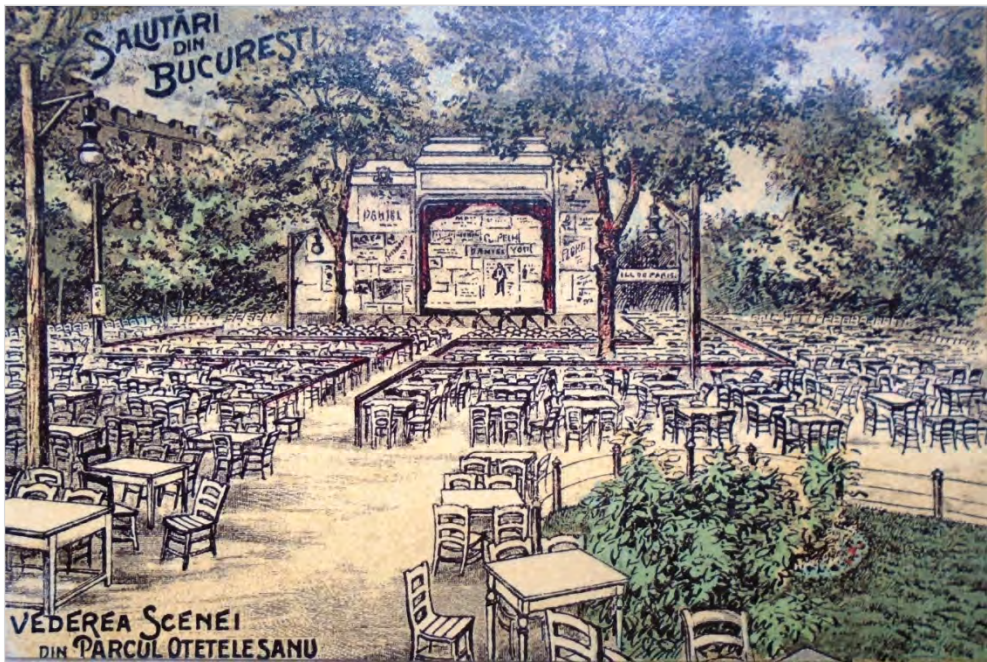


Fig. 2: Postcard with the Oteteleşanu Terrace and Summer Theatre

³ Velimir Maximilian, *Evocări*, (Bucharest: Editura Meridiane, 1962), 90

In his paper titled “Romanian Theatre”, Ioan Massoff proposes the following people as part of the founding troupe: tenors I. Băjenaru, Al. Bărcănescu, C. Stănescu-Cerna, bass D. Theodorescu, artists G. Niculescu-Basu, Velimir Maximilian, N. Niculescu-Buzău, N.P. Ciucurette, G. Carussy, Ion Cigallia, Margareta Dan, Elena Teodorescu, Aura Mihăilescu, Virginia Micioara, Leontina Ioanid, Ana Grand, band leaders O. Spirescu and I. Neuwirth, directors N. Elinescu and G. Dimitriu-Mitu. He is also the one to record the season’s opening performance of *The Princess from Canari* (music by Charles Lecocq), which took place at Oteteleşanu terrace, on the 23rd of June 1904, with Nae Ciucurette, Ion Băjenaru, N. Niculescu-Buzău, G. Carussy, Velimir Maximilian, Leontina Ioanid, Anna Grand in the main roles. In his memoir, Velimir Maximilian claims that the performance took place on the 26th of June, “two times thirteen, said the superstitious”. It seems that these credulous fears were justified- the play wasn’t as successful as planned, and after a second performance that failed to engage the audience, it was definitively removed from the repertoire.

The newly-created troupe would perform at Oteteleşanu terrace during the summer and at the Bucharest National Theatre during the winter, or in various establishments around the country (in Galați, Brăila, Iași, Craiova), collecting “praise for Romanian talent”, as C-tin Grigoriu writes in his memoir; Ioan Massoff states that performances also took place in the Lyrical and Modern (formerly known as Edison) Theatres.

Because the play that had been chosen for the debut was a nonsuccess, Grigoriu decided to continue the season with *Spring Wind* (music by Joseph Strauss) featuring N. Leonard, Carussy, Leontina Ioanid, Al. Bărcănescu, Margareta Dan and N. Niculescu-Buzău. I. Massoff also recalls a performance of *The Fairytale with the Princess from the Dream* (Al. Davila) in the Cotroceni garden, on the 21st of May, 1904, with Princess Maria playing the Princess from the Dream.⁴

Shows such as *The Vagabonds*, *The Model*, *Boccaccio*, *Races-barbecues!*, *The Gypsy King*, *Sweet Girlies*, *The Drum Major’s Daughter*, *Crispino*, *The Tittle-Tattler* were added to the debut season’s repertoire list.⁵

⁴ Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul Românesc* (vol. IV), (Bucarest: Editura Minerva, 1972), xx

⁵ see Vera Molea, *Teatrele din grădinile de vară ale Bucureștilor de altădată*, (Bucarest: Editura Biblioteca Bucureștilor, 2011), 71 and Nicușor Constantinescu, “Cu Elena Mavrodi despre ea și alții”, în *Rampa*, 1926, apud Vera Molea, “Constantin Grigoriu și începuturile operei române” in <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/constantin-grigoriu-si-inceputurile-opereiei-romanesti>.



Fig. 3: The artists N. Leonard and his wife, Elena Leonard

At the end of the first season, in September, Grigoriu disbands the troupe only to reunite it one year later, after having recruited new talent, among which Leonard. They perform *The Wizards of the Nile* (translation by Paul Gusty), *Roam the World*, *The New-York Beauty* (Sidney), and *The Happy Heirs* (Winterberg)⁶. Elena Mavrodi recalls the Company's activity in 1905. "On the 20th of September 1905 we went on tour. (...) During those times, actors would travel in first class train carriages and stay in one town for a week to play about 14-15 different vaudevilles. We were in Brăila and Galați for a month. 21 days were spent in Iași. 15 days in Botoșani, and in Craiova another month. (...) In Iași, for instance, our arrival was considered as important as a holiday. The ladies would prepare the outfits they would

⁶ N. Niculescu-Buzău, *Suveniruri teatrale*, 113

flaunt at premiers ahead of time. Back then, theatres were like racing booths: real fashion shows. But Grigoriu disbanded the company at Christmas. Its administration was taken over by Niculescu-Buzău and Leonard, who remained until the 23rd of April.”⁷

There were two reasons behind the disbanding of the group during the long tours of winter: some of the company’s stars signed contracts with the National Theatre and would start work there in October, while the others had no place of their own in which to perform during the cold season. Very few places were suitable for theatre/opera/vaudeville: the National Theatre, The Lyrical Theatre and the Modern Theatre, whose rent fees were much too expensive for a debuting company. But...It was all for the best. The tours contributed to the popularization of vaudeville in the countryside and helped animate artistic and social life wherever Grigoriu’s company would settle down for a while.

No more relevant information about Grigoriu’s troupe is to be found in the archives until the record of autumn 1905. Upon a closer inspection, it becomes clear that it was no easy feat to be an artist at the commencement of the past century; regardless of how assiduously the members tried to survive solely by way of the profession they had dedicated themselves to with pride and passion, state subventions given to theatres were necessary to ensure that Constantin A. Grigoriu’s company would remain on the market. “No matter how many sacrifices the private initiative makes, it is fighting a difficult battle for the progress of theatrical music against the hindrances fatally encountered in our country.”⁸ In order to support his enterprise, C-tin A. Grigoriu also made a presentation of the history of the vaudeville theatre movement, whose debut he places in 1884, when the first attempts to introduce Opera and vaudeville in Romania were made and the first valuable performers emerged, “transcendent in the glory of our people and beyond borders”⁹.

The private initiative had an important role in the advent and evolution of vaudeville theatre, which was initially supported by the state through subventions. The Minister of Education, Take Ionescu, offered a

⁷ Nicușor Constantinescu, “Cu Elena Mavrodi despre ea și alții”, în *Rampa*, 1926, apud Vera Molea, “Constantin Grigoriu și începuturile operei române” in <https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/articol/constantin-grigoriu-si-inceputurile-opereiei-romanesti>.

⁸ Serviciul Arhive Naționale Istorice Centrale (SANIC), a fund of the Ministry of Arts, dossier 147/ 1906, f. 139

⁹ Ibidem

subvention of 20.000 lei in 1895 for the Romanian Opera and Vaudeville, which later on grew to be 40.000 lei. "A whole movement, a true artistic event has its foundation stone in this attempt. While the private initiative has made titanic efforts, never backing down from any sacrifice, it could only accomplish what was possible; and when all possibilities were exhausted, the authority responsible for the protection of intellectual and artistic movements comes in with the rescue boat."¹⁰

Despite the fact that during the directorship of Wachmann the Romanian Opera and Vaudeville made progress, the dissolution of the Opera compromised the future of a brilliant group of young Romanian artists. The subventions that were given up until that point to the Opera were now redirected towards foreign troupes. "Here we are then in front of the following painting: a national castle full of riches, with sumptuous dining tables, sheltering and feeding foreigners, while out the windows one might notice prurient Romanian artists with 20 years of work as capital and scores of talented graduates of our Conservatories. Performance made the Romanian heart bleed and that was when we rebuilt our society, once more thanks to private initiative, under the leadership of the distinguished master G. Ștefănescu."¹¹

After sending in an official statement to the Directorate of Arts, C-tin A. Grigoriu writes an account to the Ministry of Public Instruction through which he motivates his refusal to solicit subvention: "It would be the worst gesture towards art and the taste of the general public, already tainted, to ease the lingering of vaudevilles that are, in their vast majority, null, or even distasteful, from both a musical and literary perspective."¹² A solution is also agreed upon, conditioning Mr. Grigoriu to respect certain commitments towards the ministry regarding his troupe, its repertoire and its performance style.

While these undertakings were ongoing, Constantin A. Grigoriu sent a statement to the ministry through which he solicited to become manager of the Opera for five years, commencing with the 1907 season, so as to offer comical opera and vaudeville shows at Bucharest National Theatre (for three months, during winter) and in the countryside for the remainder of the year. It wasn't only the need for money that prompted Grigoriu to take this step (although subvention was about 20.000 lei annually), but also the fact that Al. Davila, director of the National Theatre, asked him to renounce concessions he had in the building.

¹⁰ Ibidem

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² SANIC, a fund of the Ministry of Arts, dossier 147/ 1906, f. 134

After having left the National Theatre, Grigoriu's troupe (Margareta Dan, Elena Leonard, Florica Florescu, Ana Grand, Virginia Miciora, Leontina Ioanid, Ana Berlescu, Ioan Băjenaru, N. Leonard, Vasile Toneanu, C-tin Tănase, Alexandru Catopol, N. Niculescu-Buzău, Ionel Cigallia, Grigore Petrovicescu, Mișu Ștefănescu) performs the following vaudevilles at Oteteleşanu terrace: *The Washwoman's Daughter*, *The Gypsy King*, *Virgin Asylum*, *If I'd be King*, *Boccaccio*, *Clereta Concentrating*, *Danger*, *Voyage to China*, *The Mascot*, *Sweet Girlie*, *Ragamuffin*, *Races-barbecues*, *Small Mouth to Sample*, *Spring Wind*. Seeing how Leonard had gone to Paris to study the performances being held over there, Grigoriu opts for comedies instead of vaudevilles. After Vasile Toneanu from the National Theatre joins the group, they stage *A Debauchery* and *Ștrul Nuță*. Seeing how these fail to be successful Grigoriu decides they should opt for *The Merry Widow*. The first performances that happened during Leonard's absence did not attract great audiences, so the group went back to comedies.



Fig. 4: Three of the important artists of the Grigoriu Company: Velimir Maximilian, G. Carussy and N. P. Ciucurette

Not even a year had passed from the world premiere of *The Merry Widow* at the Theater der Wien, when on the 18th of August 1906 it was staged by the company with Leonard as the lead and music by Franz Lehar. After his performance in this show, he would thenceforth be known as “the prince of opera”. On the other hand, Leonard’s success was overshadowed by Maximilian, Ciucurette and Carussy’s catastrophic decision to leave the troupe to act at Blanduzia Garden. The “divorce” was not an amiable one, and it seemed to have been rooted in a conflict between C-tin Grigoriu and Ciucurette. Despite all this, the three stars would return a year later.

In the year of their factionalism, C-tin Tănase stars in *Boccaccio*, *Sibyl* and *Air Girl* alongside N. Leonard and Lucreția Brezeanu.

After the arrival of autumn, the tour is on the brink of recommencing and it is decided that it should take place between September 1906 and January 1907, featuring a repertoire which consisted of *The Merry Widow*, *The Charm of a Waltz*, *Three Wishes* and *The Island of Flowers*. The actual debut happened on the 15th of October 1906, with week-long performances in Brăila, Galați, Craiova and three days of shows in Roman, Bârlad, Bacău, Focșani, Buzău, Ploiești. In Iași, no suitable venue was available and thus the troupe returned to Bucharest.¹³ Wanting to prolong the tour, certain artists decided to form smaller troupes (with members from Grigoriu’s company) so as to continue performing in towns where Grigoriu’s group hadn’t been. It is the case of the „Niculescu-Buzău – N. Leonard” troupe, that performed in Vaslui, Râmnicu-Sărat, Mizil, Târgu-Jiu, Drăgășani, Râmnicu-Vâlcea, Turnu-Măgurele.

Niculescu-Buzău recounts about the show in Turnu-Măgurele: “We got there (...) on the 25th of February 1907. The whole venue had only 200 seats. We started our first show with “The Bird Hunter”. Full house. First act goes by. During the break, people step out for a smoke (...). We change the décor and announce the beginning of the second act. We ring once, twice, thrice, but nobody comes back in. What could it be? How strange! Nobody returns to the venue. (...) Then what do they tell me? They tell me that the peasants around Alexandria city had raided the town and left it devastated, especially certain manors of near-by estates. The people had run back to their homes. (...) We went to the hotel too. (...) We stayed in Turnu-Măgurele for 15 days without performing. In the meantime, the conservatives had surrendered the reigns of the government to the liberals (...).” The peasant uprising happened while they were in Turnu-Măgurele.

¹³ N. Niculescu-Buzău, *Suveniruri teatrale*, 131.

Many peasants were hit by the horsemen's swords or spears, and some were trampled by the horses. I was an eye-witness to this terrible carnage; I observed this barbaric response the authorities thought best to offer to those demanding their rights (...)¹⁴



Fig. 5: The cover of the Minerva calendar, from 1912, illustrated with the photographs of the artists Florica Cristoforeanu, Oscar Spireanu, Elena Apăteanu and C. Grigoriu.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 132-133.

C-tin Grigoriu returns to his pursuit of the management position at the opera with a more detailed offer in March 1907. To receive this concession, he promises to hire Romanian artists, the only exception in the case of foreign staff additions being celebrities; he plans to offer job stability to performers by signing contracts binding for 11 months a year, to perform opera, comical opera and vaudeville, to self-finance production costs (décor, costumes etc.), to have his own venue for rehearsals in Bucharest (The Lyrical Theatre) where he will also perform a minimum of 40 times during the winter (thus ceasing to bother the National Theatre performers with his rehearsal schedule, as he had done before). He proposed a troupe of minimum 40 Romanian artists, with the possibility of expanding this team through the creation of a ballet group.¹⁵

For a concession of five years (the maximum period), Grigoriu's offer stipulated a performance season in Bucharest at the Lyrical Theatre between the 15th of January and the 1st of April, a summer schedule between the 1st of May and the 1st of September and four months in the countryside (Iași, Craiova etc.). He also took it upon himself to offer an annual prize for a Romanian dramatic piece and to hire the four top graduates of the Conservatory every year. ¹⁶As a possible repertoire, he had nominated the plays *Zaza*, *Hoffman's Stories*, *Orpheus in Hell*, *A Thousand and One Nights*, *A Dream of a Waltz*, *The Student-Beggar* (a novelty) and as artists, for the opera he proposed: Băjenaru (tenor), Alexiu (bass), Petrovicescu (baritone), Ghimpețeanu (baritone) and the ladies Natalia Otta, Herescu, Mary Dan, El. Leonard; for vaudeville: Anna Grand, B. Movilă, Aur. Maximilian, Teodoru, V. Maximilian, Carussy, Ciucurette, Leonard, Al. Gheorghiu, Al. Ștefănescu. In addition to them, there was also a choir of 30 people, the vaudeville orchestra, made up of 24 people, the opera orchestra– 30-35 people; the ballet consisted of a foreign master, 2 main ballet dancers (also foreign) and 12-16 Romanian pupils.¹⁷

When this offer was defined, the Romanian Lyrical Company had 70 employees, most of which were graduates of the Bucharest or Iași Conservatory; they performed vaudevilles, operas and comical operas in Romanian, having a repertoire of 40 plays. In addition, Grigoriu's troupe did not survive on the state's subventions, even if it had received certain sums from the ministry.

¹⁵ SANIC, a fund of the Ministry of Arts, dossier 147/ 1906, f. 140

¹⁶ SANIC, a fund of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, dossier 2250/ 1907, f. 3

¹⁷ Ibidem.

In the cultural scenery of 1907, a proposition even more outrageous than Grigoriu's insinuates itself, asking for the reinstatement of the Romanian Opera within Bucharest National Theatre (BNT). Among the people who signed this document, dated May 15th 1907, there is also conductor George Stephănescu (the founder of the BNT opera troupe). The motivation behind this endeavour is important to our study because it sheds light on the beginnings of Romanian opera and vaudeville. The first attempts to found a national Opera go back to 1873; a first season of performances took place in 1885, with the famous Adelina Patti invited to star in *Traviata*, but their success was short lived because of rather subjective reasons: the star was sometimes "welcomed" and other times "shunned" from BNT. In addition, the inflation of shows (that were low-quality because of insufficient rehearsals, a problem prominent among Romanian artists), the great number of artists brought in from abroad (whose fees directly influenced the high cost of shows) and the placement of Romanian artists in supporting roles caused the demise of this type of performances and the disappearance of Romanian Opera.¹⁸

In an attempt to meet the public's opera and vaudeville needs, artists reverted to managed troupes through which they could request state subventions according to the theatre law under the pretext that Romanians performed in them. Because this solution was unsatisfactory, a large segment of artists solicited the reinstatement of the opera, motivating their gesture by invoking their need for stability and for the creation of a job market for the graduates of the Conservatory (seven classes in Iași and one in Bucharest every study cycle).

This movement remains unheard during the epoch; the ministry chose to focus on the managed troupes, which seemed much more profitable at the time. Grigoriu's offer was not unique. The atmosphere was that of "bidding", with several people sending in workbooks recording their responsibilities in exchange for the ministry's subvention.

Thus, in exchange for the subvention, Spirescu and Feder pledged to hire a troupe of Romanian artists to perform 3-4 plays in Romanian (for example, *The Rustic Cavalry*, *Rigoletto*), to invite lady Olympia Mărculescu from the Grand Opera of Paris to perform with them, to bring over a complete troupe for dramatic opera made up of first rank Italian artists and to hire the choirs and orchestras of the ministry. Because they had no venue

¹⁸ Ibidem, f. 5-7

at their disposal, they proposed a rent of 200 lei/night for the 1907-08' performance season and separate payment for illumination expenses, heating and maintenance; later on, the rent would be calculated proportionally to their subvention. They solicited the concurrence of BNT, which was supposed to offer them a venue and access to costumes and music sheets.¹⁹

Franassovici (who had been manager during the 1906-07' season) had an offer which encapsulated a rent of 4000 lei/ month for lighting, heating, miscellaneous services, costumes, décor, props, a troupe with "most superior elements" (which included famous foreign artists such as Luisa Tatrzzini, Hariclea Darclée, Edoardo Garbin, Mattia Battistini, Arturo Franceschini) and three shows a week between the 15th of October and the 15th of November. He pledged that the ballet (excluding the soloists) and choir would consist only of Romanians.²⁰

The fourth offer belongs to colonel D. Gheorghe and contains similar elements: annual performance season between the 20th of October and the 20th of November with three shows a week (Monday, Wednesday, and Friday), a repertoire of masterpieces, preponderantly Romanian personnel. He was also lacking a venue and costumes, but proposed that the costs of décor and costumes be covered by the Opera, despite the props remaining property of BNT. Furthermore, in exchange for an annual growth of the five year subvention, he promised to stage Eduard Caudella's Petru Rareș again and to showcase a new Romanian opera annually beginning with 1909, provided that there was "a Romanian composer such as Enescu or Stephănescu to write it"²¹. A report was later on attached to this offer announcing that the famous manager Jean Feder had been chosen as head of the administration (he had organized some of the most accomplished performances of the past years)²².

All of the above-mentioned offers were analyzed at the ministry by Ștefan Sihleanu, who wrote in his report that of all propositions, "the most acceptable one belongs to Mr. Grigoriu, with certain modifications, because the troupe employs many Romanian artists, the vast majority of whom have graduated the Conservatory. It has a choir and a ballet. Unlike other groups, this one is cohesive due to many years of collaborative work. Because this troupe has seniority, its members do not squander their time and efforts to look for other sources of income. He won important points by pledging to

¹⁹ SANIC, a fund of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, dossier 2250/ 1907, f. 10

²⁰ Ibidem, f.14

²¹ Ibid, f.15

²² Ibid, f.16

perform around the country, thus contributing to the diffusion of artistic inclinations." It mattered just as much that he had taken it upon himself to hire Romanian artists, graduates of the Conservatory, but the most important aspect was the fact that he had access to the Lyrical Theatre.²³

After receiving this report, the Ministry announced the Grigorescu Company that it had received a three year concession according to their conditions, but with the following modifications: out of 40 performances, a minimum of 25 needed to be comical opera shows; the tickets for shows featuring foreign artists could not exceed a 50% addition to normal BNT fees; there should be one performance free of charge at one of the three national theatres in order to support the provisional fund for said theatres' dramatic artists; a number of representations would be held in Iași and Craiova; in the case of extraordinary performances at the BNT, they would have to pay 250 lei/evening rent.²⁴

On the 6th of September 1907, C-tin Grigoriu answers the official notice, stating that "I partially accept the conditions proffered" and annexes a contract proposition based on his offer, integrating the changes requested by the ministry. The differences between his version and that of the ministry are minor; Grigoriu stipulates in the contract that he will pay 200lei/ evening rent (not the requested 250), that he will negotiate the price of tickets with the ministry when it comes to celebrity performances, noting that they must take into account the artist's honorary fee, and that the BNT should not be allowed to rent the venue while they perform (even if at the Lyrical Theatre), so as not to create unwanted competition.²⁵

During C-tin Grigoriu's epistolary exchange with the ministry, the troupe (consisting of Ioan Băjenaru, N. Leonard, V. Maximilian, N. Ciucurette, N. Soreanu, G. Carussy, Grigore Petrovicescu, Al. Gheorghiu, Marietta Ionașcu, Margareta Dan, Ana Grand, Elena Leonard, Elena Mavrodi) continues to perform the shows *The Ghost of Dâmbovița River*, *Artist's Strings* (Edmund Eysler), *The Merry Widow* (Lehar), *Races-barbecues*, *The King of Hunters* (Lehar) featuring N.P. Ciucurette, *The Happy Heirs* featuring N. Soreanu, *The Vagabonds*, *Sweet Girlie*, *The Opera's Ball* (V. Leon, Walberg), *The Bat* (Johann Strauss the son) featuring N. Leonard, Elena Leonard, Margareta Dan, V. Maximilian, Marietta Ionașcu, and *Nini* at Oteteleşanu terrace.²⁶

²³ SANIC, a fund of the Ministry of Cults and Public Instruction, dossier 2250/ 1907, f.29-30

²⁴ Ibid, f.28

²⁵ Ibid, f.33

²⁶ Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul Românesc* (vol. IV), (Bucarest: Editura Minerva, 1972)



Fig. 6: The artists Elena Leonard and Florica Florescu

In the summer of 1907, Maximilian, Leonard and Vasile Soreanu go to Vienna to study Viennese opera. They return at the beginning of fall and join the Company's tour in Iași alongside Marieta Ionașcu, Florica Florescu, Margareta Dan, Elena Mavrodi, Ana Grand, Ion Băjenaru, Ciucurette, Carussy, Gheorghiu, Petrovicescu. The first performance took place at Sidoli Circus on the 20th of September. Thereafter, the tour was extended (there were no openings at the Lyrical Theatre) and shows were also held in Bârlad, Focșani, Bacău, Roman, Botoșani and Craiova.

A new name made its way in Grigoriu's troupe: Florica Florescu. She left an impression on C-tin Grigoriu while performing at the Craiova Theatre. When speaking about her meeting with Grigoriu, the artist said: "It wasn't just the pay that seduced me. He dictated dignified conditions and described perspectives to me; he showed me a theatrical soul of a kind I had never seen before. To me, he was an embodiment of the ideal dramatist and that sensation never left me while we worked together. As a director, Grigoriu was admirable. I'm convinced that if he would be alive today,

vaudeville would be alive in our country. He always encouraged young elements and gave them opportunities to prove their worth, but what's most important is that he was keen on discovering them. This is what vaudeville desperately needs: youth."²⁷

Once they returned to Bucharest, the Company's artists opened the first winter performance season at the end of January 1908 with *A Thousand and One Nights* (Johann Strauss), *The Charm of a Waltz*, *The Sold Bride* (Smetana), *Hoffman's Stories* (Offenbach), *Don Pasquale* (Donizetti), *Cio-cio-san* (Puccini), *Hansel and Gretel* (Humperfing) and *Werther* (Massenet). For these shows, Natalia Otto, Mihail Nasta, Liviu Macedonescu, Andrei Niculescu and Gr. Alexiu were hired.²⁸ The normal season was opened on the 31st of May with *The Charm of a Waltz* and continued with *Artist's Strings*, *The Gypsy King*, *The Little Princess*, *The Merry Widow*, *Lumpatius Vagabondus*, *Parisian Life*, *Him and Her*, *Voyage to Africa*, *The Bat*, *The King of Hunters* etc.

The humoristic magazine *Furnica* wrote about the troupe's success: "because we predict an avalanche of music lovers come to say good bye to the artists that enchanted them all summer, Mr. Grigoriu ought to install some hammocks in the trees, otherwise the audience won't fit, no matter how vast Oteteleşanu park. A performance such as this one ought to take place in the Bărăgan fields, but there's still a chance that even there people would complain that it's too crowded."²⁹

During the next season, with the same troupe as in 1908 (Velimir Maximilian, Nicolae Leonard, Nae Ciucurette, Gogu Carussy, Grigore Petrovicescu, Const. Stănescu-Cerna, Nicolae Soreanu, Marietta Ionaşcu, Anna Grand, Virginia Miciora, Elena Teodorescu-Leonard, Elena Apăteanu), shows such as *Hussars during Maneuvers*, *The Merry Widow*, *The Dollar Princess*, *Night in Vienna*, *Artists' Strings*, *The Bat*, *The Charm of a Waltz* and *After the Divorce* were staged. Because the Lyrical Theatre was now owned by Leon Popescu, the season of 1909-1910 took place at the Modern Theatre.

That same year, to avoid another 1906 moment, when the company's biggest stars chose to perform separately from the troupe, C-tin Grigoriu asked Leonard, Ciucurette and Maximilian to become partners in the company's administration. Another turning point would present itself in

²⁷ Nicuşor Constantinescu, „Cu Florica Florescu despre ea și despre alții”, *Rampa*, year XIII, no. 3226, 22 October 1928

²⁸ Velimir Maximilian, *Evocări*, (Bucarest: Editura Meridiane, 1962), 124

²⁹ *Furnica*, year IV, 11th of September 1908

1912. Leonard wanted to be featured in operas and threatened Grigoriu with his resignation if he wouldn't comply with his requests. The only one supporting him was Velimir Maximilian, while the other artists were openly against the idea, considering the whole ordeal too risky. "Poor Grigoriu had been caught between two stools. He was always putting things off. Even if he was Leonard's godfather for his first marriage, he still couldn't tell him that his voice wasn't suited for opera."³⁰ A streak of unexpected luck came... straight from Leonard, who, dealing with vocal indisposition, gave up his aspirations for opera.

Sadly, the story was coming to an end. In 1913, after the commencement of the second Balkan War, Grigoriu decided to disband the troupe because the conflict with Bulgaria was seen as a state of emergency in which contracts became meaningless. Left leaderless, the group chose Velimir Maximilian as its new manager. His "directorship" was off to a rocky start because in 1914, a short while after the death of the troupe's founder, Florica Florescu, Nae Ciucurette and Carussy definitively left the company to act at Blanduzia Garden alongside Anna Grand, Marioara Cinski and Stănescu-Cerna in Carussy's newly created group.

Even if Maximilian adapted quickly, replacing those who had resigned with Anny Aurian, Natalia Macri, Zizi Roșianu and George Timică and working on the shows that were most popular during the epoch, he did not manage to rent out Oteteleşanu garden anymore (their place had been taken by Grigore Gabrilescu's troupe). In its attempted survival, the group organized a tour in Constanța (during which Carussy had returned). The losses vastly outweighed the winnings. Without taking into account the financial point of view, at the end of their contract with the Constanța Casino, many artists asked to be let go and refused to go back to Bucharest. With plenty of stand-ins and no orchestra (which had remained in Constanța to play), the group went to Brăila. They then performed in Galați, Bârlad and Focșani. The troupe was becoming smaller as the days went by (recruitments had also begun and many of the artists were called upon to defend their country). The audience was becoming smaller too.

The remaining members returned to Bucharest to prepare the following season's performances. In August 1916, after the German troops had occupied the capital, shows in summer gardens were banned. They begin again one year later, but the genre had already started to slowly fade into obscurity.

³⁰ Velimir Maximilian, *Evocări*, 171.

During the First World War, the Grigoriu Company did not seek shelter in retreats, but chose instead to lift the spirits of occupied Bucharest. Many of their shows were removed from the advertisements by German censorship. The troupe itself had become a ghost of its former glory, with Maximilian and Leonard the only remaining members from the original formation.



Fig. 7: The Square in front of the National Theatre with the Oteteleşanu Terrace in the background, on the right, 1915.

At the end of the war, a new type of theatre, which had become extremely significant when it came to raising the morale of the troops and the wounded, started gaining more and more admirers. This was variety theatre, in which Constantin Tănase excelled. The shift in the preferences of the masses naturally led to the disappearance of the Grigoriu Company, whose activity is said to have ended in 1923, when Velimir Maximilian joined the Bulandra Company. Last man standing, Leonard attempts to resuscitate the genre by founding his own company.

By comparing the lists of artists belonging to the troupe, one can notice a permanent fluctuation in members, even if the nucleus-group was maintained for a long period of time. Thus, one of the founding members, tenor N. Niculescu-Buzău, started his own troupe as early as the summer of 1907 (alongside Cazimir Belcot, G. Achile, Mișu Fotino, Olga Culitza, Mișu Ștefănescu, C. B. Penel, Al. Demetrescu-Dan, Avram Nicolau, Pepi Moor, Jenny Ioanid, Alexandrina Alexandrescu, Betina Săvulescu and others), performing at Ambassadors Garden and in cross-country tours.³¹ Furthermore, at the end of every season, the artists were free to perform in other troupes or to go on tours.



Fig. 8: The artists N. Leonard and Florica Christoforeanu



Fig. 9: The artists V. Maximilian and N.P. Ciucurette

³¹ Cervatiuc Ștefan, *Istoria teatrului la Botoșani. 1848-1944*, vol. II (1900-1924), Editura Quadrata, Botoșani, 2010, 73

Because the reputed journalist and theatre specialist Ioan Massoff, born in the year of Grigoriu Company's debut, chose to rely on statistics (members, repertoire), giving less importance to the characters of theatre history about which he wrote during the inter-war period, we shall try to trace a portrait of the troupe's members using memorial pieces, the press and the literature of the time.

Who actually was Constantin Grigoriu? There is very few information archived about him. He is mentioned in a file from 1924, in a centralization sheet of Romanian artists titled "Synoptic Representation of Drama, Comedy, Tragedy and Musical Artists that Have Graced the Romanian Stages from 1819 to present"; in the entry corresponding to his name one can read "1877", "Bucharest", "light tenor and director". The dating is done in the column generically titled "Epoch", from which we can deduce when his debut took place.



Fig. 10: The artists Maximilian and Florica Florescu



Fig. 11: The artists V. Micioara and N. Leonard

Born in Iași on the 11th of May 1866, Grigoriu was “discovered” by Gavril Muzicescu, who included him in the choir at 9 years of age. Passionate about music, he studied opera at the Iași Conservatory (1884-1886) and transferred to the one in Bucharest in 1887. After graduation, he was hired as a tenor by the Bucharest National Theatre. He also performed with private vaudeville troupes alongside actors Ion Brezeanu, Petre Liciu, Lucreția Brezeanu (in Nicu Poenaru’s group) and in Grigore Gabrielescu’s troupe. He was a soloist in G. Stephănescu’s lyrical company.

He was also a talented writer, responsible for two extremely successful pieces of the epoch: “The Fairy of the Carpathians” and “Don’ Vagmistru”. He wrote for many publications of his time and taught at the Pompilian Institute. His activity was not restricted to Bucharest, but also encompassed the countryside, Iași, Craiova and Chișinău, “across the border”.

In a history of Romanian ballet, Grigoriu is named as a founding figure due to the ballet group within his company. His even bigger merit was attempting to create a ballet school and associating with Oscar Schmidt in order to see it through. The choreography school was opened in 1908, but there was not much interest among young ladies. As proof, a surviving postcard sent to Grigoriu on the 29th of October 1908 by Oscar Schmidt informs him that the girls do not enroll for classes because they don’t see the point of them as long as there is no job security. A proposed solution was hiring the young trainees at the Lyrical Theatre.³²

1908 was a year rich in significant events in the history of C-tin Grigoriu and the Romanian Lyrical Company. This was also the year in which their first international tour took place, with leading figures V. Miciora, N. Leonard, Elena Leonard and V. Maximilian performing two very well-received shows in Chișinău.³³

Constantin Grigoriu was also a grand talent scout, with people such as Nicolae Leonard, Velimir Maximilian, Ciucurette, Carussy and Florica Florescu unbreakably bound to the name of the Grigoriu Company. He also contributed to the formation of a generation of vaudeville singers such as Florica Cristoforeanu, Elena Drăgulinescu-Stinghe and Virginia Miciora, who became some of the greatest Romanian lyrical artists.

³² see “Baletul în România, considerații istorice (1)” pe <http://baletromania.ro/baletul-in-romania-consideratii-istorice>

³³ Traian Ichim, “Evoluția fenomenului operistic în Basarabia la începutul secolului al XX-lea”, in *Intertext*, 1-2/ 2016, 289.

When Grigoriu left the troupe's directorship in 1913, this revealed to the remaining members that aside from his uncontested talent, he had been an extraordinary leader and the only element to keep them together for so many years. Later on, Velimir Maximilian would confess that during those moments it was hard for them to accept that "vaudeville was Grigoriu himself".

This is the story of the Grigoriu Company, although we must admit that the story of a story cannot come to an end without some lines dedicated to the artists that were part of this outstanding group. Sadly, the only information available about most of them is but their name, listed in the cast list of a show at the beginning of the past century.

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