

Arguments for a Historical Examination of the Discourse of Theatre and Film Criticism

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Abstract: Paradoxically, historical studies of performing arts seem to have seldom approached the manner of development of critical discourses; and this, despite the fact that the basic subject matter that comes to the aid of historiographers interested in arts (fewer and fewer of them can be seen in the academic environment of my activity) is given by critical discourses: leading articles, essays, reviews, investigative pieces, feature reports and interviews from this or that time. Very few researchers seem to have raised valid questions about the relationship between (artistic, theatrical...) creation and the critical discourses meant to represent and assess it. A simple web search including the keywords "theatre", "history", "theatre criticism", "rhetoric" will expose the austerity of this field: such austerity may seem unfathomable, since, both from the viewpoint of the history of performing arts and from the viewpoint of the history of aesthetic, social, philosophical or political ideas, interactions are essential and their dynamics is almost impossible to ignore. This is why this article seeks to emphasize a number of primary themes, each of them potentially representing individual research stages that deserve subsequent systematic development.

Keywords: Theatre, Critical discourse, Hystory, Rethorics

Political context, ideology, aesthetics: normative criticism vs axiological criticism

The attempt to place theatre criticism in the historical context of the time of its development is extremely necessary, if not even mandatory, irrespective of the age of a specific critical discourse. The critics' discourses

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do not depend solely on the (hegemonic or emerging) aesthetics and on the modes of theatrical production of the space and time of their conception, but also and first and foremost on the landscape of dominant political ideas, on the power relations that define the delivery of value judgements. In this respect, even when it is not (or it does not seek to be) normative, critical discourse exposes, willingly or not, its axiological and ideological roots, in parallel with the aesthetic references that are on sight, in the fabric and flesh of critical reasoning.

There are two major aspects driving a historical, contextualized rereading of Romanian theatrical criticism in the second half of the 20th century. The first one is the need to analyze the specific way (and the subtended strategies) by which, in some periods, theatrical criticism took its normative dimensions/function seriously. Particularly in the former communist areas, like the Romanian one, press discourse and, in our case, theatrical criticism were steered from a single control center in the years of enforcement and strengthening of Stalinism; they mimicked the wooden language of the propaganda emanating from Moscow, by borrowing ideologizing concepts, keywords, strategies and attack tactics against “bourgeois” or “decadent art”, which had already been tested for decades in the Soviet space. The process of gradual withdrawal of the normative dimension, after 1956, in Romania’s case, was slow and unhinged, in direct relation with the domestic political developments – including here both the overt legal changes and the directives “processed” in the countless “plenum” sessions, conferences and symposia with theatre artists, administratives and scholars, extremely relevant in the first fifteen years after the Second World War - but also after 1971, at a different level.

I could refer here, for example, to the debate regarding “dogmatism” – a “popular” theme launched from Moscow in the entire space of satellite-countries, in the wake of legendary Khrushchev’s February 1956 speech. In our country, the debate opened, naturally, in the officious cultural magazine *Contemporanul*², preceding but also following the January 1957 historic counsel of theatre-makers³. And it also echoed in the magazine *Teatrul* (March, April, May, June 1957). Paradoxically, unlike the careful delineation operated in the previous debate, regarding stage direction, from March to September

2. *Contemporanul*, 19 February 1957.

3. For the 1957 Counsel, see Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea Și Reteatralizarea În România [The Theatricalization of Romanian Theatre] - 1920-1960* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2003).

1956, this time it was clear that the polemics did not include generations, or compact categories of critics or would-be critics: in spite of the fact that some definitions and clear attitudes would have been welcome, they were absent from a professional context such as the monthly magazine of theatre people. However, critics of different ages and backgrounds did spar at one another, starting from some op-eds, or even from theatrical reviews: S. Damian, who had been reserved about the quality of some of Mihail Sebastian's plays⁴, was humiliated by Vicu Mândra⁵, and then by B. Elvin (author of the first study on Sebastian⁶) and charged with "dogmatism". "Dogmatically" self-confident, Radu Popescu sprang to S. Damian's defense and tore to pieces Sebastian's *Jocul de-a vacanța*, in *România liberă*⁷. And so on and so forth...

Since I.D. Sârbu⁸ had found that the text of Al. Mirodan's *Ziariștii* (which had been recently put on stage at the National Theatre) was thin, Andrei Băleanu⁹ replied by blaming the *Teatrul* reviewer with dogmatism; with a classicist training, professor H. Zalis stepped in by quoting amply from Faguet, to prove Elvin's anti-dogmatism¹⁰, as well as I.D. Sârbu's judgement errors; Horia Bratu¹¹ shook the dust off the older woeful (Stalinist) keyword "formalism", which he uses in the praising of both duelists – I. D. Sârbu and Andrei Băleanu. Eugen Luca, a critic renowned several years before for the Zhdanovist resolve of his reviews, intervened with a title meant to dynamite sarcastically the whole debate: "Dogmatofobie sau snobism intelectual?" ["Dogmatophobia or Intellectual Snobbery?"]¹²

The discussion about dogmatism faded in total abstract fog, wherein the most vocal ones seemed to be the former professional dogmatists, and the only victims were the critics that expressed sensible aesthetic reserves – S. Damian

4. S. Damian, "Prea Multe Aplauze [Too Many Cheers]," in *Încercări de Analiză Literară* (Bucharest: ESPLA, 1954).

5. Vicu Mândra, "O Monografie Excelentă [An Excellent Monograph]," *Gazeta Literară*, December 15, 1956.

6. B. Elvin, *Teatrul Lui Mihail Sebastian [Mihail Sebastian's Theatre]* (Bucharest: ESPLA, 1956).

7. Radu Popescu, "Jocul de-a Vacanța [Holiday Games]," *România Liberă*, February 18, 1957.

8. I. D. Sârbu, "Grandoare Și Servitușile Debutului [Grandeur and the Encumbrances of Debuting]," *Teatrul*, December 1956.

9. Andrei Băleanu, "Despre Teoria Echilibrului Și Alte Ciudățenii [About the Theory of Equilibrium and Other Curiosities]," *Teatrul*, February 1957.

10. H. Zalis, "Judecata de Valoare, Factor Esențial [The Value Judgement, an Essential Aspect]," *Teatrul*, April 1975, 44–47.

11. Horia Bratu, "O Simplă Păreră [Just an Opinion]," *Teatrul*, March 1957.

12. Eugen Luca, "Dogmatofobie Sau Snobism Intelectual? [Dogmatophobia or Intellectual Snobbery?]," *Teatrul*, May 1957.

and I. D. Sârbu; a plain symptom that, for the time being, personalized critical opinion had not earned sufficient privilege, even if, apparently, the zone of basic and rough normative criticism had been abandoned¹³. However, at a closer reading, the debate evolved almost involuntarily to the aesthetic qualities of the play structure, to the momentousness and intensity of the lines, to the verisimilitude of the characters and of the circumstances etc. – in spite of the fact that, more often than not, interveners squared up their own accounts.

I believe attention should be paid both to the causes and dimensions of this gradual withdrawal of the normative dimension, and to the tactical variations by which the editorial policies of the next decades would favor this decrease of potential of normativeness, to the benefit of hermeneutic analysis: the evolution of essay stylistics, of the review or of thematic investigations, etc. is not the only aspect at stake here; the balancing strategies between the deliberately normative and self-normative texts (so-called “in line” texts, most of them editorial, ordered answers to investigations or transcriptions of speeches held during party-managed professional conferences, etc.) and the texts on theatrical phenomena and events as they occurred (reviews, analyses, synthetic essays, etc.) are also at stake. I remember accurately that, for decades, as a reader, I would skip the first pages of cultural magazines, which would be programmatically dedicated to propaganda and circumstantial rules, and I would start to read the magazine from where the reviews, investigations, feature stories or essays on the current – literary, artistic, theatrical or film – production would start.

At a different level, special attention should be paid to how, ever since the first decade (1945-1955) dominated by Zhdanovism, the signs of professionalization (or of the return to the basic profession) had appeared at some theatrical journalists, cultural activists or theatre scholars who would also approach criticism. Because, at the midst of the claims of hegemony of normative criticism (signed by officials, by cultural activists or by “state-owned” artists, leaders of theatrical institutions) and the multifold cultural de-indoctrinated praxis, professionalization, in my opinion, is the core: in fact, considering all the brutal returns to dogma, which occurred in the Romanian

13. This is, in fact, one of the observations of the anonymous author (possibly Horia Deleanu, although stylistics and argumentation opt, instead, for Radu Stanca – but the poet-director was only a contributor) in the article “În loc de încheiere” (“In lieu of a conclusion”), *Teatrul*, June 1957, pp 35-38, which ends this failed debate.

cultural policies several times, normative-dogmatic criticism gradually and irreversibly became a lost cause, even if it never ceased to exist, between 1956 and 1989. The process of professionalization can be monitored by reference to the cited sources, to the critics' interest in relation to theatre history and aesthetics, since here, too, during the post-1956 decades, a "transfiguration" similar to the one in literary criticism occurred (when some of the more or less young coryphaei of aggressive Zhdanovism later raised mere earnest critical works)¹⁴.

The second reason for the historical revisiting, apparently even more interesting, relates to the double oriented efficacy of theatre criticism: in relation to the creators and in relation to the audiences. Certainly, such a level of research is considerably more difficult, since no one had dared until now to approach the theatre economic reporting archives, which could be revelatory with respect to the frequency and fluctuations in the spectators' presence at theatre plays in the last half of century. Except for the rare cases where some play had stirred some polemics (which were, in fact, strictly controlled, such as *As you like it*, at the Municipal Theatre in 1961, directed by Liviu Ciulei, or *King Lear* at the Bucharest National Theatre, in 1970, directed by Radu Penciulescu), it is almost impossible to find persuasive evidence about how Romanian criticism sent spectators to see the play, or how it had a negative influence on audience attendance.

Instead, an examination of how theatre or film directors, scenographers or actors, especially after 1956, relate to the critical opinions regarding their creation is possible at any time: with respect to this, many interviews, thematic essays, round tables or investigations of cultural magazines are available, especially after 1960.

One example (of the many) is the series of debate-articles launched by the *Teatrul* magazine in the last part of 1959 and completed in 1960, under the umbrella title *Pentru prestigiul criticii dramatice* [*For the Prestige of Dramatic Criticism*]. Originating in an unsigned feature article in *Scînteia*¹⁵, „Împotriva tonului apologetic în critica literară și artistică” [“Against the Apologetic Approach in Literary and Artistic Criticism”], fully reproduced by the *Teatrul* magazine¹⁶, the investigation actually invites the artists (paradoxically, only

14. For this purpose, see Alex Goldiș, *Critica În Tranșee* [Criticism in the Trenches] (Iași: Polirom, 2011).

15. No. 4635, 23 September 1959

16. *Teatrul*, October 1959, p 1

one director, Val Mugur¹⁷ and one playwright, Victor Tulbure¹⁸, the others being actors) to express their opinions, in a sort of experimental operation of “criticism of criticism”. The tone approached by the involved parties was elegant and it expressed a shared (perhaps real, perhaps simulated) respect in relation to the role of criticism. We must not ignore that the political machine of “criticism and self-criticism” was still active, which may also have contaminated the sphere of signification and the position of theatre criticism.

For their most overwhelming part, actors (A. Pop Marțian¹⁹, Irina Răchițeanu²⁰, Kovacs Gyorgy²¹, Toma Caragiu²² and others) complained about the structure of the review, which was much more literary rather than performing arts-oriented. They said that a too little sepace was allowed for the play, in the body of the text, and that the play was often described superficially, while the creative participation of the actor drowned in stereotypical, empty phrases. They all sought adamantly “to be helped” by critics, but to this end almost all of them (including Val Mugur, who was otherwise a theory-oriented essay writer) claimed the critics’ presence in the creative process, during the rehearsals; some also recommend to the critics to see the same stage play at least twice, not only on its premiere. A few of them also related to a number of very harsh articles, perfused with amusing quotes from reviews, signed by the actor and professor Ion Finteșteanu²³. Hilarious proposals were also made: for example, the writing of reviews “together” by cooperating critics, which should improve objectivity²⁴. But extremely pertinent things are also said. At any rate, the watchwords, which had been

17. Val Mugur “Rolul creator al criticii teatrale” [“The Creative Role of Theatre Criticism”], *Teatrul*, December 1959, pp 56-57

18. Nicolae Tăutu “Criticalul să cunoască opera pe care o judecă” [“The Critic Should Know the Work He Is Judging”], *Teatrul*, November 1959, pp 63-65

19. A. Pop Marțian, “Și Criticalul Poate Greși [The Critic, Too, May Be Wrong],” *Teatrul*, October 1959.

20. Irina Răchițeanu, “Criticalul, Îndrumător Judicios Al Creației [The Critic, Sound Exponent of Creation],” *Teatrul*, October 1959.

21. Kovacs Gyorgy, “Cu Mai Mult Simț Al Răspunderii [More Responsibility],” *Teatrul*, November 1959.

22. Toma Caragiu, “Critica Să Urmărească Spectacolul Și După Premieră [Critics Should Also See the Plays After the Premiere],” *Teatrul*, December 1959.

23. Ion Finteșteanu, “Însemnări Despre Critica Teatrală [Notes on Theatre Criticism],” *Gazeta Literară*, no. 25–26 (1959).

24. Marțian, “Și Criticalul Poate Greși [The Critic, Too, May Be Wrong].”

in vogue since 1956 and repeated by very many of the signatories, were *critical/scientific analysis* and even *scientific objectivity*, a sign that the impractical illusions of Stalinist political education had left indelible traces in the artists' profound consciousness.

Curiously, the most... liberal (ironically speaking) point of view, while also the best argumentatively articulated emerged from Margareta Bărbuță²⁵ – theatre critic and translator, while also a consultant with the Culture and Arts Committee, hence an official of the system. She would synthesize the debate and would draw its conclusions, by separating the overstatements from the pertinent observations, and by inviting to a closer communication between critics and artists. We note that, starting from that first debate, the round tables and the symposia of “criticism of criticism” would return cyclically in the magazine pages, obtaining increasingly more coherence, especially in the next decade. Careful research of the evolution and junction points of these debates should be approached.

The aesthetic and stylistic evolution of theatre criticism in relation to international theatrical directions

From my point of view, one of the areas of great interest in the historical research of theatre criticism relates to how theatrical thinking strives, after 1956, to re-synchronize – where allowable – with the Occidental theatrical theory and artistic praxis. From 1956 to 1989, because the circulation to and from the European West was strictly controlled, an essential part of the information regarding the new aesthetic directions of Europe and the USA was offered by cultural magazines and, after 1960, by very few volumes of studies, travel books written by theatre scholars or forewords to translations. Without denying the importance of theatre tours, especially of those coming to Romania from abroad, their small number and, consequently, limited audiences make us believe that their effect in the process of aesthetic emancipation of Romanian stage directing was rather minor - the very few exceptions, such as the legendary 1972 tour of the Royal Shakespeare Company with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* directed by Peter Brook, seem to prove the rule. Instead, the theoretical and practical information, with a synchronization

25. Margareta Bărbuță, “Datoria Criticului Și Eficiența Scrisului Său [The Critic's Duty and the Efficiency of Their Writing],” *Teatrul*, January 1960.

role, earned, by comparison, a major importance, and the way in which theatre criticism answered to these needs should be investigated carefully and devotedly. Such a discussion would encompass the examination of the study voyage reports, regarding lectures and cultural exchanges at theatrical institutions or festivals, the essays or even essays on high-profile European dramatic authors, directors and scenographers, avant-garde artistic movements, interviews with foreign artists obtained during trips abroad, or during visits/ tours of such artists in Romania.

For example, ever since its first issue, in April 1956, the *Teatrul* magazine had sought to provide constantly information on the theatre life abroad. Such information comes from voyages or from interviews, and also from the translation and reviews of foreign magazines, preferably from the Soviet-influenced area, but not only. Young Valentin Silvestru, as a disciplined party soldier, proposed a feature story from Moscow²⁶, accompanied by small reviews to stage plays; but also a report about an interview with Jean Paul Sartre, given to a Soviet magazine, during his visit to Moscow, helping us find that the writer philosopher thought that the French theatre was still under a crisis, seeking for its spectator, trying to escape the bourgeois/commercial formulae. Jean Vilar's "people's theatre" was, of course, praised by the philosopher-playwright, as were the directors and the teams that promoted Brecht. Furthermore, Sartre appreciated the public policy of establishment of Regional Dramatic Centers that sought to democratize both the theatrical production and access to it by an audience coming from the most diverse categories²⁷.

Certainly, the present of Soviet theatre continued to be hegemonic, expressed not only by tours, exchanges and reciprocal visits, but also by the more or less theorized successive return to Stanislavsky's rules. Writings about Stanislavsky come from the academic Eftimiu²⁸, the young director Miron Niculescu who engaged in polemics with Ion Finteşteanu regarding the Stanislavsky method and the Knebel method, borrowed at us rather by ear (the debate on the art of directing and re-theatricalization was at its peak)²⁹,

26. Valentin Silvestru, "Pagini de Block-Notes Dintr-O Călătorie În URSS [Aide-Memoire from a Trip to the USSR]," *Teatrul*, April 1956.

27. "Jean Paul Sartre Despre Situația Teatrului Și Dramaturgiei Franceze [Jean Paul Sartre about French Theatre and Dramaturgy]," *Teatrul*, April 1956.

28. Victor Eftimiu, "Stanislavski Și Alții [Stanislavsky and Others]," *Teatrul*, May 1956.

29. Miron Niculescu, "Stanislavski, Knebel ... Și Noi [Stanislavsky, Knebel... and Us]," *Teatrul*, August 1956.

Ion Marin Sadoveanu³⁰ and others. But exactly at this time of relative “thaw”, we are reached for the first time, rather hastily, by the first somewhat substantial information about Brecht - deemed decadent by pure and harsh Zhdanovism, exactly when left-oriented Occidentals, and not only, placed him at the core of the new European theatre directions. The first steady article, signed by Alfred Margul Sperbel, was published in October 1956 and it definitely originated in the disappearance, in August, of the great poet and playwright³¹. In 1957, a more consistent essay by Paul Langfelder was published on *Viața lui Galileo Gallilei*³², and also a correspondence from Berliner Ensemble by Martin Linzer.

One should consider the direct relation between the guidelines of the Soviet “thaw” as strictly supervised by the party (like “we are allowed” or “it’s free to...”) and the interface position of theatre criticism – in relation to the overall theatre environment. Because, in the next years, the first Brechtian stage plays would also to be staged, some of them weaker, some other widely successful: *Mutter Courage* at the Iași National Theatre, *Fear and Misery of the Third Reich* at the Bucharest National Theatre, both of them in 1958, and especially *Mr Puntila and his Man Matti*, directed by Lucian Giurchescu at the Giulești Theatre in 1959, a real triumph. This will actually pave the way, in the next decade, to an ample series of plays dedicated by the director to the famous German author.

The rhetoric and (more or less individualized) stylistics of theatre criticism should also be approached with special care, because the structure of the reviews, in itself, is a contextual testimony on how theatre critics of this or that era relate to a specific system of aesthetic or ideological values, to the type of specific editorial policy and, of course, to their target-audience. From this viewpoint, one should analyze the internal sources of the stylistic changes of the writing itself, and the relation of value judgements included in the reviews to the specific atmosphere and to the dominating trends of the theatre environment, at this or that time. Thus, case studies could be built, based on the rhetoric and stylistic analysis, meant to monitor and perhaps to contextualize the evolution of some critical voices that left their mark on the theatre environment for at least a decade, when not more – I.D.Sârbu,

30. Ion Marin Sadoveanu, “Izbânzi de Neegalat [Unparalleled Success],” *Teatrul*, September 1956.

31. Alfred Margul Sperber, “Berthold Brecht Și Teatrul [Berthold Brecht and the Theatre],” *Teatrul*, October 1956.

32. Paul Langfelder “Ce e neobișnuit în dramaturgia lui Berthold Brecht” [“The Uncanny of Berthold Brecht’s Theatre”], *Teatrul*, October 1957, pp 7-14

Ștefan Aug. Doinaș or Ecaterina Oproiu in the period of the brief thaw of 1956-1957, later Mira Iosif, Valeria Ducea, Florian Potra, Ana Maria Narti or, undoubtedly, the uncrowned patriarch Valentin Silvestru; and so on and so forth. In the same train of thoughts, I don't believe that the oscillation between theatre criticism and film criticism, of some of the "strong voices" of decades six and seven, is lacking importance. Subsequently, the causes of such migrations should be examined; they can be institutional, economic or related specifically to the inner organization of the two artistic environments...

Starting from here, from stylistics and rhetoric, perhaps the most difficult and most challenging study to attempt would be (closing the circle that we opened in the previous subchapter) dedicated precisely to the fragile/ambiguous concept of *critical authority*: which were, through time, the expectations and the measures of the "authority" of the theatre critic, which were the operating mechanisms of this so-called authority, how did the relationships between the critics and censorships manifest? And, in particular, to what extent did the imaginary collective construction of the *authority of the critic* interfere or not (in line with the propaganda or, on the contrary, with the resistance) with the exercise of plain and harsh political power?

Finally, one should study, contextualize and explain also (where possible) the matter regarding the marked disinterest (where this is not deliberate opacity) of our cultural space in the innovating directions of critical, theatrical and para-theatrical theories of the 1960-1980 decades: in other words, attention should be paid to the marginal paths of formal analysis of dramaturgy (Solomon Marcus³³, Mihai Dinu³⁴), the lack of appetite for thematist, post-structuralist/semiotic or inter-textual criticism methodologies, etc. Because, admittedly, there has been little, if any at all, serious academic approach on

33 Solomon Marcus, *Poetica Matematică [Mathematical Poetics]* (Bucharest: Editura Academiei RSR, 1970).

34 Mihai Dinu, "L'interdépendance Syntagmatique Des Scènes Dans Une Pièce de Théâtre," *Cahiers de Linguistique Théorique et Appliquée* 9, no. 1 (1972): 55-69; Mihai Dinu, "Continuité et Changement Dans La Stratégie Des Personnages Dramatiques," *Cahiers de Linguistique Théorique et Appliquée* 10, no. 1 (1973): 5-26; Mihai Dinu, "Individualité et Mobilité Des Personnages Dramatiques," *Cahiers de Linguistique Théorique et Appliquée* 11, no. 1 (1974): 45-57; Mihai Dinu, "How to Estimate the Weight of Stage Relations?," *Poetics* 6 (1977): 209-27; Mihai Dinu, "Ștafeta Personajelor - O Problemă de Tehnică Dramaturgică Si Soluțiile Ei [The Relay of Characters - an Issue of Theatre Technique and Its Solutions]," *Caietele Critice Ale "Vieții Românești"* 10 (1970); Mihai Dinu, "Teatrolgia Matematică - Realizări Si Promisiuni [Mathematic Theatre Studies - Achievements and Promises]," in *Matematica in Lumea de Azi Si de Mâine*, ed. Mihai Drăgănescu and Caius Iacob (Editura Academiei RSR, 1985).

the paradox between the focus on the theatrical experiment of theatre directors, and the critical blindness toward the older and newer theoretical directions (alternatives to “honest” impressionism) of analysis and interpretation...³⁵

All of the above is but a hurried, not at all exhaustive sketch of the multiple possibilities that could be open by the critical, multidisciplinary exploration of the history of theatre criticism discourse, especially in the Eastern European space – in our case, the Romanian theatre and film press. We shall see whether this challenge has an effect and whether at least some of the historians, academic and, especially, young researchers are ready, in the following years, to focus on such daring surveys.

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³⁵ Here, too, a parallel should be approached to the same phenomenon in literary criticism, of course much more consistently represented there, as well noted by Alex Goldiș, in *Critica în tranșee*, cited edition.

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