

The Merry Widow 2.0. Andrei Șerban

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Abstract: Review the show or the article 'Merry Widow 2.0. Andrei Șerban' traces the journey of bringing an operetta completed and premiered in 1905 up to date. Adapting and relating a musical composition to contemporary reality is an arduous process that requires rigorous probing into the depths of the libretto, the spoken text and the music to bring out their universality and relevance. By following the two versions made by director Andrei Șerban in Romania, the one in 2016 and the one in 2023, I try to point out that the mirroring of the present in contemporary art is not only a necessity to speak to the man of today about his world, but also defines the purpose of art, which must direct the gaze of the receiver towards himself and the world around him

Keywords: operetta, adaptation, updating, directing of the present, Romanian National Opera Iași

*'Especially in today's world, when everything, at all levels, seems to be deteriorating beyond repair, it's very easy to make... the weapons by saying: 'Nothing can be done!' Even if apparently true, it's still a lie, because no matter how dark the situation we find ourselves in, something is always possible. To complain that everything is terrible is far too easy, to capitulate is destructive and leads nowhere.'*¹

It is quite common to invoke already bagatelized phrases such as 'theatre mirroring the present' or 'theatre here and now', although they seem to be an intrinsic condition of this art, being even an eliminatory clause in the process of a performance's passage. However, we have the misfortune of witnessing artistic productions suspended in time, which seem to belong to no period and, what is more problematic, only present events under the so-called dome of timelessness, of universality. The human natures represented by the characters in a performance and the issues they face have indeed been the same for centuries and centuries, and the viewer's eye has the ability to make the associations that are at hand. But the task of the show's creator, the one who must provide direction, the one who chooses a particular interpretation, is called into question, and it is in fact his task to direct

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¹ Andrei Șerban, *Niciodată singur*, Polirom, București, 2021, pp. 37-38.

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attention to a particular horizon. What of the present can be superimposed on an already known subject, what are the boundaries of the alignment of eternally valid facts with those of the present moment? These are some of the questions that lead us to analyse the idea of adapting a performance, because the continuous updating of theatre, bringing it into the present, makes art respond to the needs of contemporary man.

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Peter Brook said that `theatre is like life, but more concentrated`², and life belongs to the people of the present moment, who have a duty to understand time and decode its enigmas, even if they sometimes resort to means belonging to the past. Thus, whether he relies on the past or not, the artist of our century tries to respond to the needs of the contemporary receiver, to speak to him about the present in a recognizable form that brings him closer to art, to touch him by the very proximity of the themes addressed. Art becomes a fragment of the reality that the consumer recognises. The spectator, in the case of the performing arts, does not watch from the armchair of the auditorium a museum reproduction (theatrical, choreographic or other), but takes on the role of a passer-by who is standing in the vicinity of a scene that may be happening in close proximity. The scene is not obliged to encapsulate a particular work of art in time, and it is impossible to read it with anything other than the eyes and mentality of the present, for only photography and painting can be real traces of a period. The sacredness of the stage and the distance of the heroes from the audience are concepts that have been obsolete since the birth of naturalistic theatre, but unfortunately they have infiltrated the auditorium even in the 21st century among the prudish purists. Often invoking the fragment of `art for art's sake`, even though the phrase is profoundly foreign to them, conservatives remain stuck in retrograde opinions cloaked in a refined aesthetic sense.

The process of adapting and updating a work is an arduous one in which, through doubts and multiple arguments, one looks for the resonances in the substrata

² Apud George Banu, *Repetițiile și teatrul reînnoit – secolul regiei*, trad. Mirella Nedelcu-Patureau, Editura Nemira, București, 2009, p. 297.

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of a work that will transform it into an asset of the present. In other words, by delving into the great masterpieces, the creator of the performance, for it is to him that I shall refer, brings to the surface the eternal past, purged of the means specific to other times, and dresses it in the garb of the present. The essence is imperturbable as long as a work endures over time, which allows the modern creator to transform what has become classicised in the collective consciousness and to preface it in a new work. Always the same, but each time different, the work of a classic is ready to be 'rewritten' through the eyes of the present. It sometimes happens that, out of a passionate desire to bring a work of the past into the present, it is betrayed, so that the subject it proposes becomes a derisory pretext that we are not obliged to take into account. I am of the opinion that when the original work preserves its structure and meaning, allowing only the pulses of the present to breathe from within, then the mechanisms of adaptation are functional and respond to today's man, mirroring his reality as, it is already proven, it did at the time of the birth of the original work.

For a more explicit argumentation of what I mentioned, I will bring into discussion a performance of the Romanian National Opera Iași - *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, an operetta that bears the signature of the director Andrei Șerban, a sonorous name both of the local and, especially, of the international stages. The operetta, which will be performed in Iași in February 2023, is well known to music-loving audiences and is the fourth version of the director's work in his career.³ The current proposal can be called, in fact, a revisitation of the 2016 version, a co-production, at that time, between the Romanian National Opera Iași and the Bucharest National Opera, benefiting from a stripping away of the grotesque world imagined by the director in the first version. The mirror of the times in 2016 reflected the perdition of a hypothetical country, similar in name to the region of Moldavia - Moldrosovia, so, by extension, reference was made to the whole of Romania.

Andrei Șerban is a fervent castigator of the political class and the derailed currents in the social life of the present, speaking through the obviously political subject of the opera about the collapse of our country, about the inculturation and lack of ethics of the politicians of the time, about the irrecoverable human degradation of a people who have become superficial and petty in the continuous chase for money. The world in Andrei Șerban's 2016 play *The Merry Widow* is not at all different from Caragiale's. The distinguishing elements, then, are not of substance but of form. The linguistic handicap of myths and politicians is only adapted to the present world, as the spoken text of the operetta is a collection of not rare pearls from Romania, gathered together by humorists Radu Paraschivescu and Andrei Pleșu.

The libretto and original text of the operetta are seemingly innocent, but essentially the filthiness of the people of the land called Pontevedro is unequivocally

³ Andrei Șerban has also staged Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* in 1984 at the Welsh National Opera in Cardiff and in 1999 at the Wiener Staatsoper, Austria.

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apparent. Satire is a sensitive and dangerous genre, the reins of which need to be tightened. Thus, *The Merry Widow* of 2016 explicitly leaned towards criticism, and the mixture of small stories in Lehár's version was embroidered with new ones, characters invented by Andrei Șerban reflecting the disappointing intellectual and human state of the people of Moldrosovia. Unfortunately, we also find this hard to accept, even if the characters' boorish and illogical language was so easily recognizable. The audience in the auditorium hears it frequently and receives it as a plague that has infested the whole country. Art also has the role of condemning hallucinatory deviations, and *The Merry Widow* was clearly a gesture of revolt by the director, disappointed that his compatriots spoke, thought and behaved in that way. Moldrosovia the country that risks bankruptcy if the billions of a moldrosovian woman, Hanna Glavary, are withdrawn from the motherland's banks by possibly marrying a Frenchman, deserves its fate. Populated, for the most part, by a mass of people with no horizon and led by politicians with no prospects, this hypothetical country is guilty of its own fate. A deep disappointment with Romania shines through in the 2016 approach, with the focus instead turning to the pettiness of those who are plotting to save the country, though these remain adjacent goals. Attempting to criticize the moldrosovians, Andrei Șerban's performance at the time downplayed the efforts to rediscover a love that has never faded and has inflicted deep wounds in the souls of the main characters - Hanna Glavary and Danilo Danilovich.

With the abundance of details about the empty world of Moldrosovia, the focus is no longer on the heroes determination to challenge each other to admit what they feel. To be sure, a performance is poor when it pursues a single theme, when it directs the viewer's gaze to only one point, but one of the many themes addressed must take pride of place. In the case of *The Merry Widow*, the subject matter is so compelling that it is tempting to suggest this. The hypothetical country in the Balkans becomes Romania and, through adaptation, it is drastically x-rayed.

The adaptation does not, therefore, betray the libretto and operetta, only opting to define more clearly the small state to which Lehár referred. Though equivocally unnamed Romania, the many details remove any doubts that might cause confusion. What's more, the choreography proposed by Andreea Gavrilu in 2016 underlined and reinforced the identity of the persiflage state - the horeas, the penguin dance, the festivity of the synchronised movements that seemed to recall the celebrations glorifying the communist leader, as well as the vulgarity of some people, especially politicians, who shamelessly fabricate an extremely dangerous cult of personality. Andrei Șerban bitterly recalled that, although freed from the yoke of communism, the mentalities of people today are still attached to this period. The celebrations of communism's heyday have left a deep imprint on the so-called new approaches to politics, the subtle weapon by which ordinary people are transformed into `the manoeuvring table of imaginary thugs.` One can thus see an underlining of the dangers

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of a state haunted by the same ghosts, but which, it seems, today have a different appearance.

Operetta is, in any case, more permissive than its `big sister, opera`. Although many of the operetta's subjects are similar and have poor dramaturgy, *The Merry Widow* makes a discordant note. Both in terms of the sequence of events and, more importantly, musically it is a gem. The well-written work and its extremely offering subject matter breathes of the present day. It's tempting and unblasphemous to update it, to transport it to any country and corner of the world as long as you know its strengths. Beyond relocating it to Romania, Andrei Șerban preserves its universality by choosing not to perform it only in the local language, but to bring together several international languages. The brave attempt highlights the thematic and pastel Babel of the contemporary world where, although anyone can enter into a conversation with anyone, little of substance is said. At the same time, it reveals that identities are lost in the mass of characters' unsuccessful attempts to become heroes of saving the beloved homeland:

*Usually the operetta is sung in the language of the country in which it is performed, but as a tribute to Lehár, who was born in Komáron (then in Hungary, now in Slovakia), descended from a family that came from Moravia, a small country in the Austro-Hungarian Empire where Germans, Czechs, Serbian Slovaks, Croats, Slovenians, Romanians, Italians, Poles, etc. lived together. This incredible amalgam of ethnicities gave us the idea of using different languages in the spoken and sung text, the mixture bringing a familiar colour to both our time and Lehár's. And the choices were dictated by the diversity of impressions created in the musicality of the ensembles, arias and duets: something sounds more accurate in German, something else seems more convincing in French, and Romanian and English have their own specific tones, each arousing corresponding feelings.*⁴

We are now concerned with what is lost and what is gained by the revised version proposed to the public in 2023, as the adaptation process continues. Seven years on, times have changed, the issues are different, the imminence of major catastrophes has frightened all mankind since the outbreak of the Russo-Ukrainian War. In Romania, the political class is different, but always the same, a new argument that the world of Caragiale's politicians still overlaps with local politics: `it is admirable, sublime we might say, but it is completely lacking.` Backward-looking visions do not open the way to progress, but now it also seems difficult for this to happen. However, Andrei Șerban no longer adopts the position of a fierce critic of the way Romania is run today, he no longer condemns ordinary people by abandoning

⁴ From the programme book of the premiere of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, 2016 - the director's argument.

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them to their own stupidity. This time the people are saved, beyond the meteors they carry, by love. The Romanians of 2023 are, in Andrei Șerban's vision, more sensitive, more forgiving, more innocent. Their principles, though vehement in the septet scene in Act II - sauna Glavary, are easier to shake. The background of these simple people is the same; they are content in the 2023 version with champagne offered by Ambassador Zetta in the Pink Room. The irony is finer, and the Moldosovians now turned Pontevedrians, as Franz Lehár wished, are very easily fooled by the ambassador, but play their part scrupulously. Although the Stock Exchange has fallen, another novelty now, alien in my view to the masses, the Pontevedrians enjoy what little they get and are content with that.

The small digressions from the main theme, which we will detail later, are less overwhelming and, quantitatively, have a smaller weight, and may be encountered sporadically. The approach is clearly sensitive, as Hanna Glavary and Danilo Danilovich, as soon as they meet, are again overcome by the emotion that once bound them. Egos have separated them, and this is what prevents them from finding each other. If Danilo Danilovich was a good-for-nothing relying on his kinship with King Nikitauc, another allusion to a 2016-era politician from Iași, indulging in arrogance and excesses of all kinds, in the new version he is a bland and horizonless civil servant who wastes his bitterness in parties. The only chance of salvation for the two heroes, and for the characters around them, is the rediscovery of love, the honest acceptance of the self and of one's own emotions. In a world of falsehoods, masks, imposture and lies, the only lever of control remains sincere love. This time, with the dialogue preceding the well-known *Lippen Schweigen* duet, we realise that the choice to sing in several languages is, in fact, an echo of the same words - *I love you*, equally charming and with the same reverberations in every possible dialect.

Without resigning himself in front of the excesses that still happen in Romania, but opting for a less satirical proposal, Andrei Șerban does not aggressively condemn politicians, although he scrutinizes their behavior, but tries to look at the clear sky hidden by our cloudy society:

Today the reality is no longer the same. Politicians' slippage and hypocrisy have taken other, perhaps more subtle and perverse forms. We will not change them, nor do we have this mission. What has remained untouched, in the present version, is the purity of the basis of authentic love. We have cut and shortened the spoken dialogue a lot with the intention of letting Lehár's magical melodies warm our souls. Merry Widow 2.0 helps us, even in this difficult time, to be invaded by hope, as Lehár says: «When you are touched in the heart, when you feel pain and joy as in life...»⁵

⁵ From the programme book of the premiere of Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, 2023 - the director's argument.

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Moreover, not only Hanna Glavary and Danilo Danilovich are consumed inside in the absence of love, not only they long to find the warmth of a true love, but almost all the characters experience the same turmoil. Witness the scenes of real poetry during the aria Vilja (Act II), in which two Pontevedrine couples find each other in a tender movement reminiscent only of a dance in pairs, or the scene of the dancers who wander onto the stage, almost aimlessly, in search of love, taken by the ballerinas' hands to go their separate ways, but always in tandem with each other. In the search for love, the ideal reality intersects with the real. As in a dream Hanna appears to Danilo first in his imagination, he adores her in his thoughts and then confronts her in reality. On the other hand, Danilo appears in Hanna's thoughts as in a projection when he is reminded of Ambassador Zetta at the reception in Act I. Throughout the three acts, we often get the sense that not everything that seems real to us is a clear portrayal of the truth. The 2023 version of *The Merry Widow* is therefore a much more emotional adaptation. Apparently, the man of the present lacks the tacit, deep, sincere love that kept Hanna and Danilo alive in their exhaustions through the world.

To conclude, I will refer to an excerpt from *A Biography*, a book published in its second edition by Andrei Șerban in 2012, when he had only twice tackled the operetta *The Merry Widow*. Apparently, the course of attack and directorial interpretation were similar to that of the Iași widows:

With The Merry Widow I didn't feel drawn to the easy effects common in operetta performances. In an early version, at Cardiff, I was influenced by Stroheim's film of the same title, which even today seems to me the most daring interpretation of the decadent, disorientated world of this operetta, in which artificial, rhetorical nationalism conceals an almost animalistic greed for all things material. Rather desolate images from the film also appeared in my stage version. I don't need to describe them, so as not to unnecessarily shock operetta lovers, accustomed perhaps, like the English, to the tradition of light, pleasant and cheerful vaudeville, like the protagonist of the title in question. The atmosphere in my performance had a tinge of dark humour, at times perhaps risking to blur the love story in the foreground. If Hanna Glavary and Danilo didn't rise above the general promiscuity, the scales tipped in favour of the grim world and the operetta became a satanic cabaret. Lehár's idea, however, was different, luminous: despite everything, love wins.

When Ioan Holender suggested that I stage a new Merry Widow in Vienna, I was convinced that I had to redress the balance and give to Caesar what belongs to Operetta. I did everything I could to make love triumph at the Staatsoper and, despite a heavy set and no come-and-go, the love story rose above all others.⁶

⁶ Andrei Șerban, *O biografie*, Polirom, București, 2012, pp. 2028-229.

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