

Caragiale between comic and communism

Alexandru SINCA •

Abstract: A work of art is never finished because it acquires and captures new values and meanings with each passing year, decade or century. Thus, Caragiale's dramatic work, mirrors a new world and new perspectives of thought with each staging. What kind of Romania was captured by Sică Alexandrescu in staging the play "A lost letter" from 1954 compared to the one offered by Liviu Ciulei in 1982? What kind of comedy did a society in the midst of a world war taste when "A Stormy Night" was made in 1943 compared to the humor it enjoyed during the years of communism in 1984? If we balance these different stagings of the two plays of the most beloved Romanian playwright, we can observe both the evolution of his dramatic work and the evolution of Romanian society.
Keywords: Caragiale, comedy, communism

What is the purpose and role of theatre in a society? Shakespeare, through the voice of his emblematic character Hamlet, portrays simply the destiny of this art in a few verses: „the purpose of playing, (...) was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; (...) to show (...) the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.”¹³ Theatre reflects the taste of the age, its needs, its wants and its beliefs. The characters that are present in a certain space at a certain time, the flaws that they show, the values, principles but also the vices of the individuals that make up that society will constitute the matter from which the personages will be made flesh, this matter will determine the roles that these characters must play in order to portray a believable painting of the world of which they are a part of. The actors themselves will thus mirror the expectations and stereotypes of a certain society, in order to permit the audience to identify and empathize with the portrayed characters, because actors are „the abstract and brief chronicles of the time”¹⁴.

The meaning of theatrical art must not be trivialized through its assimilation with entertainment, which can be at the most one of its side effects. Nowadays theatre, cinema and television, through its entertainment broadcasts, get blended together in the eye of the untrained viewer because of the fact that the people who are involved in their production are found in all three completely different forms of displaying the

• Phd student, National University of Theatre and Film „I.L. Caragiale”, Bucharest

¹³ William Shakespeare, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.3.2.html> accessed on the 24th of March, 2023

¹⁴ William Shakespeare, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.2.2.html> accessed on the 24th of March, 2023

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

seal of their time. However theatre serves a different purpose in society, it is not a mere tool which relaxes the troubled minds of the audience, it has a sacred origin (The Eleusinian Mysteries) and it retains its sacredness through its message that transcends appearance. Plays do not necessarily reveal the wealth of the playwrights cultural level but rather they represent their answers to the needs of the people of those times. If the ancient Greeks felt the need to humbly follow in the footsteps of divinity and of the great tragic heroes, slowly ruminating over dozens of hours profound themes and implacable destinies, if the Elizabethans subtly asked for the independence of human destiny detaching themselves from the divine's absolute power, contemporary mankind desires a short theatrical pill that encompasses both the grandeur of antiquity and the savor of the renaissance, all bundled up in an easily digestible wrapping.

Compared to Aeschylus and Shakespeare, Caragiale seems to have been elected only yesterday as the first director of the National Theater in Bucharest, but the 110 years that have passed since his death, have left their mark not only on his work, but also on the manner in which it is viewed by society. This change in perception regarding the work of the most famous Romanian playwright can be easily observed by analyzing the different stagings of the plays "A stormy night" (1943 and 1984) and "A lost letter" (1953 and 1982). At the same time, the analysis of these four different stagings can also provide a perspective on the change in the set of values and principles of Romanian society spanning forty years.

Unfortunately, we do not have access to the first productions of these plays, the ones in which Caragiale himself contributed to their staging, in order to be able to make an adequate comparison of the social changes that took place in Romania, but a simple glance at the film "A stormy night" from 1943 compared to the televised play from 1984, provides a clear insight into how Caragiale is clichéd and mannered over time. In the 1984 production, which was made in full so called communist glory of the Romanian people, the Caragiale's characters, which had already become national emblems of Romanians inner vices and caprices, lose their veracity and authenticity. Thus, it becomes obvious that Caragiale's characters have "each one, a forehead full of labels. Some valid, some expired, some erroneous; but so well preserved and repeated by students, that the effort to peel them off is at least maddening, if not futile."¹⁵

From the style of acting and the directorial concept, to the sets and costumes, including all the details of their realization from the most physical and concrete meaning of the uniforms used, of the posters on the background or the quality of the variety numbers presented on the stage of the famous UNION, to the immaterial and intangible meaning of acting, all these details speak not only about the theater, but

¹⁵ Ana-Maria Nistor, *Cele mai frumoase 100 piese de teatru povestite pe scurt*, Editura Orizonturi, București, 2012, p. 201

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

also about the society in which this phenomenon manifests itself and the standards and principles that govern that society.

If in 1943, in a belligerent but still royal Romania, Jean Georgescu has the freedom to create a film script based on Caragiale's text, in which the Western atmosphere insinuates itself discreetly against the background of a Union-Suisse with variety numbers in French, German and Romanian, the 1984 installation by Sorana Coroamă Stanca is marked by The Mangalia Theses¹⁶, the famous garden remaining only UNION, and the musical numbers having only Romanian lyrics, the cosmopolitanism of the era being timidly suggested by a cancan lacking its specific exuberance. The years of communism had left their mark on Romanian society, and the professionalism characterized by the attention to the veracity of detail gives way to the cheap suggestion of obvious props, a relevant example being the creaking of the polystyrene from which the wall of the house of master Dumitrache was made (in contrast with the sequence from 1943 in which we are shown the application of real plaster on Titircă's gate) or the sufficiency of caricature-painted decorations to reproduce the dimension of the communist-inspired Union located on the opposite pole of the Union Suisse filmed with the necessary extras to reproduce the authentic atmosphere of the garden.

By mythologizing Caragiale, his world suffers because the creators no longer focus on the story itself, but on changing the angle from which an already well-known story is approached. The personality cult proposed by the communist ideology unconsciously extends to the whole of society, not only to Comrade Ceaușescu, but also to Caragiale and implicitly to the actors of that period, to such an extent that the characters succumb to the performers, and the action to the playwright.

Peter Brook states in his famous book "The Empty Space" that "a living theater that thinks it can stay away from something as ordinary as fashion will become obsolete. In theatre, every form once born is perishable, every form must be conceived anew, and the new conception will bear the marks of surrounding influences. In this sense, theater is relativity."¹⁷ If in Jean Georgescu's film, Caragiale's text is presented as if it were its first public appearance, the staging from 1984 starts with the assumption of some known elements, pre-existing in the audience's consciousness, and the theatrical process is widowed from the moment of its birth and thus loses its luster. However, we cannot deny the talent and hard work of the artists involved in making the 1984 television adaptation, and if this staging of Caragiale's text has too many flaws and shortcomings, this is due to social prejudices and an oppressive political context.

The two productions of "A lost letter" do not differ as much as in the previously mentioned case, firstly because the text is not adapted in any of these

¹⁶ Political measures adopted by the Romanian Communist Party in 1983 aimed at imposing communist ideology in the cultural field

¹⁷ Peter Brook, *Spațiul gol*, Editura Unitext, București, 1997, p. 23

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

variants as is the case with the film "A stormy night" from 1943, but it strictly follows, with the exception of a few minor omissions, the original text. Secondly, the political context of the two productions, even if different, does not present the same discrepancy of everyday reality as in the case of Stormy Night, moreover the time elapsed between the two productions is only 28 years while in the other case, more than four decades have passed. What is interesting to notice between the two "Letters" is the interpretation of the actors and the options they have assumed in the direction of the character. A conclusive example is the role of Zaharia Trahanache, balanced between the lucid and intelligent political leader, the main player who knows everything that moves in his city, played by Alexandru Giugaru and the old and tired president, who hides under the mask of senility played by Petrică Gheorghiu.

The difference between Romania in the 1950s and Romania in the 1980s can still be analyzed through the lens of the two productions of Caragiale's play. From the very first scene, the two actors who play Tipătescu opt for different actions during their discussion with Pristanda: Nicky Atanasiu chooses to roll a cigarette and smoke lazily, leaning in a very elegant way on the upholstered sofa, thus portraying the image of the gentleman whose superiority finds its origin in his birth into a privileged family; Victor Rebengiu chooses to shave himself, letting the policeman humbly hold his mirror while he orders him to continue to tell his story, thus displaying his character as an intelligent bourgeois who has won his power and rank by his own forces. Even if we are not given any indication of this fact, it seems inconceivable that Tipătescu in Sică Alexandrescu's staging ever shaved himself, which reveals a world still under the past monarchy's atmosphere, whose social and cultural landmarks from the interwar period had not yet been forgotten.

At the same time, the different way in which the actors who play Pristanda relate to Tipătescu, allows us to observe the blurring of the social ladder's different steps. Even though Tipătescu in Sică Alexandrescu's production is a gentleman who does not raise his voice and maintains a joking tone throughout the conversation with the policeman, Pristanda, played by Marcel Anghelescu, the latter still trembles with fear in front of the prefect when he tries to hide his petty theft. In Liviu Ciulei's staging, Tipătescu has harsh nuances, imprinted with masculine strength, but this does not prevent Pristanda (Ștefan Bănică) from only playing the humble servant to his face whilst referring to his "master" with the swagger of the prowler who believes that only chance has placed the person before him on a higher social level. Thus, it can be ascertained through a simple theater scene, the dismantling of the imperialist world (Europe) in which the nobility had an undeniable privileged status and the formation of a still imperfect world, but which promotes equal opportunities.

The comic couple Farfuridi - Brânzovenescu, the savor of the play "A lost letter" also presents some notable differences in interpretation, relying on different types of humor, however both casts retain Caragiale's indications. If Brânzovenescu's character passes from the simple and native comic of Birlic whose mere appearance

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

on the screen or on the stage causes waves of laughter, to the broad construction of an idiot who is mentally challenged, played by Mircea Diaconu, Farfuridi moves from the elegant and intelligent comic of Ion Finteșteanu to Dem Rădulescu's frothy humor interspersed with gags. The ironic nobility of the Farfuridi character is assumed by both actors because "it is assumed that Farfuridi is a landlord, since he is a (probably prominent!) member of the Agricultural Committee, like Zaharia Trahanache and Brânzovenescu."¹⁸ In order to better mark the preciousness of the Farfuridi character, both directors opt for a few simple costume elements. In the 1954 production, while all the other men are dressed in elegant day suits, Farfuridi and Cațavencu only wear frock coats, Finteșteanu adding to this false elegance through his interpretation, his posture always straight, his chin raised to be able to look down on others, and a soft and clear speech. In Liviu Ciulei's production, on the other hand, Dem Rădulescu is dapper, he wears a striped suit with a pocket watch to which is added a cane that Brânzovenescu, his friend, occasionally has the honor of carrying when Farfuridi's hands are busy with gesticulating an important peroration. Dem Rădulescu, whose autochthonous humor differs from that of Finteșteanu, does not add exaggerated and ridiculous grace in his interpretation, but relies on added gags (such as the vocalizations at the beginning of the speech in act three and the silent gag with the cup of coffee between him, Brânzovenescu and Trahanache) and on the discrepancy between the moments of false elegant eloquence and those of a simple man, from the people.

Also, the relationship between Brânzovenescu and Farfuridi, viewed through the angle of differences in interpretation, changes from one staging to another. If in Ciulei's show, Brânzovenescu is clearly placed below Farfuridi, both through the perception that he is an imbecile and through his servile attitude towards his friend, in Sică Alexandrescu's production, Brânzovenescu is Farfuridi's equal, and only the devotion towards his friend, is what paves the way for Farfuridi to advance in the party before him.

What can be generally noted in the interpretation of the actors comparing the two productions of "The Lost Letter" is a simplicity of performance in Sică Alexandrescu's staging, which draws its comic from context and from Caragiale's brilliant writing compared to a comic built both on situation, as well as on gags and added comic of the characters in Ciulei's show. We can conclude that in 1954, Caragiale's humor was still fresh, the audience was not satiated with his plays, and Sică Alexandrescu's televised production did not need to overcompensate through gags in order to satisfy a viewer that was perhaps harder to please.

The ephemerality of the theatrical performance is perhaps painful for those involved in the theatrical process, but it is precisely this ephemerality that gives the

¹⁸ C. Cubleşan, G. Chiciudean, V. Cubleşan, I. Galață, I. Ghemeș, C. Groza, G. Orian, M. Popa, *Dicționarul personajelor din teatrul lui I.L. Caragiale*, Editura All Educational, București, 2012, p. 138

THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

theatrical art its distinction and specific mystery. Theater is a mirror of the time in which it is made, and this mirroring cannot last for centuries, because times change rapidly. The only clues of the theater that existed two thousand years ago or a few hundred years ago are reviews, words written on paper about few of these performances and the dramatic writings that represent only a part of the complexity of a theatrical act. Even when staging a show whose subject takes place hundreds of years ago, the theater still has the power to bring the debated issue into contemporaneity and to continue to reflect the present and not the past. As Peter Brook states, "it's about communicating meaning - and meaning is never a thing of the past."¹⁹ If theater is time's mirror, then actors are society's reflection. They cannot give life to a past they did not live, they will always play any role according to the era they belong to. "To make an art in accordance with his era, the theater actor must be a man practiced in contemporary thinking, in giving meanings their current interpretation..."²⁰. What can be observed in the four stagings of the two plays written by Caragiale which we are fortunate enough to still be able to watch thanks to the advent of cinema is that each production indirectly mirrors the time from which it is drawn, and if our taste leans more towards the vision of a piece from a certain period over another, it is not because of a lack of talent on the part of the artists involved, but rather thanks to the world to which our soul feels closer.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Brecht, Bertold, *Scriseri despre teatru*, Editura Univers, București, 1977
Brook, Peter, *Spațiul gol*, Editura Unitext, București, 1997
Cojar, Ion, *O poetică a artei actorului*, Editura Paideia, București, 1998
C. Cubleșan, G. Chiciudean, V. Cubleșan, I. Galață, I. Ghemeș, C. Groza, G. Orian, M. Popa, *Dicționarul personajelor din teatrul lui I.L. Caragiale*, Editura All Educational, București, 2012
Nistor, Ana-Maria, *Cele mai frumoase 100 de piese de teatru povestite pe scurt*, Editura Orizonturi, București, 2012, p.201
Shakespeare, William, *Opere vol. VII*, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1959
Silvestru, Valentin, *Personajul în teatru*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1966
Stanislavski, Konstantin Sergeevici – „Munca actorului cu sine însuși vol.1”, Editura Nemira, București, 2013

Filme și teatru televizat:

- 1943 - *O noapte furtunoasă*, regia Jean Georgescu
1954 - *O scrisoare pierdută*, regia Sică Alexandrescu
1982 - *O scrisoare pierdută*, regia Liviu Ciulei
1984 - *O noapte furtunoasă*, regia Sorana Coroamă Stanca.

¹⁹ Peter Brook, op.cit., p. 20

²⁰ Liviu Ciulei în „Teatrul”, nr.4/1958, p. 29 apud Valentin Silvestru, *Personajul în teatru*, Ed. Meridiane, București, 1966