

Bringing the Romanian Theatre to American Universities: The Plays of Mona Chirilă at Arizona State University

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Abstract: When talking about Romanian theatre staged abroad, in the United States and especially in Phoenix, Arizona, it is impossible not to mention the extremely talented director Mona Marian (Chirilă). She started her theatrical journey at Arizona State University in the Romanian Studies program at the Department of Languages, due to her encounter with prof. Ileana Orlich, after a performance at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca in 2000, where a beautiful friendship started. An important number of poetical and most creative performances toured to the United States, where the Romanian diaspora audience and the American student audience could participate to these unforgettable shows.

Keywords: Mona Marian (Chirilă), Romanian theatre in Arizona USA, National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, puppet theatre.



*Life must be lived as a play, playing certain
games,
making sacrifices, singing and dancing, and
then a man
will be able ... to defend himself against his
enemies, and
win the contest.*

Johan Huizinga

Mona Marian (1961-2013)

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In the quote above, the word *man* needs to be read in Mona's name as she lived her short life playing literally, in the world and on stage, while defending herself against adversity: first through her art as a theatre director, then as a beloved teacher and friend, and finally as a winner². Today she is remembered, and still loved, by those whose lives she touched in so many ways. Of those ways, I will address in this homage the manner in which Mona changed my life and my professional career during the time span of almost two decades and within a space that brought into focus her beloved Cluj and my hometown of Phoenix, Arizona.

In this interplay of time and space, I will begin with a significant moment in my past – the year 1998, when I was asked to start a Romanian language program at my home academic institution, the Arizona State University. As the newest addition to the Department of Languages, the

² Stage Director at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre and professor at the Faculty of Theatre and Television, Babeş-Bolyai University Cluj, Manager of "PUCK" Puppet Theatre of Cluj, **Mona Marian (Chirilă)**, was born on 17 August 1961. She graduated from the "I. L. Caragiale" Theatre and Cinema Institute in Bucharest in 1987, the class of Cătălina Buzoianu.

Ever since she was a student, she had a passion for challenging productions, from *Matca* by Marin Sorescu, to *The feather dress*, a Nō Japanese drama and to the productions for children, each one of them an artistic wonder. She participated in a workshop conducted by Peter Brook and his collaborators from Bouffes du Nord Theatre in Paris, a meeting which placed her among the few blessed ones who had the chance to study the game of the subtle energies of the human body.

She directed more than 40 productions, 25 of them in puppet theatres. She started her career as director at Constanța Puppet Theatre, and those productions were highly praised by the critics and awarded numerous national prizes.

Her passion for Commedia dell'arte was used not only in the productions she directed but also in her PhD thesis.

Since 1996, she directed at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre, The Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, The Dramatic Theatre in Constanța, Târgu-Mureș National Theatre and Oradea State Theatre, parallel to directing puppet theatre productions. The list of her important productions at Cluj-Napoca National Theatre started with *The Queen Mother* by Manlio Santanelli, *The Overcoat*, script by Mona Marian based on Gogol's novel and his *Death Souls* and Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*; *Ubucurești*, based on I.L. Caragiale and A. Jarry; *Servant of Two Masters* by Goldoni (her longest lasting production); *Travesties* by Tom Stoppard; *How to explain the history of communism to the mental patients* by Matei Vișniec; *The Inspector General* by N.V. Gogol; *Zenobia* based on Gellu Naum and *Carnival* by I.L. Caragiale and others. She left this world on September 16th, 2013.

Romanian Studies program initiated in 1998 did not seem destined to achieve great academic visibility beyond its immediate reach. Towering language programs, such as those in Spanish, French, Italian, or Chinese were better funded and associated with a tradition of cultural immersion familiar to Humanities students. Nothing could predict the rise and growth of the small Romanian language program connected to the Babes-Bolyai University through a summer program that advanced primarily history, a mythology of vampires, and the socio-political examination of a country that had been a part of the now defunct Soviet bloc.

A random invitation, initiated as a surprise event within a heavy schedule of language and culture courses, took the summer program students to the “Lucian Blaga” National Theatre of Cluj-Napoca for a performance of the Romanian Avant-garde titled somewhat cryptically as *MEMO*³. We did not know what to expect within the confines of a small and dark acting studio, surrounded by a mostly young crowd of spectators. Then the music began and two actors engaged in a most enticing performance complete with seductive body language, nostalgic music, and unsettling dialogue. Slowly, the magical stage performance, made up of a mix of romantic and provocative appeal enhanced by the lyrics, proposed an interplay of the emotional components of human behavior that drew in the students.

At the end of the performance, we were invited to a reception to meet not only the two principal actors, Miriam Cuibus and Dragoș Pop, but also the play’s director, Mona Chirilă. She appeared to us as a most extraordinary personage, fluent in a sort of English that enchanted through an unusual pitch, an almost acrobatic movement of bejeweled hands, and an overall charming warmth. We found ourselves enticed in the presence of a powerful person, whose strength was gently clothed in the dark velvet of her eyes and the sound of her voice.

By the time our summer program ended, we became Mona’s friends and held out the hope that she would visit us in Arizona, bringing along the fascinating *MEMO* play. In the following year, she came to the Arizona State University and we could thus share with our American friends and colleagues the beauty of the performance and its culturally rich context.

³ <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-440/memo/>



Fig. 1: Miriam Cuiibus and Dragoş Pop in *Memo*, a production of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca⁴

Before long, many students from the Arizona State University wanted to sign up for our program that began to show growth and visibility beyond a language program; indeed, the students' and faculty interest reached deep into Romanian culture and its wealth of contributions to world literature and theatre: Tristan Tzara and the Romanian the Avant-garde, Eugene Ionesco, and the period between the two great wars, all of which became attractive topics for our courses and cultural offerings.

Mona's first trip to Arizona State University in 2001 with *MEMO* also marked the beginning a long series of annual visits that highlighted the Romanian theatre and its trove of dramatic repertoire. Her plays engaged us in an amazing stage odyssey that Mona made possible through her impressive

⁴ All hereby presented photographs are taken by Nicu Cherciu.

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talent, professional dedication, first-class elegance, and unmatched directing style that incorporated a great variety of dramatic material. Plays of great playwrights, from Mikhail Bulgakov to Matei Visniec and Gellu Naum, deployed in Mona's stagings a comparative cultural perspective on the political, social, ethical and aesthetic problems tackled in contemporary West- and East-European and Russian drama.

More importantly, by exploring the collective biography of modern Europe – a multicultural, ethnically and nationally diverse space *par excellence* – Mona's stagings explored the intertextual web of references that connects plays, lodging the cultural decipherment and interpretative approaches to the dramatic corpus under analysis from a trans-disciplinary perspective. Her stage adaptations provided a synoptic model of dramatic conflict and resolution patterns and a global perspective that stressed inter-cultural understanding through theatre and theatrical performance.



Fig. 2, 3: Miriam Cuibus and Dragoş Pop in *Memo*

In this context, *MEMO* became the object of international interest. The outstanding acting troupe from Theatre Denis in Hyere, France, tapped into the bicultural textual possibilities and its body-oriented movements to stage this play both in France and in the United States. In Mona's sophisticated staging and benefitting from an inspired, colorful design of costumes, this rendition of the Romanian Avant-garde brought great international acclaim as the two characters interact on different levels or, in a sense, as two halves of a single, sexually challenging and undependable self. Exploring what Joyce famously called "the detritus that constitutes modern consciousness," this stage version of the selections from the Romanian Avant-garde brought into performance by the French actors triggered an awareness of key cultural, political, social, and aesthetic stereotypes and critical issues that are highly relevant in today's trans-national and trans-cultural societies.



Fig. 4: *Travesties (Travestiuri)*, a production of the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, 2006

Beyond these theatrical productions, Mona inspired a sense of cultural engagement that redirected my research toward the Romanian Avant-garde within a comparative context. As a follow up on a performance of Tom Stoppard's *Travesties*⁵ that I had seen in the UK during a visit at Oxford, I translated the play into Romanian and offered it to Mona for what I knew was going to be an unforgettable staging. With Miriam Cuibus, her collaborator in and principal actor of *MEMO*, Mona captured in *Travesties* the various techniques by which Stoppard dramatizes the continuous operations of subterranean thought – what Lionel Trilling in a different context called “a poetry-making organ” – that underscored Tzara’s Dadaism⁶.



Fig. 5: Cornel Răileanu, Maria Munteanu, Cătălin Herlo and Cătălin Codreanu with archaic Romanian masks, Dragoș Pop, in *Travesties*, 2006

⁵ Tom Stoppard, *Teatru: Travestiuri*, translated by Ileana Alexandra Orlich, (Bucharest: Unitext Publishing House, 2004).

⁶ <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-392/travestiuri/>

With her inimitable combination of melancholic verve and tragic cheer, Mona brought to her rendition of *Travesties* an ingenious presentation of the characters that redefined performance, time, and space while retaining the purity of the main characters' unconscious thought process. In the play, Lenin, Joyce, and the ingenious Tzara bring to the fore an enactment of the transition process, of how reality, dream, and history can recreate and reenergize one another on stage. Paraphrasing Stoppard's use of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* used as a palimpsest to *Travesties*, Mona's staging of *Travesties* can be seen as *The Importance of Being Tzara*, before Breton and Surrealism, before Lenin and his Bolshevik theories of class struggle, and before Joyce's anxious exposure of hypocrisy in language and society.



Fig. 6: The poster of the performance *Travesties (Travestiuri)*



Fig. 7: Eva Crișan and Dragoș Pop in *How to explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*

Conveying the same sense that the theater offers a unique mode of cultural engagement, this time with politics within a society, Mona's adaptation of Matei Visniec's play *How to explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*⁷ proposed to show how dramatists examine their societies and politics through the prism of theatrical performance by using the lenses of established literary or philosophical models from Marxism (in its Stalinist pose) to Existentialism (with Sartre's *No Exit* as a backdrop *avant la lettre* to Communism). In Mona's ingenious adaptation, this play offered a case study in theater construction, by transforming, editing, and reshuffling the political agenda of Central and Eastern Europe under Stalinism to identify through theatrical performance the conspiratorial, conniving, and scheming politics of the totalitarian communist era. Mona's directorial lens underscored the denunciation of Communism and its aberrant politics by seeking the representation of politics on contemporary stages. The play's pulse, complete with music that underscores the characters' acts of empathy and kindness in an otherwise forbidding mental asylum, brought to the stage Mona's rich imagination, that makes full use of Visniec's use of heavy irony and dense political metaphors, aiming to imply that after the Fall of the Berlin Wall becoming European means no longer being Communist.

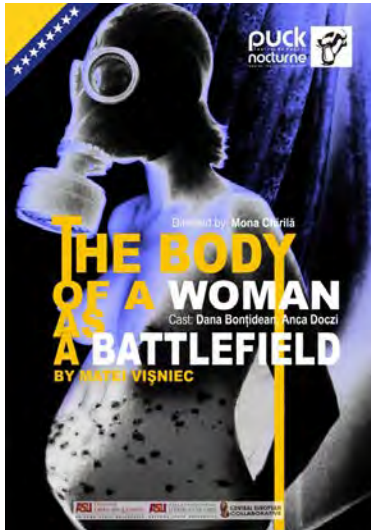
Another adaptation of Visniec, *The Body of Woman as Battlefield in the Bosnian War*, a play that articulates and analyzes collective anxieties and national politics that are missing from the more visible texts and official political discourses, could have been a mere automatic by-product of being a stage director in a politically tormented European space. However, Mona's staging of this play in Phoenix, Arizona proved to be another successful performance bearing her trademark: intellectually challenging, inventive, experimental, and porous in its engagement with traditional models of the classical repertoire and the Western canon. In the outstanding interpretation of Anca Doszi and Dana Bontidean, the play explored a critical understanding of the philosophical-moral attitude of respect for otherness and cultural diversity that underlies the aesthetic – literary and theatrical – dimensions of this staging that guides the audience to political analysis and self-decipherment.

⁷ <http://www.teatrulnationalcluj.ro/en/production-508/how-to-explain-the-history-of-communism-to-mental-patients/>

One step beyond this dramatic assessment there is a world devoid of belief systems, where the mind and heart cry out for validation and the assurance that life has meaning and life has purpose. Such a play is Matei Visniec's *Old Clown Wanted*, another great directorial accomplishment that Mona brought to the Arizona State University. As time passes and one ages, the three clowns on stage hold unto goals and belief systems as if they were still to be met, with Mona directing the three aging men's need for a moral and spiritual anchor: a new job as a clown. Her superb achievement as a director, beyond the masterful performance of the three actors, surprised with emotional intensity the emptiness of their meaningless actions, the fragmented communication, and the unfathomable sense of despair that accompanied their continuous compulsion toward purposeful activity as the only anchor left in the disjuncture between their thoughts and actions. In the reality of the stage Mona captured with infinite tenderness, the clowns tumble and struggle amongst themselves in temporarily purposeful engagement defined by a disarming courage. Their anxiety and mutual intimidations, that replace their boredom and despair, generate a similarly disheartening future that underscores their lack of a coherent sense of self or direction other than the one prefiguring an impending death without a legacy.

Mona's masterful scenic command of the clowns' useless act or of political experiments that generate despair is certainly not a defining dimension of her directorial talent. She could, in fact, bring life and diversity to the stage through puppetry and the enticing world of the children's stories, as in the case of her beautifully rendered version of *Punguța cu doi bani* (*Little Purse with Two Pennies*) tale written by the Romanian writer Ion Creangă. To the delight of the Romanian diaspora of Phoenix, Arizona, Mona brought this puppet show to the Valley of the Sun and turned it into a great creative task that registered an immediate success with the children and their parents. There was no sign of the existential dimensions of human life in its conflicted interactions as an assorted audience reminisced about childhood and its enchanted days, about the tales of the unkind and greedy *boieri* (noblemen), the rooster's tirades in a chant that echoed the familiar obligatory ritual, and divine justice served in the most extraordinary ways.

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Fig. 8, 9: Posters of two performances directed by Mona Marian presented at ASU

There was also the more elevated type of story like Gellu Naum's famed *Book of Apolodor*, another stage success that Mona brought to the Phoenix Children's Theatre. The audience clapped and sang alongside the traveling Apolodor, who covered lengthy territory, to the North Pole and back, to satisfy his yearnings. Long after Mona and her puppets left Phoenix folks here still asked about her, about the marvelous performance that brought wonder in the lives of their children, filling them with high pitched emotion and artistic yearning.

How does one forget such theatrical events? How does one forget the fascinating Mona, her cultivated talent, and her infinite dedication to the theatre world? Her stage plays incorporated a created universe occasionally stripped of its prescribed functions and filled with piercing music, yet gratifying to one's intellectual curiosity and aesthetic need. In retrospect, the riddle of her creation alone seems to have been the only constant of a world that Mona brought to the stage, and then into our lives.

She is as dearly missed today as she was in the first days of her long goodbye and final departure to a better world where she enchanted the angels by calling them "păpușă."

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