

Liviu Ciulei – WANTED At Home and Abroad

Book review: Florica Ichim, Anca Mocanu (eds.), *Liviu Ciulei acasă și-n lume [Liviu Ciulei Home and Abroad]*, vol. I-III, Bucharest: Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu”, Revista „Teatrul azi”, 2016



The release of the trilogy *Liviu Ciulei acasă și-n lume* was a veritable editorial and theatrical event in the Romanian cultural environment. The book was put together by Florica Ichim and Anca Mocanu (Bucharest, Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu”, Revista „Teatrul azi”). A multi-talented artist and an encyclopaedic personality, Liviu Ciulei (1923-2011) was an actor, architect, stage-designer, screenwriter, teacher and theatre theorist, but he is best known for his work as a theatre and movie director. He was a pioneer of theatre in Romania during the '70s and '80s, until he went into exile because of the increasingly severe censorship of art during communism. Occasionally, he would go back to Romania after the fall of Nicolae Ceaușescu's regime in 1989 and direct several plays at the “Bulandra” Theatre in Bucharest – in which he had a special interest.

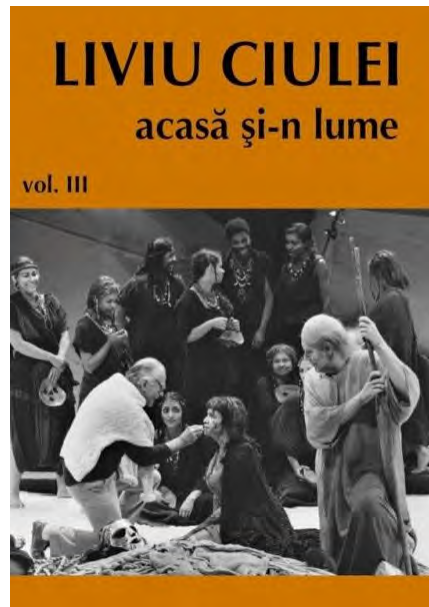
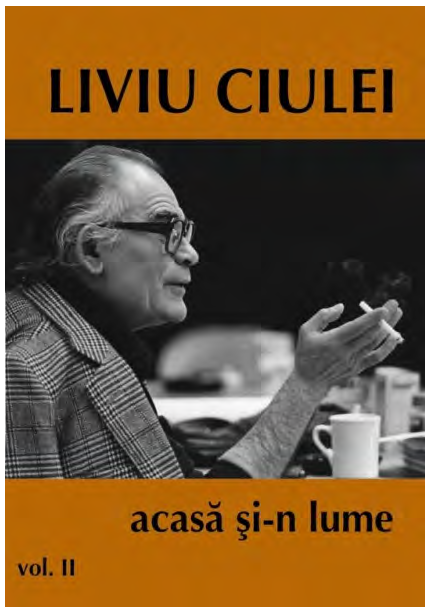
In 2009, with the help of theatrologist Mihai Lupu, Liviu Ciulei published an exceptional bilingual album: *Cu gândiri și cu imagini [With Thoughts and Images]* (Bucharest, Igloo). It was a richly illustrated "personal retrospective" of his over 60-year long theatre career, which spanned over four continents. (Starting with 1967, but mostly after the second half of the 1970s, Ciulei staged many theatrical productions in Germany, France, Italy, the U.S.A., Great Britain, Australia and Israel.) Moreover, the album focuses more on his work as a stage designer, whilst the volumes put together by Florica Ichim and Anca Mocanu, published in the prestigious *Galeria Teatrului Românesc* series of the *Teatrul Azi* magazine, offer the reader a more comprehensive picture of Liviu Ciulei's personality and creative activities.

The three volumes have a very articulated structure, mapped out by the following sections: "Articles and Communications by Liviu Ciulei", "Interviews with Liviu Ciulei", "Stage Design", "Architecture" – volume I; "Management – «Lucia Sturdza Bulandra» Theatre", "Confessions of the Creator", "Appendix. Artists Face to Face with the Censorship", "Commented Theatrography (1947-1972)" (containing vast commentaries regarding the work of Liviu Ciulei, including his teachings) – volume II; "Management - «Guthrie» Theatre, Minneapolis (U.S.A.)", "One or More Days of Liviu Ciulei's Life", "Interviews with Liviu Ciulei", "He Counseled and Supported Talents", "Commented Theatrography (1973-2005)" – volume III.

Considering that there were many sources for the materials, inevitably the information tends to be repetitive sometimes, but without it being bothersome. In the end, this results in the multiplication of perspectives – a sort of polyhedral reflection of one of the most iconic figures of Romanian and – why not? – World theatre.

Asked many times about how he manages to peacefully combine in his work so many different occupations (acting, directing, architecture, stage design, etc.), Liviu Ciulei answers simply: "My job is the show!" In this way, he asserts his respect for the complete theatre maker. Another exceptionally emphasised principle underlying his work throughout his career is that *a theatre performance aims at putting a mirror in front of our contemporary society*. We stage "the classics" not because of our love for modernism in its own, says the director, but because we find in these texts elements which must be underlined or diminished to correspond with today's world. "Museum" productions or those that lack a political/social outcome seem to be Ciulei's worst nightmare.

Regarding stage-design, Ciulei aimed at creating a set which served as a vector for the idea of theatre production, but which is not a pictorial representation of it. He was also the initiator of a revolution of post-war Romanian theatre stage design, by rejecting the naturalist sets promoted by the powerful advocates of socialist realism. He marched for treating the décor of the play in a theatrical manner: “Not crammed-up and minimized architecture on a small stage, not buildings copied in a pointless effort, made from cardboard, but theatrical, poetical and dramatic images which are made concrete in sets”. The article in which the previous quote is included (*Teatralizarea picturii de teatru [The Theatricalization of Painting in Theatre]*, in “Teatrul”, I, no. 2, June 1956), and the reply given promptly by the director and writer Radu Stanca (“*Reteatralizarea*” teatrului [“*The «Retheatricalization» of Theatre*”]), in “Teatrul”, I, no. 4, September 1956) became manifestos of the re-theatricalization movement in the 1970s and 1980s, which helped Romanian theatre to re-connect with the similar movement of the inter-war period. (One of the pioneers of this inter-war movement was the director and stage designer Ion Sava, later a mentor of Liviu Ciulei). Glancing backwards, Ciulei characterised this movement as a phase towards a theatre of the future, towards a new classical theatre. The vision and means that he sought in his theatrical productions were always realistic, so he said, but in the full meaning of the word. In this way – underlined the director – fantasy was realistic, too, as it was rooted in the real world. At Ciulei, realism simply meant ‘breathing theatre’.



The director never thought that he had invented anything new. He had a series of “role models”. Alongside Ion Sava, mentioned above, he had the upmost admiration for Peter Brook and Bertolt Brecht. Of his colleagues, he admired most Lucian Pintilie, David Esrig, Radu Penciulescu and the younger Andrei Șerban.

Liviu Ciulei was the director of the “Bulandra” Theatre (between 1963 and 1972) which he rebuilt (both literally – through the architectural reconfiguration of one of the halls – and figuratively) and transformed into one of the most appreciated institutions of its kind in Romania and abroad. His return after the long years in exile was not easy. When describing this re-encounter, the director could not really hide his bitterness as to the state of the institution when he staged *Hamlet* here after 1989. Partially equipped workshops, lack of organisation, financial problems...

On the stage of “Bulandra” Theatre, Ciulei put some of his most memorable productions: *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, *Children of the Sun* by Maxim Gorky, *The Three Penny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht, *Night Lodging* by Maxim Gorky, *Leonce and Lena* by Georg Büchner, *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *Danton’s Death* by Georg Büchner, *Play Strindberg* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Elisabeth I* by Paul Foster, *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare and so on; but also his biggest fails, such as *Macbeth*, which Ciulei, unforgiving of himself, described as his worst staging. A play that cannot be overlooked is *O scrisoare pierdută* [*A Lost Letter*], which premiered exactly 120 years after the birth of Ion Luca Caragiale, the author of the comedy. Regarding the staging of the play, the director mentioned that I.L. Caragiale is a Shakespeare of the Romanians. The same way that, each year, *Hamlet* is staged many times in England, Romania should do with *O scrisoare pierdută*, Caragiale’s best play. Theatres should collaborate, not engage in pitiful rivalry – so says Ciulei on the same occasion.

The movie considered by Ciulei (and not only by him) his biggest accomplishment in the field, i.e. *Pădurea spânzuraților* [*Forest of Hanged*], adapted from the eponymous novel by Liviu Rebreanu (Prize for Directing and Nomination for Palme d’Or at Cannes International Film Festival in 1965), dates back to the time when he was manager of “Bulandra” Theatre. His work as a movie director and actor was by no means insignificant, but political pressure and increasing censorship forced Ciulei to abandon movie-making whilst in full power of creation. Therefore, he fully dedicated himself to making theatre – seen as a refuge from the political interferences, which

turned out to be just as frail. Unable to name the real cause of his retreat from the world of filmmaking, he justified his decision then by mentioning the generally harsh working conditions and the problems which continuously arise on the movie set, as well as his very busy schedule at the theatre.

Liviu Ciulei was dismissed from the position of manager of “Bulandra” Theatre after the premiere of Gogol’s *Inspector*, directed by Lucian Pintilie, banned by the authorities after the third performance. This was perhaps one of the darkest moments in the history of Romanian theatre, leading to Pintilie’s (self)exile and later to Ciulei’s. In the second volume of the trilogy edited by Florica Ichim and Anca Mocanu, a text describes the full atrocity of the “trial” filed against the team of “Bulandra” Theatre because of the upper-mentioned play: *Cacealmaua (sau Ședința din 28.10.1972) [The Bluff (or The Assembly of the 28th of October 1972)]*, written by the stage designer Dan Jitianu. The Theatre’s artists could remember well the “assembly that turned the «Bulandra» into a museum piece”, even after 1990.

After leaving the country, Liviu Ciulei left his mark on Western theatre with plays directed all over the world, from West Germany to the U.S.A. Here he later settled and became director of “Guthrie” Theatre in Minneapolis. Unsurprisingly, the establishment became one of the most valued theatres in the U.S.A. under his management. Ciulei was also professor at several American universities, where he received the appreciation of colleagues and students alike.

Ciulei died in the fall of 2011 in a hospital in Munich, Germany. Romania lost then an artist of incommensurable value, a true national symbol. Andrei Șerban noted that, when he last saw him at his home where he visited him with Radu Penciulescu, Ciulei, although not working anymore, shared with his two friends his latest discovery regarding theatre, about the centre of gravity of the characters. The books he left behind are full of such findings, of the continuous search that tormented Ciulei, with regard to theatre. They are authentic manuals of directing, acting, stage design and so on, which should be read with the upmost care.

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