

*The Rhetorical and Stylistic Evolution of
Theatre Reviews at the End of the 50s.
The Disobedient – Case Study*

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Abstract: This paper aims at analysing the way in which the structure and stylistics of theatre review influenced the evolution of critical thinking during the short thaw that took place in all Socialist countries after Nikita Khrushchev's February 1956 speech in which the Soviet leader exposed the crimes of Stalin's rule. We therefore analysed the reviews and essays of some of the most dynamic and most professional young critics who published in the *Teatrul* Journal: I. D. Sîrbu, Şt. Aug. Doinaş, Ecaterina Oproiu and Florian Potra. Symptomatically, all the four critics subsequently moved away from this profession, for dramatic reasons related to the political circumstances, and during the following decade, they became famous writers of poetry, literary criticism, dramaturgy or film criticism.

Keywords: Theatre History; Theatre Criticism; Cultural Policies; Arts in Communist Romania

It is extremely difficult to trace - at least for the period under study in this paper - the evolutionary line of Romanian theatre criticism discourse, from the point of view of structures and stylistics, whether dominant or particular. Of course, one could first ask oneself why such an evolution would be "presumable", but it's easy to find an answer to such a presumptuous question: as long as the theatre world, in its entirety, evolved, despite the surges

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caused by the re-freeze that took place between 1958 and 1960, we should assume that criticism evolution was proportional. However, an overview on the landscape of theatre criticism, despite its great richness in the decade under discussion, does not show many signs confirming this hypothesis. Or, to be more explicit, after the short moment between 1956-1957, in spite of an evident professionalization, both discourse structures, as represented through the journalistic genres used, as well as the rhetoric and stylistics of the texts as such, go into a quite long "conservation" process, drawing some net limitations, that were certainly very carefully watched by the censoring ideological bodies. That is why, on one hand, even when talking about talented critics who had real analytical potential, or at least good intentions in reflecting the local theatre environment, their discourses always appear to strictly follow the genre's specific and rigid structures; and, on the other hand, their content and axiology are in line with the vision rigours dictated by the party. Therefore, the mapping we shall propose is based on nuances and tones rather than on the real volumetry of a rhetorical analysis in a broad sense.

In the case of the years 1956-1964, when talking about rhetoric, three constant features stand out: first of all, a certain sobriety of discourse constructions which, without referring to academic stylistics and its rigours (rich references in footnotes, Aristotelian logical argumentation, conclusive synthesis, etc.) in an intentional and assumed manner, still keep a certain protocolary, "objectifying" distance in relation to the reader. This is, of course, a particularity directly related to the general-cultural perspective of the time over the formative attributions of criticism, *ex cathedra*, over "the masses of beneficiaries", even in a niche area such as theatre journalism. This is the reason why some critics' small escapes during the thaw and after 1960 seem, as we will see, so unusual compared to this stiff tone. I would even go as far as to say that this is also why, overall, Valentin Silvestru's ironic-comical tablettes, or some of Horia Deleanu's editorial opening statements of the review section sound like relatively jarring attempts to freshen a barracks-style journalism, which is rusty decorated with caricatures and at times with bulletin board-like drawings.

The second constant characteristic, in relative terms, stems from the tribute the authors must pay, willingly or not, to the interpretative rigours related to socialist realism. From this viewpoint, especially in longer, synthesis texts, references to the principles of Gorki, of Lunacearski or to Stanislavski's method, in its normative-narrow sense, are abundant until 1961-1962. They concurred by clear references to Lenin in the difficult years 1958-1959; while, from that moment on, references allude to the guidelines on culture issued by Gheorghiu-Dej himself, in party congresses and plenaries. Surely, less complex genres, such as the theatre review, do not have to include as many such references. But this doesn't mean that, especially during the re-freeze years, partisan positioning doesn't cast its shadow over a great part of the review practice (thus, we often find quotes from Lenin, Marx, Engels or even Soviet aestheticians, even in the introduction or in the content of works analysing performances based on plays by Shakespeare, Ibsen or even contemporary authors).

In fact, nowadays it would be invalid (and even ridiculous) to draw up, at least for the interval under analysis, an evaluative list of signatures, based on how often the theatre publicists include in their texts (regardless of their genre) references to and quotes from the party's canonical or occasional texts, or to the soviet works considered to be the ideological foundation of one theory or another, one opinion or another. In the case of "guiding" editorials, "cursives" or synthetic-thematic essays written by officials, these references are an integral part of that work's argumentative corpus. In the case of other genres, especially in that of the review, there are many explanations as to why normative references were employed: besides the fact that they work as marks for the critic's assumed partisanship (which had to be somehow ostentatiously exposed, especially in 1958-1960, as it was insistently requested by the governing bodies), they sometimes establish the perspective on which the argumentation is to be built. In most cases, this point of view is rooted in the dramatic text, in the way in which it was interpreted by the classics of Marxism or by canonical aestheticians, as long as the "Diamat" theatre aesthetics fully focuses on the message of the literary text, while the performance itself is a translation, a more or less "just rendition" of this. Anyway, the classification of critics depending on how often their texts show this "collaborationism",

whether in structure, or circumstance, is in no case a pertinent criterium for their writing as such, nor for the judgments. As long as their positions in the political hierarchy are a sufficiently important factor in this equation, they align to the rhetorical rules of the moment: and these positions are to change in time, proportionally with their own rhetoric, sometimes bringing unexpected surprises.

Finally, the third constant characteristic is the evasion of the stylistic manifestation of their own personality in the critical text, regardless of its genre. Not only that, including in the case of reviews or stories, reports and interviews, the author-critic has no doubts, questions or other personal, more or less emotionally charged feelings, but - excluding small and rare slips (which we will tackle at the right time), even travel journals avoid enthusiasm and subjective notes, with the exception of those in the Soviet space, where laudatory tone is the norm. From this point of view, the typical Romanian critic is, up until 1962, in principle, not just sober (even when allowing themselves some ironies), but also hesitant in making themselves visible in the text: he/she aims at staying impersonal by default.

Actually, I don't think this particularity is only limited to art criticism in Soviet satellite countries: the rule of journalistic discourse staying as objective as possible, tending to make the auctorial ego most transparent probably has to do with a certain ethos of European post-war press writing; and in the case of criticism, it constantly feeds the illusion of a distant authority legitimizing/validating the value judgment – despite the fact that stylistic specificities make the writing of a critic or another recognisable in the eye of consistent readers. In the European Communist East, however, this feature is more evident because of the extreme ideological normativization of the entire cultural environment. “Expressing oneself” in one's inherent subjectivity probably looked like a bourgeoisie flaw and could prove potentially dangerous. Gradually, after 1960, the canonical armour of “impersonality” would dilute in Romania as well, though it won't disappear, at least not in the theatre world (this will result in the major range difference between the types of writings published in the more popular and friendlier journal *Cinema*, and in the restrictive-conservative *Teatrul*, after 1963).

The Disobedient of Re-theatricalization. Case Study

It is necessary to cast a more careful glance, first of all because, during the short thaw in 1956-1957, in parallel to the debate on re-theatricalization², some of the reviews in the *Teatrul* journal achieve perhaps the most applied and most free tone of all the years before 1962, often constituting, as we will see, real models of applied, hermeneutic re-melting of the relation between text and its representation. Let us remember that, for almost two years, I. D. Sîrbu³, Ștefan Aug. Doinaș⁴, Dan Nasta⁵, Ion Negoïțescu⁶ (former members of the „literary circle in Sibiu” and friends of Radu Stanca⁷, one of the top theoreticians of the time), Florian Potra⁸, Ecaterina Oproiu⁹ published reviews in *Teatrul*, and that they were all (more or less openly declared) supporters of re-theatricalization. Thus, Dan Nasta's text about the (now) famous performance by Horea Popescu¹⁰, *Domnișoara Nastasia* (staged at CFR Giulești Workers' Theatre), includes a programmatic fragment that seems straight out of the ethos of the Young Directors' Report (where it probably came from):

We wonder whether a *theatre review* (even a *dramatic one*) could start from the (critical) *description of those elements in the play used by the director to understand it, and based on which he built his show*. Thus, we wouldn't speak of a theatre *play* and then about a theatre *performance*, but without identifying them, we would interfere, imply them based

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2. On this topic, see Miruna Runcan, *Teatralizarea și re-teatralizarea în România. 1920-1960* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2003).
 3. I. D. Sîrbu (1919-1989), Romanian philosopher, novelist, essayist and playwright. He was a victim of the communist regime, spending about 6 years (1957-1963) as a political prisoner.
 4. Ștefan Aug. Doinaș (1922-2002), famous Romanian poet and essayist, member of the Romanian Academy. In 1957-1958, he was a political prisoner, a victim of the communist regime.
 5. Dan Nasta (1919-2015), Romanian actor, theatre director, poet and essayist.
 6. Ion Negoïțescu (1921-1993), Romanian literary critic and historian. He spent three years (1957-1960) as a political prisoner.
 7. Radu Stanca (1920-1962), Romanian poet, playwright, theatre director, theatre critic and theoretician.
 8. Florian Potra (1925-1997), Romanian theatre and film critic, translator.
 9. Ecaterina Oproiu (born 1929), Romanian film and theatre critic, also a famous playwright.
 10. Horea Popescu (1925-2010), Romanian theatre and film director.

on their real life report – which is more organic than comparing the two separately in a theatre review and a performance review, put aside in an unnatural manner and with the risk of them remaining parallel. [As emphasized by the writer]¹¹

The above urge has recognisable effects in many of the reviews dating from the beginning of the journal, which actually confirms a certain kind of underground programme that was not declared in editorial policy texts, but was largely applied by some of its editors. In the case of I.D. Sîrbu, for instance, his natural inclination towards a surgical analysis of the text sometimes intertwines with the description of the performance in direct relation with the effects of the reception: thus, it induces a complex, almost indistinguishable critical texture. In the case of a review about *Boieri și țărani* (*Boyers and Peasants*) by Al. Sever (Pitești Theatre, directed by Constantin Dinischiotu), an epic-like text dedicated to the 1907 Peasants' Revolt, this zooming effect looking at what the spectator perceives also includes theoretical-aesthetical considerations, which makes this cut-out ever more sapid:

The innermost pot of composition contains a confusion: the dramatic premises (of negative heroes) mixed with the comical premises (of positive heroes). The conflict seems to be the result of the meeting between heroes of two different plays, of two different ways of living. This confusion becomes downright painful in the scene captured by the painter Băncilă: a gruesome sky, flames on the horizon, the tragic figures of stone-still peasants waiting, shots fired, wails. At this very moment, a kind of John the Mad shows up, a drunkard and an idiot. The audience is baffled: still under the tragic shock caused by the shots, he suddenly feels the urge to laugh. He is the village drummer, inebriated and a little dumbfounded, and launches himself in a hazy monologue, only so that, when he falls under the bullets (more emotions!), people spontaneously start laughing. The drama is left behind: (...) for – look! – people notice the red nose of the kulak Bordei who, after a series of sly moves, finds nothing better to do than steal the hats and the shoes of the dead.¹²

11. Dan Nasta, "Simple note pentru detectarea poeziei regizorale," *Teatrul*, no. 3 (1957): 28.

12. I. D. Sîrbu, "Teatru epic sau roman teatralizat?," *Teatrul*1, no. 3 (1956): 70.

The irony in the fragment above, subtly slipped under the mask of a scandalized spectator, is by no chance an accident, as the author would exercise it with sufficient obstinance in these apparently more luminous years, though at the end of this period, he would pay for it in a more drastic manner than he imagined¹³.

Most reviews by Ștefan Aug. Doinaș (who sometimes signed with his real name, Ștefan Popa, because the press law forbade the publication of more than two materials in the same number of a journal; in fact, until 1989, the publication's editors used to sign everything above the legitimate number of contributions with initials or pseudonyms) also show that the intentions of the editorial policies were very good, in line with the general revival and professionalization movement proposed by Romanian directors. Paradoxically, in his short period as theatre critic, Doinaș even stood apart from his colleagues in the literary circle, as he probably made the most applied performance analysis; actually, he sometimes visibly reduced the section dedicated to the literary dimension of the play in the benefit of a careful evaluative description of the staging. We can use as an example a review from the first issue of the journal, dedicated to a performance based on *Zorile Parisului* by Tudor Șoimaru and directed by George Dem. Loghin at *Teatrul Tineretului*. The play seems to have been an ambitious one, but failed in its attempt to render the tragedy of the Paris Commune. However, due to mysterious reasons¹⁴, Doinaș's review is published in cursive/italics, as if the editors tried to isolate and propose it as a model for not complying with traditional structures. It starts abruptly, with a provocative intro, whose premises also show its evaluative conclusion.

Could it be true that every play finds the artistic direction it deserves?
Is the interdependence of the two so close that qualities and lapses
have a close parallel determination? (...) The alignment between the

13. I.D. Sîrbu was imprisoned for political reasons for seven years.

14. Considering the theme of this play, I suspect an intervention by Camil Petrescu, the honorific director, rather than an editorial decision by Horia Deleanu, the editor-in-chief. The great playwright and novelist's documentary interest for revolutionary and communal France could somehow support the odd decision to treat a simple review as a sub-editorial, graphically speaking.

text and the artistic vision – that is, the echo of the play’s purely scenic cascade of situations in theatrical effects, the resolving of the series of expository pictures about the Paris Commune into the material elements of the staging; lastly, the character interpretation from the viewpoint of the external movement and the colour intended by the author – are so close that the performance’s strong points and its weaknesses seem to deny each other, accusing one another.¹⁵

Further on, the review becomes a very applied, yet very acid analysis of all the elements of the performance – scenography, lights, music, actors’ interpretation – imperceptibly melting the play’s narrative and conflict into the very corpus of this withering critical operation, focusing on the representation’s stylistic heterogeneity and its vulgarizing superficiality. Only in the final part does the author go back to Şoimaru’s text, tearing down its structure and writing-related errors, and thus closing the circle of the interdependence between a bad text and the sadly corresponding performance. The acidity of the irony and the subversive fineness of comparisons is also noteworthy.

The famous statements of the time, the political mistakes made by Communards are recited brilliantly or monotonously, like a well-rehearsed lesson that fails to infuse the sentences with an authentic feeling. The figures of the main Communards (...) are brought like panels to a meeting and pass before our eyes without fully revealing themselves to us. The articles published in *Le Cri du Peuple* are read quickly, like posters, as romances and revolutionary songs grant just emotions, but block access to the characters’ inner torment. The expression of class hatred remains nothing but mere invective against Thiers. (...) The fundamental mistake of Tudor Şoimaru’s play is therefore the absence of living characters, of representative and thus artistically valid figures.¹⁶

Another structural technique which is very unusual for the time, embedded by Doinaş, involves a short diagnosis, followed by the flat, metronome-style rendition of the main situations in a theatre play. The tone

15. Ştefan Augustin Doinaş, “O temă majoră, o realizare minoră,” *Teatrul*, no. 1 (1956): 81.

16. Doinaş, 83.

itself, served by regular step-by-step enumerations, simultaneously conveys to the reader both the essential information about the play's cliché features, and a condensed image of what they could see in the show itself. About Lucia Demetrius' play *Atențiune copii!* (*Attention, Children!*), all we get is this apparently prudent summary, lacking adjectives that openly reveal any critical frown, but which sarcastically brings down the entire dramaturgic construction:

Maria Pricopie is a static character. Her central position allows for little axle-like movements, supporting an entire revolving system. Maria Pricopie is like a mirror in front of which the other characters have discussions or monologues about their own dramas: in Act 1, Petru Damian, a factory director, more preoccupied with production problems than with caring for and educating his children; in Act 2, the same Petru Damian, this time the head of a family in which the son - a retained high school pupil and a dreamer, hurt by his father's sternness - runs away unexpectedly; in Act 3, Olga Ceaușu, cheated in her love for Victor, or workers such as the Preda family, or Catrina Ponor, worried about their children's fate.¹⁷

On the other hand, the content of this review is dedicated to the way in which, at the Theatre in Brașov, one actress, Eugenia Eftimie-Petrescu, helped by director Ion Simionescu (who otherwise seems to have been a good trainer of actors in his days) still managed to create an emotional and partially credible performance, despite the aridity of the literary quality and in contrast with the clichéd dramatic situations. The whole review sounds like a homage to the actor's filigree work - and by reducing the interest in Lucia Demetrius' play to the above-fragment shows the implicit literary evaluation.

A distinct style in the journal's period of infancy comes from Ecaterina Oproiu's reviews. At the same time, the journalist shared the film review in the *Contemporanul* journal with the venerable critic D. I. Suchianu, a job she would stick to after the stormy year of 1958, when she stopped writing for *Teatrul* precisely because of her very frank stylistics. Nevertheless,

17. Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, "Adevărul e simplu," *Teatrul*, no. 3 (1956): 71.

the passion for theatre accompanied her throughout her life, and she turned it into a short, but highly successful at the time dramatic work, which can still be retrieved today - see the rousing success and the translation/performance in several foreign languages of her best-known play, *Nu Sunt Turnul Eiffel* (*I Am Not the Eiffel Tower*) (1965); other plays are worthy of attention too, such as the frequently staged *Interviu* (*Interview*) (1976) or *Cerul înstelat deasupra noastră* (*The Starry Sky Above Us*) (1984).

Ecaterina Oproiu is probably one of the rare theatre and film critics of that period whose voice has a recognisable personality, and its subjective perspective is not shackled by a circumstantial sobriety. The critic naturally creates a haptic presence, her very own touch, felt in her text at all levels of analysis. And this can be seen in her very first article published in the journal, a review of a recent performance called *Nota zero la purtare* (*Conduct Grade: Zero*), by Virgil Stoenescu and Octavian Sava, directed by Ion Lucian at Nottara Theatre (nowadays *Teatru Mic*). The play was extremely popular in its time, and for good reason: it is a moralistic, but not significantly ideological, comedy for young people (the action takes place in a high school) - which is rare in Romania, even our days. More than that, the radio recording of mainly the same period played a fundamental contribution to its real mass success. From the beginning of her review, Oproiu borrows the play's young, frolicsome tone, starting with a comment on the title. In fact, the intro is the author's polemic expression about her own occupation, and about the stiff 'objectivity' pretences in exercising a critical evaluation, and the final comparison, both feminine, and virulent, is a typical mark of her unmistakable stylistics:

The reviewer is not allowed to grade. If we were, we would say, for instance: the text gets a 7+, actor X "magna cum laudae", while actress Y is held back - but this would upset both colleagues and actors. However, the review (sure, except for those made up of the summary and the list of actors, whose interpretations were "warm", "thrilling", "highly internalized") basically consists of several grades and an average level based on the critic's intellectual capacity and training. Sometimes, the assessment is very direct; otherwise, it comes wrapped in lots of nappies, like an overdressed child, whose face you can't see, but whose cries are clearly heard.¹⁸

18. Ecaterina Oproiu, "A fi sau a nu fi în notă," *Teatrul*, no. 2 (1956): 74.

After all, in reviews, Ecaterina Oproiu's approach mostly starts from a direct, and at the same time very personal observation, which can somehow be generalized, or even from a certain feeling that plucks the readers by the sleeve, inviting them to a kind of an informal chat. Such a stylistic attitude does lead, on the one hand, to a democratization of the relation with the targeted-audience, but simultaneously, not just in the context of dominantly normative and standardized discourses of the time, to a familiarity implying an investment of trust. For example, this review dedicated to the play *Cadaavrul viu* (*The Living Corpse*) by Leo Tolstoy staged at Teatrul Tineretului (directed by Constantin Sincu), starts with new darts shot at circumstantial critique:

We do not like reviews stating with: "Admirable intentions, very topical theme, excellent ideological level, but unfortunately, an abysmal rendition, with puppets for characters, and a dreadful conflict." Still, in some cases, the reviewer's lack of reaction is somehow excusable, for some performances seem to be deliberately constructed in such a way as to screen spectators from any strong emotion or from worries. In these cases, revolt would nevertheless be unjust, while enthusiasm would be excessive. The reviewer grows sullen, like a muse-less poet. By saying this now, while writing about the performance *Cadaavrul viu* (Teatrul Tineretului), I am not making a general statement, but - if I may - a confession.¹⁹

Moreover, beyond this confidential intro, the author insists in her complicity with the reader - presumed to be a theatre professional, or at least an inveterate spectator. She highlights that she will avoid (refuse?) to do the things normally expected from a theatre critic, i.e. quench or even repress her personalized meditation, "put a damper on it", with the aim of recap Tolstoy's famous play, and even mocks the stereotypes of telling "a few stories about the old count dressed in his Kosovorotka who ploughs the land of the muzhiks"²⁰. The purpose of the sarcasm used in this turn of

19. Ecaterina Oproiu, "Virtutea și viciul cumișeniei," *Teatrul*, no. 3 (1956): 77.

20. Ibidem.

phrase is of course threefold: on the one hand, it's a slap in the face of fixed, normative structures in theatre reviews, then it's an irony to Soviet-style stereotypical references to the great writer, and last but not least, a wink to the receiving partner, implicitly suggesting that the beneficiary of the text is cultured enough as to not need a retelling of a classic text, nor any encyclopaedia entrance about the count dressed in his Kosovorotka. Evidently, the content of the review includes arguments supporting a mediocre staging, with some quality actors nevertheless (Al Critico, Olga Tudorache).

In her short period as collaborator of *Teatrul*, almost none of the author's reviews seems dry, or at least obsequious. And when they are concise (which happens quite rarely, compared to her colleague Ștefan Aug. Doinaș), her titles are striking, while her writing is responsive, sometimes showing clear enthusiasm doubled by searching observance, as it happens with what may be her most inciting review, the one about *The Rainmaker*, by Richard Nash, directed by Liviu Ciulei²¹ (his debut as theatre director in fact). Other times, her texts exhibit sharp humour, like this description of the atmosphere in F. Vinea's melodrama, *Secretul doctorului Bergman* (*The Secret of Dr. Bergman*), staged at Giulești Theatre:

Students seem like the pupils of a Târgu Neamț high school on a Thursday afternoon in a public garden. Of course, they are lively and talkative, for who could imagine two teenagers sitting silently on a bench (...)? Each side is treated in the same colour, i.e. either white-silver and translucent, or as having the dark shade in which the creatures of hell deserve to be shown. Virtues and vices were also handed out with no compromise.²²

In some cases, the review reaches almost essay-like dimensions, and the author feels the need to give special attention to the writer, trying to re-contextualize his presence and extract him from the clichés of understanding now-canonical literature. In one of these, Ecaterina Oproiu even gets carried

21. Ecaterina Oproiu, "Ca să pornești o ploaie," *Teatrul*, no. 6 (1957). Notice the 'loving key' in which the author reads not only the direction, but especially Clody Bertola's interpretation, a homage worthy of an anthology.

22. Ecaterina Oproiu, "Piese fără întrebări," *Teatrul*, no. 11 (1957): 67.

away by accolades and cloak-and-dagger-like penmanship, far exceeding the real dimensions of the theme and of the topic - i.e. a review about *Omul cu mârțoaga* by George Ciprian, staged at the National Theatre, in which the imperative need to retrieve the author comes before the value of the show itself (the merits of Al. Finți's direction "are first and foremost passive!):

Here, joviality is harsher than anywhere else, as it is a joviality typical of a pub situated across the street from Bellu Cemetery, where an infernal folk band accompanies those leaving this world with sinister renditions of: "*Tarabumbara!*" or "*La moară la Hârța-Târța*" (...) That's why, in this very version, Chirică exudes apostolic kindness. His face, pale as ashes and forever sad, makes one think of Christ's expiation of all human sins...²³

On the other hand, we must highlight that Ecaterina Oproiu's rhetoric, with its jaunty twists, always ready for strategies to catch the reader's attention for an imaginary, inter-subjective dialogue, remains an exception. Because the general tone of publications, generally reviews making up almost half of an issue, remains dominated by the implicit requirement of the objectifying sobriety. However, it's important to remember that, at the beginnings of the journal *Teatrul*, many of the editors show a proclivity to re-balance the textual relation between the review's two levels. Moreover, their texts often try to jump the normative-ideological constraints, or at least squeeze through them, with the good intention of granting argumentative consistency and thoroughness to the critical spirit.

In this period, Florian Potra for instance, who will in his turn focus more on film criticism over the next few years, writes a lot of theatre reviews, and his nice, careful, detailedly descriptive articles fall into the same spiritual family as those written by members of „the literary circle in Sibiu”, in direct relation to the ethos of re-theatricalization. This however does not stop the critic, a fan of Radu Stanca, from openly arguing his reserves regarding one of his shows:

23. Ecaterina Oproiu, "Poezia lui Chirică," *Teatrul*, no. 2 (1957): 71–73. In the show, Grigore Vasiliu Birlic played Chirică.

Consistency is a fragrant plant regardless of where it grows, but it feels more refreshing when found in the art field, especially in the art of the director from Sibiu. This Sibiu-based director is one of those people who put their money where they mouth is, whose written or spoken word is seen in the artistic act. The other day, he pleaded for the re-theatricalization of theatre and now he reasserts this in a straightforward, resolute performance like *Maria Stuart*. (...) Thus, *Maria Stuart* remains an admirable show designed by the director, a performance of honest simplicity, of a theatre engraved in a classic writing - let us not forget the elegant translation made by Radu Stanca himself - but lacking matching protagonists, and the fulfilment that can only be obtained by great actors.²⁴

Potra is an often extremely observant and practical analyst; for him, the descriptive, detailed effort is the starting point of any assessment attempt - however, it is obvious, even at this young age, that besides his clear interest for classic texts, he has a visual mind, as he likes to recount everything he sees, costumes, gestures, mimicry. And even though his stylistics is less spectacular than that of his colleague, Oproiu, he too proves unhesitant when it comes to arguing his critical diagnoses, even aiming at an openly dismantling repetitive ideological discourse:

Reading the play *Nach dem Gewitter (After the Storm)*, and especially seeing the performance based on it staged in Timișoara, causes justified confusion: is it natural for the dramaturgy and the performing arts in a minority language to undergo, or more precisely to retrace - a few years later - a road closed and left behind by Romanian literature and theatre? Would it not be natural for a theatre like the German Theatre in Timișoara, for example, to fully embrace the indefeasible conquests of our culture in general? For this play by Johann Szekler suddenly places us within the coordinates of the first, timid attempts at realist-socialist dramaturgy. The thorough observation on reality, mainly its staging, are substituted by a political and moral thesis, and insufficiently filtered

24. Florian Potra, "Scănteile unui foc posibil," *Teatrul*, no. 1 (1958): 60–62. We should note, even as an anecdote, that the role of Mary Stuart was played by the director's wife, Dorina Stanca.

through an artistic feeling. (...) Such a setting could only result in a superficial, naturalist performance. With very few exceptions, the actors' movement was clumsy and cumbersome, groups formed badly, lines were rudimentarily delivered, with no clear direction. The end of *all* the scenes was set against energy or even material gaps, after the stage had been inert and empty for minutes on end (...) In short, a complete lack of direction.²⁵

As this article is dedicated to rhetoric, we cannot not notice the author's merry belief in having "left behind" the vulgarly schematic phase of socialist realism and moving on to "the indefeasible conquests of our culture", based on deep observation and artistic filtering. The fact that this review was published just three months before the beginning - in May 1958 - of the new virulent-normative attack on culture in its broad sense (arts, sciences, education, media etc.), a rereading of the fragment above later in time gives it a touch of involuntary naivete and, in retrospective, a dramatic thrill.

Because, as we already know, in the spring of 1958, a new virulent freeze started, and Romanian culture - theatre criticism included - had to revert, for another three years, to ideological and stylistic stereotypes characteristic of the beginning of the decade. For I.D. Sîrbu and Ștefan Aug. Doinaș, the re-freeze meant not just shorter or longer periods of detention, or publication bans, but also their permanent parting with theatre criticism - Doinaș returned after 1964, but only as a poet and essayist, while I.D. Sîrbu dedicated himself to dramaturgy, poetry and memoirs (the latter published posthumously).

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25. Florian Potra, "Drumuri care duc înapoi," *Teatrul*, no. 2 (1958): 58–59. The director was Ottmar Strasser.

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