

Ibsen Face to Face with The New Stage Aesthetics. Radu Afrim and Andriy Zholdak Recreating *The Lady From The Sea*

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Abstract: The classical repertoire and, especially, its stage rewritings define a thematic obsession for the great theatre creators of the moment. Just as each great director has their own aesthetic, so each of them has their own way of appropriating representative plays. Henrik Ibsen is one of the indispensable playwrights in the artistic portfolio of the most important names whose creations were performed on the Romanian stages. This article aims at a parallel analysis of two recent versions of the Ibsenian play *The Lady from the Sea*, directed by Radu Afrim (2014) and Andriy Zholdak (2022), respectively, in order to deepen the specific differences of two theatrical aesthetics decisive for understand the evolution of contemporary theatre. We also aim to question the possibilities that the readaptations, the rewritings of the great classical texts involve in the attempt of the creators to “contemporize” a play representative of the sensitivity of a past century.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, *The Lady from the Sea*, Radu Afrim, Andriy Zholdak, readaptation

If the classical repertoire is a requirement for directors of all times, so the transgression of the canon, its *desecration*, forcing the limits of the original dramatic nucleus through multiple and eclectic processes of rendering it *contemporary* has become some sort of norm for theatre directors since the second half of the last century. Hence, the work of contemporary post-dramatic directors becomes a kind of organic extension of the criterion imposed by theatrical criticism that captures the spearheads of an artistic generation, to constitute a universal canon. The theatrical text is, in fact, a permeable environment, generating new meanings, depending on the external intentions that shape it and give it stage concreteness. Its primordial, intrinsic meaning, seen as the result of the historical context in which it was produced, becomes only a starting point, one of the centres of the ellipse whose trajectory is defined, on the other hand, being the director’s intention, approaching the textual material with their own cultural, social, imaginary, etc. instruments. André Helbo convincingly captures this relationship between text and performance, suggesting the semantic potential of

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a theatrical text, depending on the intended destination of the staging: “The status of a play, when it pre-exists the performance, is particular, while having an interstitial nature: it’s shaped by the performance, by the staging process, and it becomes a kind of score. It also serves as a material and a vector of meaning. Swallowed by the directorial vision, it weaves the conditions for stage enunciation and enters confrontation with the significant systems”¹.

If what makes a theatrical text a canonical one is its universality, the way in which it manages to give a coherent perspective on the human soul caught in a precise social, political, historical context, in the same way the *flexibility* of the same text, its versatility in front of the coordinates of some various directorial formulas prove to be an essential condition for such a status. Shakespeare is, as Jan Kott proved to us, “our contemporary” not only because of far too subtle mechanisms that make history repeat itself in a pattern that is inaccessible to us, but because of the way in which his characters encapsulate conflicts, eternal human passions, and pains, which exceed the limitations of a precise spatial and temporal context. In the light of such an opinion, it is obvious that the work of every great playwright in the world has a greater or lesser degree of *resistance* to such *unconventional* approaches. Shakespeare is by far the most appealing playwright for theatre creators, and his popularity in the statistics of the representative performances of the last 70 years is due precisely to the ability of his work to bend to the most varied stage experiments. However, Chekhov does not enjoy the same status, who, although it is an essential presence in the repertoires of all theatres today, is much more *rigid* in the face of overbold directorial projects, due to the geographical and historical determinism that defines the essence of his characters.

Among the great playwrights who shaped the activity of the most outstanding contemporary directors is Ibsen, whose popularity seems to have reached a peak in recent times, for which feminism, femininity issues, gender studies, etc. had become an obsessive topic. Ibsen was perceived at the time as the playwright who revisited the concept of *tragic*, more precisely the *everyday tragic*, a barometer of the contemporary era, based on the inescapable confrontation between the male consciousness, dominated by honour, and the female one, dominated by love. Its affinity with the great tragedies of universal literature is also obvious through the strength of its feminine characters, much better defined than the masculine ones. No need to insist – *A Doll’s House* is, by far, his most interesting play for modern directors. At the same time, although it is not one of the most staged Ibsenian texts, *The Lady from the Sea* (published in 1888) recently aroused some attraction, a certain curiosity from the directors belonging to different aesthetics. These directors approach this play almost microscopically, trying to penetrate its ineffable masked by a seemingly redundant, schematic construction. The play is moulded on a hermeneutic grid of Ibsenian constants that generate a series of specific patterns, with a double functionality, both at the molecular level of the text and at the performative one. If for the first dimension – the textual one, these patterns are vectors of meaning, at the level of representation, they become

¹ André Helbo, *Le théâtre : texte ou spectacle vivant*, Klincksieck, Paris, 2007, p. 40.

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landmarks of an extremely malleable and versatile directorial signifiers. Beyond the process of capturing the *eternal feminine*, it is in this interest of the performance the desire to reveal the small features of the dramatic construction, which make this text unique:

- a *misleading* exposition: the characters escape the identification process so much that, after reading the first pages, we might very well believe that the painter could be the central character, or we might as well assume that Bolette will be the main character, though she only has a *coloratura* role in the context of the play;
- the characters are essentially driven by the search for an inner truth born from secrets of the past: once openly experienced through confession as an effect of remorse or other circumstances, it becomes irretrievably destructive to the present of the characters. In the case of this play, the love affair from the past of Wangel's second wife – Ellida. The secret was already known, only the details being the ones that would come to the surface, in a similar way to a psychotherapy session²;
- the issue of free will is violently raised: this appears as a requirement of absolute freedom of the heroine, to be able to reject, without any constraint, the temptation of happiness. The intrigue core lies in a process of remanence of the idea of power, beyond years and distance, beyond the first love. Thus, this requirement attains infinite dimensions and translates into the negative drive of flight in the future;
- the struggle with moral premises: most of the time, the guarantees of morality, those who could guide the actions of the characters (notables, church people), are fragile, corrupt, trapped in past compromises or in the straps of hidden, petty interests. The society is presented at a less sinister angle than in other texts of Ibsen; at the same time, both the characters and the spectators find themselves in an almost impossible situation, that of choosing between equally absolute values. Unlike other Ibsenian protagonists, such as Hedda Gabler, the embodiment of a destructive Machiavellian force, Ellida becomes, rather, a victim of her own obsessions, far from the absolute pattern of the antagonist or protagonist. Ibsen's great merit is to bring to light in a sincere and subtle way all the micro-psychological implications of each of these postulates, and the character, without being free, has no choice but to choose for herself;
- the recurrence of mentioning the *character returned from America*: in this text also, it is impossible to distinguish between the real fascination of Ibsen,

² Françoise Decant in the article *La Dame de la mer ou le désir de l'impossible* (vol. *L'écriture chez Henrik Ibsen, un savant nouage*, Érès, Paris, 2007) mentions Sándor Ferenczi's reading of the play in which he saw the psychoanalytic treatment of an obsessive representation. Ellida's attraction to the sea would thus translate into a monomaniacal manifestation.

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the playwright, for those who come from this space perceived as strange, modern, threatening, and his instinctive fear of the ability of these characters to shake society. Thus, the image of the Stranger, although quasi absent, becomes a first-order disturbing element in the unfolding of events. This character appears in the play, first, on a strictly narrative, immaterial level, like a ghost that unleashes fears and passions of the past, so that only later his physical appearance triggers the climax.

Beyond these textual patterns, *The Lady from the Sea* has her own features, that could explain the fascination of the directors. The plot is essentially based on the apprehensions of the heroine, Ellida Wangel, about the imminent return of her first fiancé, a feared sailor, accused of murder and allegedly drowned at sea. As events unfold, the shadow of the absent person becomes more and more pronounced, while hidden details erupt violently. At this level of significance, the Ibsenian text reiterates the myth of Heine's Flying Dutchman, through this temptation to follow a magnetic ghost, to the detriment of a happy life, but without exaltations. So, remaining in the same register, *The Lady from the Sea* becomes a Nordic Madame Bovary, compensating the implosive and romantic character of the Flaubertian heroine with a self-destructive, wild energy. In the same way, the monotonous province described by the French novelist takes on the appearance of a calm harbour, as opposed to the rocky shores of the fjords described by Ibsen.

This text is one of the few Ibsenian dramas that, despite some explosive exhibition premises, has a conventional, even banal ending: the whole work, although it evokes the idea of death, avoids it in the dramatically represented action. Thus, we can conclude that the plot is much simpler and more direct, even traditional (the dilemma of love), than the other plays of the Norwegian playwright, in which the feeling of guilt, the status of forger, are much more powerful dramatic engines. All these situational determinisms are materialized by surprisingly positive characters for Ibsen's universe, usually quite promiscuous, obscene. Thus, Professor Arnholm keeps his offer to finance Bolette's travels, which brings her admiration. At the same time, Dr. Wangel agrees to restore the freedom of his disoriented wife, to speak the same language with her, and to agree to break the contract of what he considers to be a marriage of love. Thus, as usually happens at Ibsen, the characters who attract sympathy are the victims, rarely the lovers with an impeccable conscience. Finally, the sea, the aquatic element, becomes the central metaphor for the dramatic framework proposed by Ibsen. Seen as a symbolic character, the sea appears in a double hypostasis, in relation to the trajectory that Ellida's suffers. Ellida, whose atypical name, as she herself acknowledges it, comes from the name of a ship, finds in sea a state of balance, of recovery, as a kind of return to the placental stage. At the other pole is the sea as an opening to the unknown, as an environment patronized by the ghostly and virile image of the Stranger, the sea as a bridge between two worlds – that of domestic conventionalism, safe and temperate, proposed by Dr. Wangel and that of adventure, along with her first fiancé. In this ambivalent meaning of sea as a space of opening / closing translates, in fact, the inner conflict of the central female

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character who cannot find absolute comfort either in the arms of a man who offers her a *bourgeois* security, nor in romantic fantasies with the Stranger, and not even as a mother, traumatized by the untimely death of her child.

Starting from these textual premises, in the performative Romanian panorama of the last decade, two outstanding European directors offered us two distinct perspectives on the Ibsenian play: Radu Afrim, in 2014, at the “Vasile Alecsandri” Theatre in Iași, respectively Andriy Zholdak, in 2022, at the “Marin Sorescu” Theatre in Craiova.

By far, one of the most appreciated contemporary directors of the moment, Radu Afrim brings in the show *The Lady from the Sea*, staged 8 years ago at the Theatre in Iasi, some of the specificities that have consecrated his style: the appetite for ultramodern sets that work like a canvas for chromatic *digressions*, the taste for an evanescent pictoriality and for choral acting compositions. In the director’s perception, the realism of Ibsen’s play easily slips into a dreamlike setting, in which Ellida becomes a reflector-character that *alters* the kinetics of space. Everything eventually turns into a *watercolour* landscape reminiscent, on the one hand of surreal dreams and, on the other hand, of the diffuse luminescence of the aquatic spaces imagined by Impressionist painters. Through the vision of the scenographer Alina Herescu, the kitchen of the Wengel family becomes a space that opens towards metaphorical projections (provided by Andrei Cozlac and Iustin Surpanelu). In the same way, a series of suggestive decorative elements appear on the stage – floating buoys, plastic fish, and octopuses –, but also props inspired by the everyday banality: the sea breeze is suggested by the air current produced by electric dryers, and the kitchen countertop takes the form of an aquarium. Such a scenic mechanism diverts the concrete eventual development into a fantasy that loses touch with the psychological realism of the Ellida-Wangel conflict, but this is also the great bet that Radu Afrim makes on himself – to what extent the Ibsenian dramatic core can be *alienated* by the demands of an *everyday tragedy*? Thus, the director moves away not only from the chronotope or from the psychological premises imagined by the Norwegian playwright, but also from the initial profiles of the characters. We are in the middle of a bourgeois tragicomedy touched, here and there, by an ironic, incisive look at the social masquerade. Thus, the Wangel house shelters a grotesque family context, populated by confused men and resigned women – generic groups in a relationship of crushing opposition, indulging in a somewhat melodramatic misery. In this derision of insignificant existences, women become the victims of childish, alcoholic, and deplorable men. Dr. Wangel (Ionuț Cornilă) is a clownish and pathetic character, in relation to whom Ellida (Irina Răduți Codreanu) looks like a disillusioned, Bovarian wife, who takes refuge in her own chimeras, to find comfort. Out of the desire to highlight the condition of the woman and to highlight the dramas of the protagonists, Afrim either trivializes his masculine characters or has a pejorative look towards them. The strength of the female characters is rather a consequence of the

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extreme contrast in relation to the men who do not exceed the brute or shadow state without personality.

Radu Afrim's performance presents a rather serious gap with the Ibsenian plot, without referring only to the operations of adaptation, updating or essentialization, but to a change of focus. If in the text of the Norwegian playwright Ellida's character embodies the Ibsenian thematic obsessions related to the status of women, the existence of marital happiness, the fragility of the marital nucleus, in the Afrimian representation, these thematic constants become secondary. The show puts the central couple in the background, Afrim being more interested in the other characters. The Doctor's daughters (played by Ana Apetrei and Ada Lupu), together with Arhnolm, Lyngstrand, and Ballested (Dumitru Năstrușnicu, Andrei Sava and Cosmin Maxim, respectively) become a motley, noisy and banal contemporary mass, experiencing all the traumas and obsessions of the contemporary world: hysteria, addictions, depression, alienation. Afrim's characters are caught in a problematic relationship with an absence, with a projection, they are not anchored at present: Dr. Wangel longs for his first wife and feels for Ellida a compassion full of tenderness. Ellida merges her love for the man who went to sea and her own obsession with the waves of the sea. Another striking difference between the version of Radu Afrim and the Ibsenian text is the outcome: if Ibsen's ending is as conventional as possible, almost happy, totally atypical of the rest of his plays, Afrim prefers to leave his disillusioned protagonists trapped in a timeless, melancholic, and sad loop. The conjugal drama is, rather, rendered by the shrill banality of contemporaneity, by a colourful and screaming mediocrity, counterpointed by the beauty of the stage images.

Famous for his eccentric style that tackles the classical repertoire from a perspective often categorized as poetically visceral, strident, nonconformist, or provocative, Andriy Zholdak signs in 2022 for the "Marin Sorescu" Theatre in Craiova an impressive, sometimes indigestible *Lady from the Sea*, that follows one of the main purposes aimed by the director, namely that shock is the surest way not to leave the viewer indifferent. Not only the aesthetics, but also the stage concreteness imagined by the Ukrainian director is what generates this effect, but also the way in which he returns again and again to his thematic obsessions, still tabooed by a far too puritanical *bourgeois* audience: a hysterical, feverish, sickly sexuality, the psycho-erotomaniac deviations, through which he analyses, in particular, the abysses of the female soul. To this obsessive and haunting thematic construct, the director applies multiple filters that purify, model or, sometimes, completely restructure the primary textual material, filters that also became over time the marks of a specific style. These include the taste for the oppressive atmosphere, with Gothic reminiscences, loaded with a kind of sacredness of pagan temples, the almost cinematic dynamism, to which is added a suite of musical-cinematic intertexts, or the twisted, almost neurotic corporality, specific gestural marks, with an almost ritualistic character. Obviously, many of the aspects that define the style imposed by Zholdak are inspired by Artaudian's vision on theatre, to which are added

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certain reminiscences of Meyerholdian biomechanics, which impose a certain physical endurance on the protagonists. Each show signed by the Ukrainian director thus becomes not only a sensory, deceptively complex, and multi-layered *tour de force*, despite its apparent *transparency*, its imagistic purism, but also a physical and respiratory challenge for the main actors.

The latest show signed by Andriy Zholdak on the Romanian stage, *The Lady from the Sea*, applies those main thematic and stylistic obsessions, proposing a contemporary perspective on the play written by the Norwegian author. This “Ellida of the 21st Century”, as the director himself prefers to define his own concept, becomes the central pillar of an atypical family fresco, around which revolve the other characters existing in the basic text, to which are added certain ghostly appearances, with a specific functionality, depending on the requirements of the dramatic sequences. The pretext that triggers the action fully respects the premises of the Ibsenian play: on the occasion of the memorial anniversary dedicated to the first wife of Dr. Wangel (played by Nicolae Vicol), several characters arrive at the house of Ellida (Costinela Ungureanu), current wife of the doctor and, implicitly, the stepmother of his two daughters – Bolette and Hilde (Irina Danciu and Roxana Mutu). This event, however, puts in a raw light not only the latent tensions between the female characters of the house, but also the trauma of the protagonist who does not accept or does not feel fully accepted by her new home. In a short time, her past comes to the surface little by little, as the image of the Stranger, her first great love, invoked by the other characters, comes to overshadow the apparent harmony of the family. The psychological realism of the performative concept is, however, only a layer that ensures the unfolding of events. Much more striking is the element of magical realism, transposed through a panoply of symbols that Zholdak uses, moving away from the pattern proposed by Ibsen, to reconstruct the background of the protagonist, a background that viewers must intuit. This Ellida is not a “lady from the sea” in the metaphorical sense of the word, she literally is a creature of the sea, a mermaid who, although adopted by Dr. Wangel’s family, still falls prey to her instincts. In the privacy of the pool, at night, she often loses herself in moments of almost lycanthropic trance, *turning* into a dolphin or a seagull. Her spasmodic body seems to change, while the human voice is being replaced by sounds of marine life. The moment we see Dr. Wangel injecting certain serums to restore her human *form*, the story becomes clearer: Ellida, once a mermaid, was rescued (kidnapped?) by the Doctor madly in love with her and brought her in his house, far away from her environment, she is *tamed*, taught to become human, with the help of drug treatments. The brutal snatching from her environment triggers in Ellida some moments of revolt, incomprehensible even for her, states of anxiety that break out unpredictably and culminate even in episodes of self-flagellation. Ellida becomes a prisoner not only in the Doctor’s house, but also in her own human, artificial body, assaulted with sedatives or antipsychotic serums. In the same way, the love of Wangel, an apparently protective, tender, paternal character, is perceived during the show as the care of a doctor for his patient he’d fallen sickly in love with. The relationship between the two evolves, in fact, in a similar way to the one proposed

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by the *Frankenstein* novel, where, in the end, the creator will be destroyed by his own creation. The similarities with the fictional universe built by Mary Shelley do not stop, however, only at this level – Zholdak's show takes from it the gothic atmosphere, which the director processes with the help of some cinematic mechanisms. Thus, the use of spotlights to enhance the emphasis of the faces, cutting on the background of the stage some close-ups, images projected on the bedroom wall that expose the subjective perspective of the protagonist, instrumental film noir music insertions specific to certain gestures or episodic ruptures. behind which we sense the intention of an editor who cuts the sequences of a film, merge into an expressionist sensory construct like a thriller signed by Alfred Hitchcock. Not coincidentally, both the Wangel-Ellida couple and their relationship with the ghost of the doctor's first wife are strikingly similar to the stakes of the feature film *Rebecca*, the Hitchcockian adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's novel.

The other characters do not enjoy the same attention from the director, constituting, rather, a choir that completes the background of the domestic space. The only characters, existing both on stage and in the Ibsenian play, who stand out are Wangel's daughters, who, in turn, emanate a cruel, sometimes excessive sexuality. If their Ibsenian literary *personas* saw in marriage a compromise that would ensure their freedom to study and travel, in the performance, for them marriage would become the only way to experience and exhibit their eroticism. The character of the mother (Petronela Zurba), the first wife of Dr. Wangel, whom Zholdak prefers to materialize on stage, is also extremely sensual. Dressed in a festive red dress, she crosses the space at specific moments, without intervening at a discursive level, drawing behind her choreographic, almost ritualistic gestures. It's hard to tell if this ghostly woman is just a hallucination of Ellida who is always compared to the model of femininity and motherhood embodied by the first wife of the consort. Or if the same character, despite her muteness and apparent lack of involvement in the action, is the true mastermind of the whole show, which enslaves the inhabitants of the house, possesses them, catches them in the net of a hallucination about a harmonious past. Maybe not as obsessive as the mother, but well-defined enough, despite her few appearances, is the housekeeper (Raluca Păun) – another character who does not appear in the Ibsenian text. Her role is rather technical in the general formula of spectacular dynamism (she counterpoints through short interventions the transition of sequences), being, at the same time, extremely similar to her reference in Hitchcock's feature film. Like Mrs. Danvers in du Maurier's novel, she functions as an anchor to the past, as a conductor through which her former mistress, the first Lady Wangel, can return to the present. The couple made up of the housekeeper and the first Lady Wangel thus ensure the gaps in the concrete reality of the other characters, leaving the ghosts of the past to invade, invisibly, the stage. Compared to all these female appearances, the group of secondary male characters seems insignificant, being reduced to a series of typological sketches. Lyngstrand (Cătălin-Mihai Miculeasa) and Ballested (Cătălin Vieru), characters with almost non-existent biographies, only appear on stage for a very short time, and their only function is to ensure the details from Ellida's past that complete the puzzle of her trauma. Arnholm (Angel

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Rababoc), in turn, is rather a passive witness to the introspective process of the Wangel-Ellida couple, while the Stranger has no stage concreteness at all, being only a ghostly presence, manifested strictly at the discursive level.

The stage set imagined by Danilo Zholdak and Andriy Zholdak illustrates, in its symmetry, Ellida's double identity. On the one hand, we have the interior of the house – the domestic space, specific to the human identity of the protagonist; on the other hand – the swimming pool, the metaphor of the sea, the space of both opening and seclusion, the space of instinctual unleashing, in which the mermaid becomes herself. Finally, the musical accompaniment (provided by Valentyn Silvestrov) varies several registers, depending on the needs of the episodes. The film noir soundtrack is complemented by euphonic instrumental scores, as well as Arvo Pärt's leitmotif *My Heart's in the Highlands* – a kind of acoustic emblem of Ellida, like a call of the sea – culminating in *Thunder*, performed by Catnapp – the last song of the mermaid, a manifesto against the conformity imposed by the other characters, in which the protagonist rediscovers her primary identity. Between the sacredness of the moments of silence or the nocturnal revelations and the sexual, Dionysian outbursts, of a pagan carnality, Ellida remains on the border between human and animal instinct, in a percussive and hypnotic portrayal of a traumatic female soul.

Although initially, as we can see in the writings that accompany the publishing of Ibsen's play, the playwright wanted to write a text about the sea and its disturbing diversity, the performative contemporary versions of *The Lady from the Sea* bring to surface much more complex layers. Far from being just a bourgeois drama about the condition of women, the Ibsenian text reveals through the work of the two directors two unique, sometimes divergent perspectives on the relationship between the individual and society or the domestic environment. In this *sea*, the obsessive metaphor of the two directorial constructs is reflected not only, as in the case of Afrim, an imagistic background, an escapist space par excellence, but also a space of (self-)destructive energies, as happens at Zholdak, an acoustic manifestation of neurotic states that overwhelm individuals caught in the artificiality of social conventions.

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