

The Eastern Front of the Romanian Language, the Founding Of the Iași National

Alexandru Florin SINCA*

Abstract: The first steps taken by some of the most prominent cultural and political figures of the Romanian people, from the first half of the 19th century, to develop the national theater in Iași, as well as the significance of these steps in the historical context of the development of modern Romania.

Keywords: Iași National Theatre, Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory, national identity, affirmation of the Romanian language

The art of theater has always been closely related to the history of civilizations and societies, being used as a political propaganda tool or as an instrument for unifying mentalities or even fulfilling a true apostolic role in disseminating religious and spiritual information to the masses. It is for this reason that it is not surprising that the efforts to establish the Romanian theater are entwined with the struggle for establishing the Romanian state and with the fierce grapple of some politicians who found in theater one of the keys that would lead to the salvation of the people.

If the interwar period signifies for many historians one of the peak moments of Romanian civilization and culture, then the 19th century is one of the most important and fundamental periods of construction and design of the socio-cultural aspirations of the Romanian nation and implicitly of Romanian theater. The struggle for the establishment of Romanian theater had two main fronts, one in Bucharest and another in Iași which, even though they were separated territorially and politically, they influenced each other, and their combined efforts gave birth to the beautiful cultural edifice that we today may call the Romanian national theater. The title of the first national theater of

* PhD student I.L. Caragiale National University of Theater and Cinematography, Bucharest

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Romania was claimed by the theater that is now called "Vasile Alecsandri" from Iași, the principality of Moldova managing at the beginning of the 19th century to establish its specifically Romanian artistic priority a few years before Wallachia. Even so, the behind-the-scenes struggle for the birth of Romanian dramaturgy and most importantly for the performing of theatre productions in the Romanian language did not end with the construction of the National Theater building in Iași, instead it continued for decades after this historical moment, simultaneously with the Wallachian efforts to capture the identity of the newly realized nationalism that was just emerging in the theater that was being created at that time. From 1840 onward, along with the appointment of the triumvirate management of the Iași theater (the French theater uniting with the Moldovan one) consisting of Costache Negruzzi, Mihail Kogălniceanu and Vasile Alecsandri¹, we can talk about a Romanian national theater, and the finalization of the construction of the Great Theater from Copou from 1846 crowns this patriotic effort of creating the national theater. However, the efforts made to reach this historical moment were not few, and the restlessness of the fight for the Romanian theater was equivalent to the awakening of the national spirit and the discovery of the identity our people. In Moldova, as well as in the other territories populated by Romanians, especially during the Phanariot reigns, the theater did not have priority in front of the boyars and the ruling class, and the actors, called witties² at that time, were regarded as inferior beings with a questionable morality. Various forms of popular theater such as puppetry, viflaim, irozii, pehlivanii, etc. were enjoyed by Romanians of all ranks, and at the Moldavian court, especially when important foreign guests were invited, the ruler or boyar offered an entertainment program in which acrobats, vaulters or jesters performed. But, even if the taste for theater existed both among peasants, craftsmen and nobles, the existing contemptuous attitude towards those who practiced such entertainments was also kinded by church decrees against these immoral masquerades. It is for this reason, that the effort to consolidate a cult Moldovan theater by the visionaries who discovered the socially unifying power of the

1 Simion Alterescu, Anca Costa-Foru, Olga Fregont, Mihai Florea, Letiția Giță, Jancso Elemer, Harald Krasser, Mircea Mancaș, Lelia Nădejde, Ana Maria Popescu – „Istoria Teatrului în România. Vol. I de la începuturi până la 1848”, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1965, p.210-211

2 Teodor T. Burada – „Istoria teatrului în Moldova”, Ed. Minerva, București, 1975, p.77

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stage, was not an easy one at all. The 19th century begins with political unrest for Moldova, the abusive Phanariot reigns and the Russian occupation between 1806 and 1812 impoverish the country and awaken the nation's distrust in the help of foreign forces, and the echoes of Tudor Vladimirescu's revolution in Wallachia, which will bring back earthly reigns in Moldova reawakens the Romanian national spirit that will lead to the revolution of 1848 and finally to the union of the two principalities in 1859. This is broadly the socio-political context of Moldova in the first half of the 19th century, caught between the tributes of the Ottomans and the expansionist spirit of the Russians, having its capital in the old and beautiful Iași, in whose noble houses French, German, Greek or Russian were spoken, but not the Romanian language. This is how the 19th century begins for Iași theatre, with tricks performed in markets by Greek or Turkish entertainers or with a puppet theater performed by a German from Transylvania (called "caraghios"³ by the Moldavians) until the entrepreneur Gaetano Madji builds a theater in 1809 in which only performances will be given in the Russian language, played by Russian actors, with the main audience being the Russian army that was then occupying Moldova. After Gaetano Madji's artistic troupe retires in 1812, a German artistic troupe will delight the Iași audience with performances in German. "Around 1814, the sons of the boyars who studied in the private Greek school of the teacher Kiriac (...) wanted to represent some theatrical plays as well, and so, after a few months of study, they gave several performances in Greek and French, in the salons of the nobles, amongst which *Death of Caesar* by Voltaire and *Junius Brutus* by Alfieri had a particularly brilliant success"⁴. Not until the year 1816, will the doors to the cult theater in Romanian be opened, by Gheorghe Asachi with the performance "Mirtil and Hloe" played in Costachi Ghica's house in Iași by the children of the Ghica and Sturza noble families, this performance being recorded as the first theater performance in Romanian. It is at this very performance, that an important supporter for the theatrical cause will be gained in the person of Metropolitan

3 From the karagoz puppet and shadow game of Turkish origin that was very popular in Wallachia and Moldova; Simion Alterescu, Anca Costa-Foru, Olga Fregont, Mihai Florea, Letiția Giță, Jancso Elemer, Harald Krasser, Mircea Mancaș, Lelia Nădejde, Ana Maria Popescu – „Istoria Teatrului în România. Vol. I de la începuturi până la 1848”, Editura Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1965, p.101

4 Teodor T. Burada – op.cit., p.82

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Veniamin Costache, who gives his blessing for this kind of manifestations, in effect reforming the old attitude of the clergy by his mere presence.

Gheorghe Asachi represents for the beginnings of the Romanian theater in Moldova more than a simple initiator of the artistic and cultural movement, himself being among the first to manage to integrate the Romanian identity (folk costumes, Romanian language, Romanian myths, etc.) in the still simplistic theatrical performances. Even if he has been criticized for a lack of originality or historical accuracy, odes that are too complimentary in regards to controversial historical figures, and questionable political affinities, Gheorghe Asachi managed to introduce in his literary work (theatre, historical short stories, and poems) a necessary patriotism for the fulfillment of the political program that the principality of Moldavia tended towards. His translations of foreign plays (as was the case with the play "Mirtil și Hloe") were more akin to adaptations, the poet processing the stories in order to have them conform to the Moldovan situation, in some cases even changing the names of the characters by making them Romanian. These localized translations of Gheorghe Asachi, mostly after the plays of August von Kotzebue ("The Lost Son", "The Pedagogue" and "Lapeirus"), will be performed by the students from Iași (graduates of the first Conservatory in the principality of Moldova) in Romanian in 1837.⁵

Despite the enthusiasm with which the first performance in Romanian was received in 1816, enthusiasm that generated new translations of other texts and led to the production of new plays, performances in the national language will suffer an interruption for almost two decades and even foreign performances will be much more limited in the 1820s. The silence of the Iași theater movement gives us significant clues about the social and political problems that Moldova faced in that period, such as the Russian military administration between 1828 and 1834, the cholera epidemic that gripped the capital of Moldova in 1831 or the great fire in Iași in 1827. But this hiatus will be opportune for the development of Romanian theater because during this time, society's perception of those who set foot on stage will improve. Thus, the year 1834 will prove to be auspicious for Romanian theater because on the

5 George Călinescu – „Istoria literaturii române de la origini pînă în prezent”, Editura Minerva, București, 1982, p.96

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one hand, for the occasion of the departure of General Pavel Kiseleff back to Russia, a troupe of young amateurs from Iași, who had long been waiting for the opportunity to show that the Romanian language can also arouse emotion, not only French or Italian, they will perform in the national language "The Moldovan shepherds celebration", and on the other hand, it is in this year, that a titan of the Romanian theater, the actor Matei Millo, will debut in a small play entitled "The military celebration".

An essential merit of Matei Millo, which is often overshadowed by his contributions to the development of stage art, theatrical organization and original Romanian dramaturgy, is that through his passion and dedication, he manages to change the preconceived ideas about the children of boyar families who they wanted to pursue a career in theater. Although the nobility had begun to regard theater with a bit more tolerance, recognizing in it its cultural importance and the significance of this importance in terms of the national momentum, although they enjoyed the existence of performances given in Romanian by dilettantes who came from the ranks of the young boyars, the only one who accepted for his name to be printed on posters or to appear in the chronicles of the era was Matei Millo⁶.

A turning point for the theatrical art of the Principality of Moldova in particular and for the Romanian language and culture in general, is the establishment in 1836 of the Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory in Iasi. The appearance of this form of education for the aspirants to the title of dramatic artists will significantly contribute not only to improving the quality of Romanian performances, but also to increasing their number. However, theater in the Romanian language still failed to arouse waves of appreciation among the ruling class, the French, Italian and German theater were still preferred by the cultured inhabitants of Iași. Mihail Kogălniceanu in a letter from 1837 urges his sisters to give Romanian theater a chance and to be lenient with the lack of experience of the Romanian actors compared to the foreign ones: "Instead of showing your dissatisfaction and preferring the French theater, you must do everything possible to encourage Moldovan actors, because, consider for yourself, the French actors have had models and have played since their youth, things are not the same with the Moldavian ones:

6 Teodor T. Burada – op. cit., p.114

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actors only from yesterday, without having had predecessors before them, they undoubtedly play badly; but as they play, they will do better."⁷.

The Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory in Iași, established by the tireless Gheorghe Asachi, in whose management committee are also Ștefan Catargi and Vasile Alecsandri - the father ⁸, has numerous contributions to the development of Moldovan theater, and among the graduates of this school are Dimitrie Gusti, Neculai Luchian, Gheorghe Stihî ⁹ to mention just a few. In the study program of the first Conservatory in Iași, the declamation course led by Gheorghe Asachi (a much simpler form of today's acting course) was conducted only in the "language of the motherland"¹⁰, an important step towards the fulfillment of the ideal of creating the Romanian theater. At the same time, the existence of the Conservatory stimulates the translating of important authors such as Voltaire or Goldoni into Romanian, but also the original dramaturgy which, through comedies or historical dramas, awakens the national consciousness of the people, delicately correcting their shortcomings. Beyond the didactical benefits brought on by the Conservatory, its founders saw in the development of national theater a true school of morality, an opportunity for the flourishing of the Romanian language and an effective means of correcting society's evils.

The success of the first performance offered by the students of the Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory, "Lapeirus" alongside "Văduva vicleană" from 1837 brings about not only the admiration of the Iași nobility, who send letters of thanks to Gheorghe Asachi and gifts to their favorite performers¹¹, but also the recognition of Wallachian Romanians who will donate seventeen plays translated into Romanian in Bucharest¹² to the library of the Conservatory. The circulation of plays printed in the national language in all territories inhabited by Romanians represents a major factor in strengthening national identity, contributing decisively to the spiritual and cultural union of

7 Mihail Kogălniceanu – „Scrieri literare, istorice, politice”, Ed. Tineretului, București, 1967, p.281

8 Simion Alterescu, Anca Costa-Foru, Olga Fregont, Mihai Florea, Letiția Giță, Jancso Elemer, Harald Krasser, Mircea Mancaș, Lelia Nădejde, Ana Maria Popescu – op.cit., p.170

9 Teodor T.Burada – op.cit., p.130

10 Ibidem, p.140

11 Teodor T. Burada – op.cit., 144

12 Ibidem, p.147

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all Romanians, which will naturally precede the administrative-territorial union.

In 1832, the Fouraux brothers opened the first space especially designed for hosting theatrical performances, namely the Variety Theater¹³, which will have performances in French and which will in time receive a subsidy from General Pavel Kisseleff, governor of the principalities of Wallachia and Moldova during the Russian military administration. The second recorded show in Romanian in Iasi, the theatrical celebration organized as a farewell party for the Russian general will take place in this first theater of Iasi. The students of the Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory will benefit from the existence of this theater, not only from a material point of view because of the professional stage they had access to, but also through the exposure to the playing style of the French actors. To put it plainly, the first half of the 19th century is the period when the taste for authored theatrical performances developed not only among those who benefited from a good material standing, but also among the masses, and these masses were eager for theater in the national language, that is, in a language that they can understand. At the same time, through the translations of universal works into Romanian and their representation, the Romanian public is exposed to European culture, being made aware of the great reforming ideas of the era. At the same time, from the show given for General Kisseleff and the small Romanian play "The military celebration" performed for the name day of the ruler Mihail Sturdza, theater in the Romanian language begins to take shape and maintain some constancy in the cultural life of Iași. It often happens that after a French vaudeville was performed at the Variety Theatre, Moldovan dilettantes would go on stage to perform a short play in Romanian, thus offering their unspoken support for the formation of a Romanian theater. Matei Millo, who since his debut had a resounding success, will discover his ardent passion for the theater and will fight for the support of theater in the Romanian language, playing in 1835 two plays written by himself, "A romantic poet" and "Postelnicu Sandu Turkey", the latter being unfortunately one of the lost writings of our nation¹⁴.

13 Simion Alterescu, Anca Costa-Foru, Olga Fregont, Mihai Florea, Letiția Giță, Jancso Elemer, Harald Krasser, Mircea Mancaș, Lelia Nădejde, Ana Maria Popescu – op.cit., p.167
14 Florin Tornea – prefață la „Primii noștri dramaturgi”, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1956, p.31

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The establishment of the Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory brings to the Iași stage a purely Moldavian theatrical season for the first time (1837-1838) which will take place in the Variety Theater through a collaboration with the entrepreneur of the French troupe Fouraux and later with Paolo Ciabatti. The repertoire of this season primarily contained comedies (mostly translations adapted by Gheorghe Asachi or Costache Negruzzi after Kotzebue), but also some attempts at historical dramas by Gheorghe Asachi such as „Petru Rareș” and „Dragoș Vodă”. It should be noted that the subscription to the season of the French troupe was considerably more expensive than that paid for the performances of the Philharmonic-Drama Conservatory. For a deeper understanding of the reality of the capital of Moldova at that time, it should be mentioned that Iași was visited by a large number of immigrants, and the national love that can still be observed today for everything that is foreign, created an opportune environment for petty swindlers and liars to get rich off the good faith of the Moldovans. In his seminal work, "The History of Romanian Literature from its Origins to the Present", George Călinescu remarks; "Iași of that time appears to us today as a group of naive Orientals scared of adventurers. French theater was being played (...) Ciabatti, the director of the French theater, who died in 1840, was able to have collected jewels, silverware, antiques, furniture, foreign wines and to acquire a vineyard with a house and a garden in Vlădiceni. Foreigners pretending to be French, but usually being Germans, Italians, come from all directions just passing through or stopping. Fraudsters, losers abound."¹⁵ Small foreign businesses flourish in the capital of Moldova (the same happens in Wallachia), tinctures, cosmetics, tapestries, clothing, anything brought from abroad is appreciated because of the snobbery of Romanian nobility.

Romanian dramaturgy is searching for its identity in this period, having the same two main fronts, Bucharest and Iași, making simultaneous efforts, even encouraging each other¹⁶. Starting with localized translations, then with short plays that fail to break away from the element of imitation, moving on to historical dramas that showcase the achievements of great rulers and that are very well received by the national spirit that is awakening in the

15 George Călinescu – op.cit., p.209

16 Costache Caragiale comes to Moldova in 1938 and performs shows in Romanian in Botoșani (1938) and in Iași (1939).

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population, Romanian dramaturgy is making important steps and quite quickly (just a few decades) towards reaching its original voice that will be captured first by Vasile Alecsandri in Moldova and then by Ion Luca Caragiale in Muntenia. Among the first playwrights of Iași are Gheorghe Asachi, Matei Millo, Mihail Kogălniceanu and Costache Negruzzi, pillars of Iași cultural life. The favorite subjects of their works are taken from the Moldavian reality of the times, Costache Negruzzi will scandalize the audience with his satire of the nobles morals ("The Muse from Burdujeni") and with bringing to the forefront the contemptuous opinion of the peasants towards them ("Two Peasants and five charlatans")¹⁷, Matei Millo will also support the pure soul of the Romanian peasant ("Baba Hîrca"), and Mihail Kogălniceanu will, in turn, try his hand with a bourgeois comedy "Two women against a man" whose role is rather a means of urging the people to support and watch Romanian theatre.

From what has been presented so far we can clearly see how the phenomenon and theatrical manifestations contribute decisively to the affirmation of the Romanian language and to the coagulation of the national identity of our people. The most important cultural and political personalities of the Romanians, give theater a place of honor among the institutions of state, and from the turmoil and anxieties that the founders of modern Romania suffer in the 19th century, from their offerings and sacrifices, more shall emerge than a simple spectacular impression, but rather the very cornerstones of theater, nation and the Romanian state of today.

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17 Florin Tornea – prefață la „Primii noștri dramaturgi”, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă, București, 1956, p.34

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