

Romanian Theatre Criticism during the Stalinist Era. Construction and Deconstruction of the Critical Discourse

ALEXANDRA EMMA PEDESTRU¹

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to capture the way theatre criticism changed once the communist regime was finally established in Romania. The focus is on the years of Stalinist reign, as they might be considered the most oppressive, especially in the cultural domain. The article aims, on one hand, to draw a historical context in which the change occurred, while, on the other, it analyzes the various ways Socialist Realism affected critical thinking, substituting aesthetics for ideology in drama reviews and forcing critics to concentrate almost obsessively on the dramaturgy, in the detriment of the performance itself.

Keywords: Stalinism, Socialist Realism, criticism, textocentrism, ideology, aesthetics

Suppression and substitution of the critical act

After King Michael abdicated and the communist regime was instated officially in Romania, the responsibilities of artists and art critics significantly drifted away from aestheticism and, closely following the Soviet model, embraced the field of politics and ideological militantism. This historical reality has become axiomatic; the years of the so-called “integral Stalinism” produced an impressive amount of literary and aesthetic rejects from which, later, the authors themselves tried to take a distance; some of them managed to do so elegantly in a new political and cultural environment, others failed in their attempt to penetrate the protective wall of collective memory.²

1. Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania.

emma.alexandra.dima@gmail.com. Paper translated from Romanian by Adriana Fekete.

2. v. Angelo Mitchievici and Ioan Stanomir, *Comunism inc. Istorie despre o lume care a fost* (Bucharest, Humanitas: 2017), 15-34.

The tasks of theorists in almost all humanistic domains, though not necessarily simple (as we will see later), were repeatedly defined with clarity by Andrei Jdanov and the Jdanovist spokespeople – among whom the famous Leonte Răutu still ranks as an emblematic figure for the Romanian censorship. To a neutral 21st century observer, the constraints imposed on the intellectuals and the creators of the time may seem simultaneous appalling and hilarious because of their restrictive, caricaturistic character.

According to Jdanov's draconian precepts, artistic creation was supposed to incorporate a series of qualities (downright perverse in their illusive simplicity) in order to meet the requirements of socialist realism: to illustrate the struggle of the working and/or oppressed classes against their oppressors; to be founded on socialist values; to fight "obscurantism", "mysticism", and "superstition"; to depict heroes embarked upon building a new existence and so on. However, it was equally important that the lives of the heroic and obviously victorious protagonists be depicted with veracity, not only as an "objective reality" but also in its "revolutionary development".³ In passing, we can note that the last specification ably/skilfully reversed the argument for verisimilitude and veracity, acting on the conscience of the target audience especially by means of the subtext. Thus, the actual, mundane reality lost its relevance and was replaced by a different, more convenient and carefully processed/altered reality.

In the Romanian space, Leonte Răutu's diatribes targeted at certain socialist fads such as "aestheticism", "formalism", "cosmopolitanism", "comparativism", "apoliticism" and so on⁴ reinforced/intensified the message of the Soviet ideologists against aesthetic pluralism which was seen as malign bourgeois inheritance. Seemingly, the recipe for artistic success was available to whoever was willing to accept moral compromise and the gradual inevitable uniformization of cultural products after 30 December 1947.

Consequently, we should not be surprised that the older and younger intellectuals in the USSR and its satellite states, in their ingenuity and disorientation, understood that they were expected to idealize everything, down to the very last consequence of the socialist existence (this being the

3. See Andrei Jdanov's speech at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers, available at <http://www.cengage.com/>.

4. See Leonte Răutu's speech at the November 29th 1948 meeting with writers, artists and journalists and also "Împotriva cosmopolitismului și obiectivismului burghez în științele sociale", both texts reproduced in Vladimir Tismăneanu and Cristian Vasile, *Perfectul Acrobat. Leonte Răutu, măștile răului* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008).

source of the so-called conflict between “good and better”). However, this well-meaning panegyric/eulogistic intention proved itself insufficient, at least in the field of drama where a more pronounced Manichaeism was recommended, so that the audience should not be overwhelmed by too much good and forget about the existence of various enemies of communist aspirations.

In this respect, we think worth mentioning an episode in 1952, relevant to understanding how socialist realism got stuck/was trapped in a plethora of norms which, today, seem ridiculous. On the occasion of an ample article initially published in the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* and made available to the Romanian public by its publication in *Contemporanul*, playwrights and critics were authoritatively reprimanded for the wrong understanding and application of the official aesthetic direction⁵ (the contemporary reader would rightfully tend to identify a certain normative intransigence beyond the seemingly benign reproof).

The title, “Let us put an end to the falling behind of our drama”, is as explicit as possible given the spirit of the age. Evidently, the aim of the author, unmentioned, was to make an inventory of the shortcomings of the Soviet dramatic production. Mercilessly, he pointed the finger at playwrights and critics equally, particularly reproaching them for “not having correctly understood certain theoretical and practical aspects of socialist realism and, above all, the problem of conflict as the foundation for the dramatic work”⁶. Actually, the text was trying to sanction the autoprotective tendency of the theatre people against taking risks that could discredit them later on.

For example, the alleged flaw of playwrights was that they “did not found their work on deep, real conflict”, inspired by the mundane existence of the Soviet citizen, whereas the flaw of the critics was that through their writings they encouraged the depiction of an idealized reality. Hence, it was believed that the class struggle was not over and that there still existed numberless negative aspects in the young socialist world that writers had the duty to address in their works, while the role of the chroniclers/journalists was to encourage uninterruptedly the production of adequate works.

5. “Să lichidăm rămânerea în urmă a dramaturgiei,” *Contemporanul*, April 11 1952, first published in *Pravda*, April 7 1952.

6. *Ibid.*

Consequently, the unknown author was accusing the spreading of the “vulgar/trivial theory of conflict extinction” or the reduction of conflicts to the sterile struggle between “good and better”⁷. Such an article discloses, from a contemporary viewpoint, the inability of the Soviet world intellectuals to escape to a safe and satisfactory formula which could provide professional survival. They were denied even this tiny subterfuge (the hyperbolic flattery of the regime) which, normally, should have pleased the authorities. Instead, the glorification of the perfection of the socialist system required, in most cases, a negative counterpoint: condemnation of the class enemies or, in their absence, of the old regimes, along with all the principles (actual or imaginary) that lay at their foundation.

However, as we will see further, Manichaeism and the tendency towards idealization coexisted successfully in Romania, even though the aesthetic idiosyncracies of the dramatic productions had been diminished down to the status of dispensable accessory. From this point of view, it is worth noting the autochthonous reactions to such Soviet pleas (or indictments) as the one mentioned above.

Thus, in the same year, in issue 298 of *Contemporanul*, Lucia Demetrius⁸ published an analysis entitled “Unele probleme ale creației noastre dramatice (Some Issues of Our Dramatic Creation)”, similar (and in response) to the one in the Soviet newspaper. In it, playwrights such as Aurel Baranga⁹ and M. Davidoglu¹⁰ were scolded for small professional failures. The former was reproached for the fact that in his play “Recolta de aur (The Golden Crop)” he did not show a deep understanding of “the people and their problems” when imagining an apolitical hero (head of an agricultural production cooperative), which was, surely, unthinkable in real life. The latter, despite depicting a “strong” dramatic conflict, was unable to elaborate on it, thus drifting towards *formalism* (in an early version of the play “Cetatea de foc (The Fortress of Fire)”, later improved in reaction to the bad reviews that appeared in *Scînteia*).¹¹

7. Ibid.

8. Lucia Demetrius (1910-1992) was a Romanian writer, poet and playwright. Between 1949 and 1965 her plays abode by the rules of socialist realism.

9. Aurel Baranga (1913-1979) was a Romanian poet and playwright, author of “Zdrobite cătușe”, the anthem of Romanian People’s Republic, and of numerous socialist realist plays.

10. Mihail Davidoglu (1910-1987) was a Romanian socialist playwright.

11. Lucia Demetrius, “Unele probleme ale creației noastre dramatice,” *Contemporanul*, June 20 1952.

In a later issue, P. Țugui and S. Damian were to make a similar contribution (this time in reaction to the Plenary Session of the Writers' Union), "Despre unele probleme ale dramaturgiei noastre (On Some Problems of Our Drama)", in which they insistently criticized the "schematism" of some plays, providing complex explanation for the roots of the phenomenon:

Trying to conceal schematism, the lack of spiritual substance of certain characters, some playwrights resort to sterile, artificial procedures, taken from the arsenal of decadent bourgeois literature. Schematism and the fake individuality of the characters point to the fact that these playwrights do not sufficiently cherish the beauty and the dramatism of life, confining themselves to "tourist" documentation/research, to mere visits to reality. [...] Socialist realism means the manifold/multilateral representation of the truth of life, of the spiritual richness of the new people; it requires the firm control of schematism, of lifeless clichés that kill real art.^{12,13}

Further on, a short comment regarding the responsibilities of the critics catches our attention:

Our theatre criticism should take a militant stand on affirming a just point of view when evaluating original drama; it should be more effective in popularizing the successes of our drama, offering high quality ideological and artistic guidance.^{14,15}

12. P. Țugui and S. Damian, "Despre unele probleme ale dramaturgiei noastre," *Contemporanul*, September 12 1952.

13. "Încercând să acopere schematismul, lipsa de conținut sufletesc a unor personaje, unii autori dramatici apelează la procedee sterile, artificiale, împrumutate din arsenalul literaturii burgheze decadente. Schematismul și falsa individualitate a personajilor arată că acești autori dramatici nu prețuiesc îndeajuns frumusețea, dramatismul vieții, rezumându-se la documentări „turistice”, la vizite prin realitate. [...] Realismul socialist înseamnă reprezentarea artistică multilaterală a adevărului vieții, a bogăției spirituale a oamenilor noi, impune combaterea fermă a schematismului, a clișeelelor fără viață, careucid arta adevărată."

14. P. Țugui and S. Damian, "Despre unele probleme".

15. "Critica noastră teatrală ar trebui să manifeste o poziție militantă pentru afirmarea punctului de vedere just în aprecierea dramaturgiei originale, să fie mai operativă în popularizarea succeselor dramaturgiei noastre, dând o îndrumare la un nivel mai înalt ideologic și artistic."

We can note how this last recommendation suffers from convenient ambiguity: the authors of the text fulfilled their duty of pointing to a systemic evil; they offered a solution consistent with the problem and concluded their approach with the awareness that they had offered a correct cure, irrespective of the angle from which one might consider the issue. It seems that the tasks of the critics were extremely simple: sanctioning any deviation from the right road, encouraging appropriate writings, and, most importantly, taking a "militant stand". In reality, their task was burdened on the one hand by the fact that socialist realism, subject to excessive rigour, was unable to deliver original/genuine products since it was based on a rather limited recipe collection; on the other hand, it was made difficult by the critics' own disorientation (especially in the case of those with serious professional training) in relation to the new identity of the prototypical intellectual.

Consequently, convergent with the official discourse established by the Soviet publications, the Romanian authors started to question the autochthonous theatrical manifestations and, even though they could not actually reproach the lack (or insufficiency) of Manichaeistic approach, their criticism was directed towards similar shortcomings: superficial, insufficiently elaborate conflicts; the drift towards "formalism", and so on. Such remarks were often circulated in the mass media of the time and they were just slightly (re)formulated from one text to another. Actually, given their simplicity, they could be considered universally valid as all criticism could be reduced to stating whether the authors were successful or unsuccessful in creating characters and conflicts that could support and illustrate the socialist cause/ideal.

In conclusion, we can say that even in the most glorious years of Stalinism, socialist realism was undergoing an insoluble aesthetic crisis, triggered by its purely ideological genesis and by the fact that its existence was prolonged artificially, thus disturbing its life cycle. In Romania, where this trend had been imposed over night, the adjustment of the evaluative discourse to the newly created conditions for creation happened in a brutal and traumatic manner, hence the difficulty that theorists had in acquiring the appropriate critical tools, which resulted in an ever-deeper immersion in an ideology simplified by an *ad infinitum* reproduction of its principles.

Survival techniques for the cultural journalist

Among the standpoints that were rapidly taken over from Soviet publications (more precisely from *Sovietscoe Iscusstvo*) by *Contemporanul* there was an article directly aimed at theatre criticism, a virulent reproach to journalists – whose mission to support the proliferation of socialist realism seemed to have failed and turned into an arid simulacrum.¹⁶ Once again, the accused were Russian intellectuals, even though the accusations could have easily taken on a universal character. Surprisingly, in this particular instance the issue was the separation of aestheticism and ideology when analyzing the socialist-realistic performances.

V. Vlasov was accusing the Soviet theatre theorists of “narrow empiricism”, of connivance with the playwrights, thus becoming accomplices to the “serious mistakes” made by the playwrights and bearing responsibility for spreading “pernicious conceptions”, among which the hesitant attitude towards the “depiction of negative characters”. However, the main imputation referred to the lack of balance between the interest shown in the content of cultural products and the interest in the analysis of artistic form. As the author put it, “the lack of exigence towards the artistic quality of the play, towards the embodiment of its ideological content in perfect artistic images”.

Instead of being normative and inquisitive, “sanctioning shallowness” and appreciating the value of the works of art in terms of unity of content and form, theatre criticism would rather try to evade, taking refuge in ideological sentences and just stating the adequacy or inadequacy of the plays in relation to the official politics. The reasons for such deviation are numerous; however, we can identify some of them focusing on the Romanian context, with all its peculiarities, such as the obsession with the dramatic support of the performance and the seeming incapacity of evaluating staging beyond the success/failure in the theatrical materialization of the text.

As Angelo Mitchievici notes, “Totalitarian regimes exhibit literature-centred cultures where the role of the writer is oversized because it accumulates the prerogatives of the other humanist sciences”.¹⁷ However, the theatre critic does not work with a finite, constant and one-layered product that can be

16. Andrei Jdanov, “Însemnări cu privire la critica teatrală (Notes concerning theatre criticism)”, *Contemporanul*, July 11 1952. Reprinted from *Sovietscoe Iscusstvo*, no.47c

17. Mitchievici and Stanomir, *Comunism inc.*, 27.

evaluated according to such blatantly reductionist principles. On the contrary, he is at greater risk to “be wrong” since his sentences/verdicts refer to a lot of aspects: not just the “correctness” of the text, but also that of staging, interpretation and of other more subtle and insidious elements. Thus, in the context of troubled and radical changes brought about by the traumatic establishment of Stalinism in Romania, the alteration of the theatre critic’s identity was inevitable.

Even though the Romanian culture has always tended to be text-centred, theatre critics started, even before 1947, to pay increasing attention to the elements typical of the performing arts. However, after the imposition of socialist realism, maybe out of fear for their own safety or maybe out of convenience (especially because some of them were new to the field), their interest in the new literature went hand in hand with subjecting the performing elements to the dramatic ones. Thus, a genuine obsession with fidelity to text appeared along with a quasi-general paranoia in relation to the creative liberties that the numerous actors involved in the production of a performance could afford to take.

More often than not, the plays had to pass through numerous filters before their staging was approved; consequently, a purely descriptive review containing just a few fanciful remarks added to the abstract seemed to be a safer option than a thorough technical analysis of the dramatic components that could be criticized for its “aestheticism” or accused of “formalism”. Consequently, in most cases, three out of four columns were dedicated to the play and the author, with detailed moral analysis of the protagonists. Frequently, stage management was mentioned just in passing and mainly referred to the selection of the actors who had the duty to intensify as much as possible the qualities of the characters they played. Let us consider the following example:

Doctor Murgu, too, is a complex character, considered from various angles, a man with a rich spiritual life. Not without hesitation, he manages to overcome confinement to his professional shell, his indifference to political involvement and realizes that the fight for the health of the people cannot be fought outside the fight against the enemies of the people. His struggle with himself, his love of the working people, his increasing combativeness in relation to the class enemies, his moral purity evidenced by his true and strong love for

teacher Marta, his high professional scrupulousness – all these characteristic traits of doctor Murgu make the hero embody the best features of the intellectuals who are now resolutely breaking with the evil influence of the bourgeois school that had taught them.^{18,19}

Even without having knowledge of the dramatic text, we can infer the reforming effort made by the character in order to break with the old social order entirely. Additionally, this short fragment portrays the typical hero of socialist realism, namely a person who breaks with her/his own past to the point where s/he loathes the bourgeoisie and dedicates her/his efforts to the working class. The author of the review insists on a series of attributes of the character, essential to its integration in the pantheon of new dramatic heroes: devotion to the proletariat, rejection of the bourgeois order, involvement in the socialist struggle, etc. And, maybe the most important aspect, the author underlines the doctor's transition from apolitism to active involvement in the struggle against the enemies of the people. The evolution of the character is well structured and the review records the most significant aspects of the character's personal, professional and social route. In regard to acting, things are more complicated:

In the role of doctor Murgu, Septimiu Sever achieved a beautiful performance, embodying a complex and bright character. With simple yet valuable means, the actor brought out in relief the inner struggle of the character, and his growth; he highlighted, without ostentation yet convincingly, the positive traits of the hero, as well as his positive potential, not disregarding the presentation of the negative features of the character. Septimiu Sever will perfect his performance in "People

18. Aurel Baranga, "Lucia Demetrius: 'Oameni de azi'," *Contemporanul*, October 3 1952.

19. "Doctorul Murgu este deasemenea un caracter bogat surprins din unghiuri diverse, om cu o viață sufletească complexă. Nu fără șovăieli, el izbutește să înfrângă închistarea în carapacea profesiunii sale, indiferența față de politică și să se convingă că lupta pentru sănătatea poporului nu se poate duce în afara luptei împotriva dușmanilor acestuia. Lupta pe care o duce din acest punct de vedere cu sine însuși, dragostea lui pentru oamenii muncii, combativitatea crescândă de care dă dovadă față de dușmanul de clasă, puritatea lui morală vădită în iubirea sinceră și puternică pentru învățătoarea Marta, înalta sa conștiințiozitate profesională – toate aceste trăsături caracteristice pentru doctorul Murgu, fac ca eroul să întruchipeze cele mai bune însușiri ale intelectualilor care se desprind azi cu hotărâre de sub influența nefastă a școlii burgheze în care au învățat."

of Today" if he will get rid of certain unnatural or gratuitous gestures, of certain patterns that he tends to follow and which prevent the actor from fully emphasizing the individual character of doctor Murgu.^{20,21}

The particularities of acting are conveyed in rather vague terms, at least in comparison with the obvious concreteness of the description of the literary character's qualities. The strength of the actor resides in the fact that he was able "to bring out in relief" the doctor's character, in other words in the fact that he did not significantly deviate from the course defined by the author and did not feel at liberty to make personal contributions to the character's profile. The actor presented both the positive and the negative traits of the character – an ambiguous remark which does not say anything, in fact, about the particularities of acting. A lot more precisely expressed is the recommendation that Septimiu Sever get rid of his professional tics, of certain "gratuitous gestures" which affect the accuracy of the representation. We could interpret this indication as honest criticism of the tendency shown by some actors for automatism when working on diverse roles; however, we also feel entitled to suspect, given the circumstances, that the actor allowed himself a kind of "poetic licence" whose impromptu character disturbed the reviewer.

In spite of all this, in the latter '40s, when the new political context still appeared dim/vague and indefinite, occasional exceptions occurred when criticism was not completely devoid of critical substance. However, even in these rare cases the texts would inevitably resort to the directives of the Party, as if to a compulsory footnote, keeping at the same time a subtle aesthetic distance. Such is the case of an article on a musical published in 1949, signed by a very young Valentin Silvestru:

20. Aurel Baranga, "Lucia Demetrius"

21. "În rolul doctorului Murgu, Septimiu Sever a izbutit o frumoasă creație, înfățișând un caracter complex și luminos. Actorul a știut să scoată în evidență cu mijloace simple dar cu atât mai prețioase, frământările personajului, procesul lui de creștere, să sublinieze fără ostentație și deci cu atât mai convingător, laturile pozitive ale omului întruchipat, ceea ce este bun în el și are șansă să se desvolte, după cum nu a neglijat nici prezentarea laturilor negative ale personajului. Septimiu Sever își va desăvârși creația sa din „Oameni de azi” dacă va ști să renunțe la unele gesturi nefirești sau gratuite, la anumite șabloane pe care actorul le folosește și care îl împiedică să scoată pe deplin în relief specificul individual al doctorului Murgu.”

This time, the musical has a clear plot which is consistently seen through to the end and almost everything that goes on on the stage is centred around it. The acts are well related to one another and thus increase the interest of the audience as the plot unfolds.^{22,23}

This time, the reviewer seems to have overcome his evaluative shyness and dared to focus, analytically, on certain aspects relevant to the performing nature of the show. Inevitably, the political aspect is approached again immediately, conscientiously, if concisely:

This is the more important as it does not refer to some ordinary action. "The step forward" mainly refers to the fact that the plot illustrates an event in a factory. Based on this dramatic plot, the authors raise certain interesting topical political issues, such as the nation problem, validly conveyed with artistry and in the spirit of the important newly issued resolution of the Political Office of the Central Committee of the Romanian Workers' Party.^{24,25}

After this obligatory remark, the author resumes the proper analysis, he, too, insisting on the fidelity to text issue, even though in this particular case the arguments seem more complex and better related to stage management:

Furthermore, it is worth noting that, even though the plot is well defined, unjustified/superfluous scenes also appear, such as "Summer Goes, Autumn Comes", scenes that seem to have a loose connection to the rest of the plot. This appears to be an old bad habit which

22. Valentin Silvestru, "O revistă nouă și un pas înainte, sau spectacolul 'Stroe știe și le spune' de la Teatrul Savoy (A new revue and a step forward, or the show "Stroe knows and tells" from Savoy Theatre)," *Flacăra*, January 9 1949.

23. "De data aceasta, revista are o acțiune lămurită, urmărită consecvent până la sfârșit, mai tot ceea ce se petrece în perimetrul scenic axându-se pe subiectul propus. Tablourile legându-se unele de altele fac să crească interesul spectatorului pe măsură ce se desfășoară acțiunea."

24. Valentin Silvestru, "O revistă nouă".

25. "Lucrul e cu atât mai important, cu cât nu e vorba de o acțiune oarecare. „Pasul înainte” se referă în special la faptul că acțiunea e reprezentată de o întâmplare dintr-o fabrică. Pe această bază de intrigă dramatică, autorii pun o sumă de probleme politice interesante și la ordinea zilei, cum ar fi de pildă chestiunea națională, expusă artisticeste valabil și în spiritul aceluși important document apărut de curând, care este rezoluția Biroului Politic al Comitetului Central al P.M.R."

the management of the show were unable to get rid of: creating roles, scenes, tableaux not just for the sake of a certain meaning, but also for certain persons who should be employed at any cost; it is desirable that in the future the people who decide to embark upon such projects should focus primarily on the text [...] Responsible for such weaknesses is also N. Stroe – in his capacity as a director. Stage management should cooperate with the authors in order to clarify the issues of the show [...] ^{26,27}

The review continues by presenting some aspects regarding the nature of the performing arts, in particular of the theatrical performance:

Although acting vivaciously, Didi Ionescu did not show anything more than a certain manner of presentation which he probably thinks original; the same thing happened to other old actresses of the musical ensemble who cannot be said to lack talent. Still, remaining the prisoner of a certain manner of acting is not desirable [...] The show enjoyed the scenery signed by Liviu Ciulley and this was one of the rare occasions when we could enjoy a musical adequately served by well structured, well designed and suitably colourful scenery. Elly Roman's music, even though not very present, showed some new accents for new situations in a musical. ^{28,29}

26. Valentin Silvestru, "O revistă nouă".

27. "E de observat deasemeni că deși există o acțiune precizată, apar și scene nejustificate cum ar fi de pildă „Trece vara, trece toamna”, fără nicio angrenare în complexul general de fapte. Se distinge aci un obicei mai vechi, pe care probabil că nici conducerea acestui spectacol n-a reușit să-l depășească: acela de a crea roluri, scene, tablouri, nu numai pentru un anumit sens, ci și pentru persoane, care trebuiesc întrebuințate cu orice preț și ar fi de dorit ca pe viitor, cei ce vor mai porni la o asemenea treabă să își pună în mod deosebit înainte problemele textului [...] De astfel de slăbiciuni răspunde desigur și N. Stroe – în calitate de regisor. Direcția de scenă trebuie să colaboreze cu autorii la limpezirea spectacolului [...]"

28. Valentin Silvestru, "O revistă nouă".

29. "Deși jucând cu nerv, Didi Ionescu n-a adus nimic peste o manieră de prezentare pe care și-o socoate originală și aceasta s-a întâmplat și cu alte vechi actrițe ale ansamblului de revistă, nu lipsite de altfel de calități. Dar rămânerea într-o anumită manieră de joc nu e recomandabilă [...] Spectacolul s-a desfășurat în decorul lui Liviu Ciulley și e una din rarele împrejurări când am avut posibilitatea să vedem un spectacol de revistă servit adecvat de decoruri bine construite, gândite just, colorate după necesitățile reale ale acțiunii. Mai redusă cantitativ, muzica lui Elly Roman a găsit și unele accente noi pentru situații noi într-un spectacol de revistă."

Interesting enough, at the bottom of the same page, enclosed/surrounded by Silvestru's review, we can find an article by scenographer M. Rubingher on the adaptation of scenography to the specificity of the theatrical performance in which, among short philippics against the bourgeois who had manipulated and deformed history, we can also find decent remarks, such as: "[...] the scenic painter can no longer be a mere illustrator without personality [...]" "[...] he needs to become an active collaborator with the author and the director in defining the graphical space which should be closely linked to the structure of the performance [...]" "[...] the scenic painter needs to have good knowledge of the milieu of the age when the plot unfolds [...]"³⁰ and so on.

Consequently, the interest in the structure of the theatrical performance, in the technical aspects that define the specificity of the theatrical art, and in the aesthetic particularities of each staging still existed, if rather latent; it became more and more feeble and it almost disappeared in 1953 when the political context changed on Stalin's death (although the Romanian echoes were even then rather weak, especially in the cultural sector). Most of the reviews in the Stalinist age closely followed the compatibility of the text with the socialist requirements and then the compatibility of the performance with the text.

For example, in 1950, in *Scânteia*, a newspaper which was supposed to set the ideological tone for the Romanian space, an ample review appeared of the Army Theatre's production "The Last Message". The article was three columns long and the only remark related to the performance as such was the following:

The staging of the play "The Last Message" is a process that the Army Theatre can be proud of. Comrade Perahim's scenery and comrade M. Raicu's stage management contributed to increasing the artistic value of the performance. Substantial merit in staging the play goes to comrade Al. Finți, director of the Army Theatre, who played an active role in setting up and refining the performance.^{31,32}

Frequently, the staging of new texts was received with a solemnity that seems hilarious today; it looked as if the critical approach were, in its essence, of a parodical nature. Only by becoming familiar with the political context of the

30. M. Rubingher, "Aportul plastic în spectacol (The fine arts in theatre)," *Flacăra*, January 9 1949.

31. Zamfir Brumaru, "Ultimul mesaj (Last message)," *Scânteia*, May 7 1950.

32. "Montarea piesei „Ultimul mesaj” este un proces care face cinste Teatrului Armatei. Decorurile tov. Perahim și direcția de scenă a tov. M. Raicu au contribuit la ridicarea valorii artistice a spectacolului. Un mare merit în montarea piesei îl are tov. Al. Finți, directorul Teatrului Armatei, care a avut un rol activ în elaborarea și punerea la punct a spectacolului."

age can today's reader understand the axiological blockage which the journalists of the early '50s had to face. Confronted with a monstrous mechanism producing works that lacked originality, it is not surprising that they would cling on to certain commonplaces, previously tested and approved. In general, theatrical production was criticized for the shallowness of the plot or of the characters; the insufficiently harsh exposure of the people's enemies; the use of humour in delineating the negative characters which could result in the audience's slight empathy for them; the liberty that the stage managers sometimes took in relation to the text, etc. Obsessively denounced were caricature, grotesque humour, reality schematization and, certainly, the lack of plot unity. Furthermore, any deviation from the aesthetics of socialist realism was criticized. Mixing styles was forbidden whereas simplicity and clarity enjoyed unanimous appreciation. Ultimately, the new theatrical forms tried to attract a rather unrefined audience, with minimal aesthetic experience. In addition, metaphors and symbols had an intolerable allusive potential. The following examples illustrate this state of affairs:

The main issue of dramatization, namely the conflict, has been solved here with mastery. However, the author did not succeed in presenting the conflict with the same vigour throughout the plot. The unity of the conflict is often disrupted by the attempt to present the multiple aspects of reality as separate snapshots.^{33,34}

Or, a fragment from an older text, dating back before 1948, which criticizes the lack of aesthetic unity (showing the beginning of the obsession with aesthetic and ideological purity):

Likewise, certain tendencies towards symbolism and vague philosophical rambling, which appear awkward in folk clothing, [...] deprive the play of simplicity. And besides the lyricism of the dialogue and an imagistic and verbal excess, this blend between the author's voice and the voice of folklore gives rise to confusion.

33. Margareta Bărbuță, "Trei generații de luptători (Three generations of fighters)," *Contemporanul*, May 15 1953.

34. "Problema de bază a dramatizării, aceea a conflictului, este rezolvată aici cu măiestrie. Dar autoarea n-a reușit să prezinte în tot timpul acțiunii cu aceiași vigoare acest conflict. Unitatea conflictului este adesea fărâmițată din pricina tendinței de a prezenta multiplele aspecte ale realității în instantanee disparate."

[...] Mr Şahighian's stage management showed a number of flaws, foremostly a shortcoming that is, unfortunately, quite frequent in our theatre: mixed theatrical styles. A generally realistic interpretation is at times disrupted by expressionist moments [...].^{35,36}

Additionally, as we have already mentioned previously, the acting performances were generally evaluated in direct relation to the features of the character, according to the prescribed formula "X succeeded/failed in highlighting..."

To a certain extent, Elvira Godeanu's interpretation illustrated the anxiety of the character but the development of the process was not conveyed convincingly enough. [...] The embassy counselor was played by Ion Iancovescu whose interpretation was filled with cynicism and rapacity. However, the complex nature of the character was not sufficiently explored. The actor failed to highlight the fact that the American diplomat is the exponent of monopolist trusts and unscrupulously pursues their goals. [...] N. Băltăţeanu found the right ways to give dramatic expression to the manifold nature of the character and managed to bring out to relief the accents of human sincerity from beyond its cynicism and decrepitude.^{37,38}

35. Silvian Iosifescu, "Un debut: 'Omul din Cetal' dramă în 3 acte (10 tablouri) de Mihail Davidoglu," *Contemporanul*, 1946.

36. "Deasemeni anumite tendinţe spre simbol şi spre filosofarea vagă, ce par stingherite în haina folkloristică pe care o îmbracă [...] răpesc piesei din simplitate. Şi în afară de liricizarea dialogului şi de un exces imagistic şi verbal, acest amestec între glasul autorului şi glasurile folclorului naşte confuzii. [...] Direcţiei de scenă a d-lui Şahighian i se pot imputa mai multe lucruri şi în primul rând o lipsă, din păcate frecventă în teatrul nostru: amestecuri de stiluri. O interpretare în general realistă este brăzdată pe alocuri de momente expresioniste [...]."

37. Simion Alterescu, "'Casa cu stururile trase' de fraţii Tur," *Contemporanul*, January 19 1951.

38. "În interpretarea Elvirei Godeanu a existat într-o măsură oarecare, frământarea care caracterizează personagiul, dar dezvoltarea acestui proces nu a fost redată cu destulă forţă de convingere. [...] Consilierul ambasadei este interpretat de Ion Iancovescu, care i-a dat o interpretare plină de cinism şi rapacitate. Dar caracterul complex al acestui personaj nu a fost destul adâncit. Astfel interpretul nu a reuşit să scoată în relief cum tipul diplomatului american este exponentul trusturilor monopoliste şi urmăreşte fără scrupule înfăptuirea scopurilor acestora. [...] N. Băltăţeanu a găsit forme juste de expresie scenică pentru multilateralitatea personajului, reuşind să scoată la suprafaţă, de sub cinismul şi decrepitudinea acestuia, accentele de umană sinceritate."

The educational role of the theatre was frequently underlined and the idea arose that entertainment with no propagandistic deep meaning was nothing else than a prolongation of the bourgeois values which, certainly, needed to be eradicated. Humour, in particular, required careful control:

Our audience enjoys laughing, certainly, but their laughs need to be a sharp weapon aimed at the representatives of the oppressing class, at the remains of the past, and not a narcotic meant to lull class vigilance as was the case with the bourgeois theatre. If our actors fail to consolidate sufficiently the educational and political role that they have to play in our popular democratic regime, it is possible that some of them return to the ways of the bourgeois theatre.^{39,40}

The above fragment comes from an inquiry undertaken by Margareta Bărbuță on behalf of *Contemporanul* to identify those performances of the 1949-1950 theatrical season which, since the premiere date, had somehow altered their content. The document is extremely relevant to understanding the aesthetic and extra-aesthetic requirements of the theatre critics. The author's main motivation is expressed in unequivocal terms:

The public who comes to watch a performance months after its premiere has the same right to know the truth in the same theatrical expression as the public who watched the performance on the first nights. The actors have no right to distort the content of the play or the characters they play for the sake of a laugh. Self-importance is an evil bequeathed by the bourgeois theatre [...]^{41,42}

39. Margareta Bărbuță, "Schimbarea la față a unor spectacole (The transfiguration of some performances)," *Contemporanul*, March 17 1950.

40. "Publicului nostru îi place desigur să râdă, dar râsul său trebuie să fie o armă ascuțită împotriva reprezentanților clasei exploatoare, împotriva rămășițelor trecutului, nu un narcotic menit să-i adoarmă vigilența de clasă, așa cum fusese în teatrul burghez. Neadâncirea suficientă a rolului educativ-politic pe care ei trebuie să-l îndeplinească în regimul nostru de democrație populară, are drept rezultat o revenire a unora dintre actorii noștri la procedeele teatrului burghez."

41. Margareta Bărbuță, "Schimbarea la față".

42. "Publicul care vine să vadă un spectacol la câteva luni după premieră are același drept să cunoască adevărul în imagini scenice cași publicul din primele seri. Actorii nu au dreptul să denatureze conținutul piesei, al personajilor interpretate, numai de dragul unui hohot de râs. Vedetismul este o racilă pe care a lăsat-o teatrul burghez [...]"

The sin of the actors and directors, implicitly, was that of having inserted jokes in the performances, somehow distorting the ethics of the dramatic texts. The objections were expressed in the following manner:

Marcel Anghelescu prolongs the scene in which he reads the article in "The Voice of the National Patriot" and exaggerates the humoristic effects by exhausting every word to such an extent that the article, meant to expose the demagogy and fake patriotism of the bourgeois press of the time, is left devoid of content; Niki Atanasiu (Chiriac) spits on his hands and dusts Master Dumitrache's coat, repeating the gesture to satiation. Throughout the play there is a shrill affectation of the characters' gossipy nature, a waste of gestures that divert the attention of the audience from the real meaning of the play.^{43,44}

This, of course, is merely a sample of the censorial role critics had to undertake in order to survive professionally. Some of them played it brilliantly, maybe even with an ounce of conviction. Interestingly enough, an extensive dossier followed the above-mentioned article, with contributions from personalities like Sică Alexandrescu, J. Cazaban, Al. Finți, Aurel Baranga, Sorana Coroamă, Moni Ghelerter and so on, all of them actors, directors or playwrights. The consensus seemed to be that the actors have the obligation to do everything in their power in order to avoid improvising and, thus, betraying the text.

Therefore, we might conclude that the first years of communism in Romania were not only profoundly traumatic, but also game-changing when it comes to the theatrical field. Critics and reviewers had to abide by new rules, some of them so draconian that they managed to alter critical thinking itself, with long-term repercussions in our culture.

43. Margareta Bărbuță, "Schimbarea la față".

44. "Marcel Anghelescu prelungeste scena lecturii articolului din „Vocea patriotului național”, exagerând atât de mult efectele comice, trăgând de fiecare cuvânt, încât goleşte de conținut acest articol, menit să desvăluie demagogia sforăitoare și falsul patriotism al presei burgheze a timpului; Niki Atanasiu (Chiriac) scuipă în palme și scutură de praf surtucul lui jupân Dumitrache, repetând gestul până la saturație. În toată piesa, o afectare stridentă a mahalagismului personajilor, o risipă de gesturi care au darul de a îndepărta atenția publicului de la conținutul de idei al operei.”

References

- Anonymous. "Să lichidăm rămânerea în urmă a dramaturgiei." *Contemporanul*, April 11 1952.
- Alterescu, Simion. "'Casa cu storurile trase' de frații Tur." *Contemporanul*, January 19 1951.
- Baranga, Aurel. "Lucia Demetrius: 'Oameni de azi'." *Contemporanul*, October 3 1952.
- Bărbuță, Margareta. "Schimbarea la față a unor spectacole." *Contemporanul*, March 17 1950.
- Bărbuță, Margareta. "Trei generații de luptători." *Contemporanul*, May 15 1953.
- Brumaru, Zamfir. "Ultimul mesagiu." *Scânteia*, May 7 1950.
- Demetrius, Lucia. "Unele probleme ale creației noastre dramatice." *Contemporanul*, June 20 1952.
- Iosifescu, Silvian. "Un debut: 'Omul din Cetal' dramă în 3 acte (10 tablouri) de Mihail Davidoglu." *Contemporanul*, 1946.
- Jdanov, Andrei. "Însemnări cu privire la critica teatrală." *Contemporanul*, July 11 1952.
- Mitchievici, Angelo and Ioan Stanomir. *Comunism inc. Istorii despre o lume care a fost*. Bucharest, Humanitas: 2017.
- Rubingher, M. "Aportul plastic în spectacol." *Flacăra*, January 9 1949.
- Silvestru, Valentin. "O revistă nouă și un pas înainte, sau spectacolul 'Stroe știe și le spune' de la Teatrul Savoy." *Flacăra*, January 9 1949.
- Tismăneanu, Vladimir and Cristian Vasile. *Perfectul Acrobat. Leonte Răutu, măștile răului*. Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008.
- Țugui, P. and S. Damian. "Despre unele probleme ale dramaturgiei noastre." *Contemporanul*, September 12 1952.

Alexandra-Emma Pedestru is a PhD student at the Theatre and Film Doctoral School of Babeș-Bolyai University, with a thesis about Romanian theatre criticism during the communist regime. She has a master's degree in Film and Performative Arts from the Theatre and Television Faculty in Cluj, and in 2014 she graduated from Theatre Studies at the same institution.