

Lessons Regarding Liberty

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Abstract: Research represents a form of expression of the need for exploration from which questions and reformulations arise, but also a way of assimilating fundamental "lessons", about the profession, about life; and – thus –, the story goes on. Thus, exploring the "Horia Barbu Opreșan" fund, within the archive of the "Romanian Peasant Museum" (MTR), in Bucharest, has implicitly allowed me to approach the labor behind the books about the history of popular theater (with or without puppets). In my mind, questions sprout through which I return to his most well-known works, *Teatru fără scenă* [*Theater without a Stage*] and *Teatrul popular românesc* [*Romanian Popular Theater*]. What was not included in the volumes? What remains in the sealed files with strings, like crosses of the researcher's destiny.

In fact, the three puppeteers – Ion Perjan, Ghiță - *Artist of the World*, and Rudy (Rudolf) Nesvadba - whose profiles are outlined by Horia Barbu Opreșan, urge us to reflect on the necessity of rearranging information. The history of animation theater in Romania - a puzzle of unknown theatrical destinies, but which have often produced unforgettable emotions, invites a reevaluation of informative resources - more or less known. Each reader has their own perspective, born from their own concerns; each spectator has their own reception, born from personal searches; the lesson of freedom of choice represents a possible meeting point.

Key words: MRP¹ archive, puppeteers, Horia Barbu Opreșan, research, history of theater, creativity

Research represents a form of expression of the need for exploration from which questions and reformulations arise, as well as a way of assimilating fundamental "lessons" about the profession, about life; and – thus – the story continues. I lecture, with gratitude, the books of authors concerned with the history of puppet theater in Romania; thanks to them, I have been able to formulate my own path of understanding and have been able to teach what and how much I have gathered. In February 2024, I had the chance to enter the archive of the "Museum of the Romanian Peasant" (MRP) in Bucharest. I

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¹ Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Bucharest

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did it with emotion and hope that I would find clarifying information about popular puppeteers. To my surprise, I arrived in a large and bright room, where there were only young researchers, concerned with very clear subjects and deadlines. Here, you work... with gloves - no one needs to tell you - you notice it immediately; you feel responsible for the selection and correlation of documents. The purpose of my visit was to get closer to the Horia Barbu Oprișan fund and - implicitly - to the effort behind the books about the history of popular theater (with or without puppets). Questions sprout in my mind through which I approach his most well-known works, *Teatru fără scenă* [*Theater without a Stage*] and *Teatrul popular românesc* [*Romanian Popular Theater*]. What was not included in the volumes? What remained in the sealed files with strings, like crosses of the researcher's destiny. My time is limited; I use my intuition and first go through the digitized collection of photographs. I recognize some of them; they have been published in volumes; however, some have not. Through them, I reconnect to the classes of "History of Puppet Theater" held (in the 1990s) by the distinguished professor and folklorist Vasile Adăscăliței; my generation's chance was interrupted by human shortcomings that prevented him from continuing his collaboration with the University of Arts (then, the Academy of Arts) and... no one took over the course. He also had an impressive collection of photographs and notes, made during "field research," throughout his life, which deserve to be revisited. In fact, the time spent in the presence of the professor was equivalent to a fundamental lesson about the passion of the researcher; through it, meaning is born.

This overlap of thoughts helps me access two approaches: people and forms; the archive, for me, does not represent a space of dry, inventoried, and filed documents, but one of life fragments and reception of a time. Puppeteers and researchers are connected by the unseen threads of the desire to communicate the story woven in the metaphor of the times and... the lessons about embracing a way of life. This time, I will only seek information related to the world of Romanian popular theater. The relationship between the two identified themes allows me to open avenues of analysis regarding the degree of freedom manifested through the art of the puppeteer and (why not) to trigger questions.

I. People

The world of puppet theater is a colorful one. The history of this art can be seen, in fact, as a kaleidoscope of life; puppeteers have continually spun it and shown us what they have captured. I am bound to them by the restlessness of exploration and the embracing of the freedom to tell stories about life, humanity, and imagination. What drives them to do what they do? Simply because that's how they were born; no one can make you a puppeteer

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– you either are or you're not; you can learn, you can accumulate techniques, but the mask, the puppet (with or without strings), the metaphor, and the accompanying story all come from within.

The photographs from the analyzed collection help me receive two types of messages: about freedom and about the illusion of freedom; captured in facial expressions, body attitudes, or costumes, the unspoken messages invite reflection. Some particularly catch my attention; I note their "quota" and promise myself that I will try to decipher their stories; just the analysis of these images could generate a study of theatrical anthropology; however, their use involves special approvals and time, so the scolding will proceed in phases. The analysis of the documents leads us to observe that, beyond the fact that they could be classified into the main collection stages marked by the author in the accompanying notes, the objectivity and synthetic form of the recordings are important. Revisiting the same folkloric areas, before and after 1940/1945, allowed them to transmit, beyond time, information about freedom and the illusion of freedom of expression – even when the reference points are domestic subjects. Obviously, the research can be expanded; at this point, we will only reflect on three popular puppeteers who have taken on the narrow path of "unbudgeted" popular puppeteers, waiting to be rediscovered.

Ion Perjan – a puppeteer who caught the researcher's attention. This time, the meetings are placed in time: "It was in the '30s (but I returned to these places several times in the '50s – '70s)."² Simple and almost telegraphic, Horia Barbu Opreșan helps us understand the role of popular puppetry in the interwar period. "Who hadn't seen Perjan? There was no village where Perjan hadn't stopped with his puppets. The season in Cernavodă wasn't long. He performed as long as there was a fair; in spring, a month in summer and a month in autumn. From Cernavodă, he went down to the Danube and then from there, on a well-beaten path, to every village. He was just as well-known as the *Torbașii* [*The quivers*]. In the '20s – '30s, theater was unknown in these parts of the country. Perjan brought theater to villages with a life more than patriarchal. The village was delighted to receive something new. Everyone went to see *Vasilache and Mărioara* and no one paid attention to the fact that they had seen the same scenes before; for everyone, the show was more than an event."³ The writing triggered my curiosity and I dreamt of discovering more generous notes in the archives; I was glad when I read: "Perjan walked around with *Vasilache and Mărioara*; he lived in Cernavodă; in Cernavodă, he had his tent; he had his own music and Swings; he walked all over Dobrogea

² Horia Barbu Opreșan, *Teatru fără scenă* [*Theater without a Stage*], Editura Meridiane, București, 1981, p. 179

³ Idem, p. 180

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with his puppets. He played Vasilache and Mărioara at school behind a curtain; when he got bored in Cernavodă or didn't have an audience anymore, he left for the villages of Dobrogea. Perjan walked around until the '40s."⁴

The hand written text by the author presents two types of writing, which could lead to the intervention of a collaborator; without handwriting expertise, we will not launch any hypotheses; we will only limit ourselves to enjoying the information transmitted synthetically and objectively, through which we can infer the entrepreneurial abilities of the *freelance* puppeteer – he had embraced the destiny of a free man, bringing joy to those who lived in places where (apparently) nothing happened; he broke the monotony of domestic life, uttering what was not usually said aloud. Furthermore, we have the additional chance of understanding the working techniques specific to that period (the '70s), as the page is a standardized document; thus, we observe (even if not filled out), the sections.: „Text magnetofon nr. ...; Gen.: ...; Inf. ...; Orig. ...; Culeg.: ...; la ...; în ...”⁵

Text magnetofon nr. 200

Gen.: Inf.:
Orig.: Culeg.: la: în:

Perjan
28.5.72

Perjan numbla cu Vasilache
si Mărioara;
laomă în Cernavodă;
în Cernavodă area Baraese;
area murgie Am. si Leagăne;
numbla toată Dobrogea cu păpușile
fuses pe Vasilache si Mărioara la școlă și
pelece; când se plătisea la Cernavodă
sau nu mai avea fișă pleca în satele
Dobrogea.
Perjan a numblat până în '40.

If we read between the lines of the published volumes, especially in the case of the one from 1987, we will notice how the life story was brought to attention; everyone had (and has) the right to interpret from their own

⁴ MRP Archive, Documentary Fund Horia Barbu Oprișan, File 4, File 200

⁵ Ibidem

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perspective, to emphasize the triggering need, the power to pursue their dream, or the entrepreneurial spirit. Let's summarize the journey: the young poor man, coming from the village, sees "the rags and Vasilache" at the fair in Târgu Jiu; the puppets fascinate him, and he decides to start apprenticeship; over time, he learns the craft and sets out into the world to perform with his puppets "on his own account." The recipe for success was also taken up in Moldova, a aspect noted in the *Romanian Popular Theater* by invoking Gavril Ciucanu, who chose to reproduce the *Vasilache and Marioara* show, as he had learned it from Perjan. Each recipient can take their own lesson; I highlight dedication, joy, and commitment.

About *Ghiță "The World Artist"*... I haven't found (yet) too much information that hasn't been included in *Theater without a Stage*; the two pages seem to contain all the information that Horia Barbu Opreșan gathered about "Ghiță (Gheorghe Evgheni)" in 1972, who was "over 70 years old"⁶ at the time. However, we notice that the Teatrul Țândărică website provides the following clarification: "born in 1909"⁷, which leads us to accept that one of the assessments is approximate. In fact, the situation was clarified in the volume published six years later, *Romanian Popular Theater*, where it specifies: "«Ghiță The World Artist», whose real name is Gheorghe Evghenie, born in the village of Tarnauca, Botoșani County, in the year 1912."⁸ He initially met him in Frumosu⁹ playing "Vasilache and Mărioara" in a traditional way, specific to the puppeteers' shows at fairs, which reminds us of the lineage from the ancient satirical puppet theater. We are drawn to a remark: "The subjects of the plays had changed. They all now had a moral and a somewhat didactic feel. If it wasn't *Vasilache*, people made fun of him."¹⁰ Although we cannot establish with exactitude the time distance between the two encounters, we can observe how his longevity in the field implies two aspects: diversification of the spectacular expression means used and adaptation to the new socio-political context. Admiration for this puppeteer is reflected in the way his biography is presented, emphasizing his strength in pursuing his dream: "He didn't learn from books. Being a shepherd, one day

⁶ Horia Barbu Opreșan, *Teatru fără scenă [Theater without a Stage]*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1981, p. 266.

⁷ <https://www.teatrultandarica.ro/personalitati-g/>, accesat la data de 20 martie 2024

⁸ Horia Barbu Opreșan, *Teatrul popular românesc [Romanian Popular Theater]*, Editura Meridiane, București, 1987, p. 209

⁹ Frumosu – Town located on the Bistrița River Valley.

¹⁰ Horia Barbu Opreșan, *Teatru fără scenă [Theater without a Stage]*, ed. cit., p. 265

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he went to a fair in Darabani where many rags had come; he saw the *Vasilache and Marioara* show at one of them. He stood frozen all day watching the puppets; on the way back to the sheepfold, a thought took hold of him: to also perform with puppets. From that moment on, he became a puppeteer."¹¹ Another powerful lesson about native talent and determination is offered, forgotten, left in the shadows; reflecting on it, we can approach the status of the contemporary professional puppeteer/artist, the fears accompanying young people at the beginning of their journey.

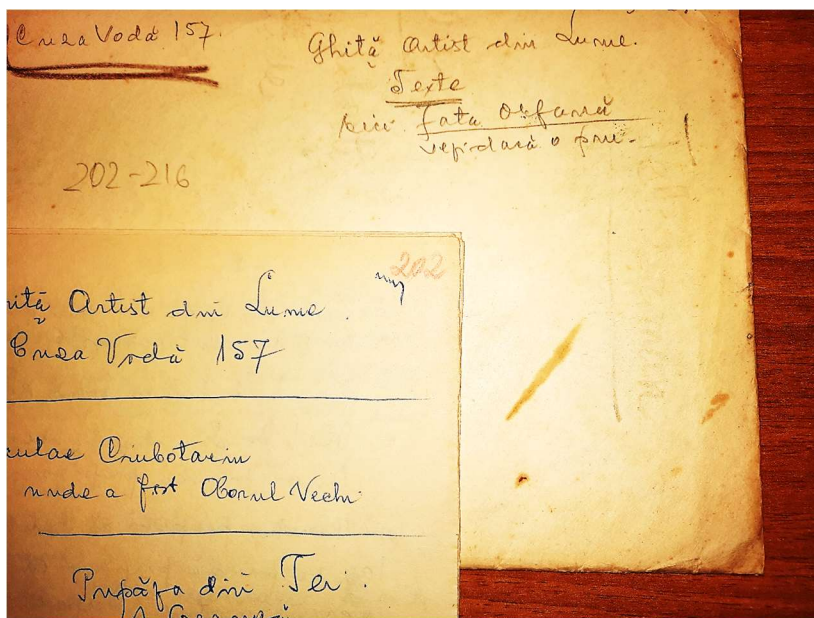
We note the contents of an undated note, identified in the MTR archive: "Ghiță The World Artist. Texts. Here is the *Fata Orfană* [*Orphan Girl*]- see if you can include it."¹² - the associated text representing a play that could lead us to the theme of the "orphan girl" persecuted by her stepmother, perhaps a feminine and reversed version of his own childhood. The idea of including dramatized stories in the *World Artist's* repertoire is confirmed by the existence, within the same file, of three texts: *The Cuckoo from the Lime Tree*, *Lelea Casandra*, and *The Fox* and (the already mentioned) *Orphan Girl*. In 1987, readers received clarifying information: "The sketches – his "creations" – have subjects from today's village life. They are designed with a moralizing purpose. Here are the titles of the ones we saw in 1983: *Vasilache and Marioara*, *The Stepmother*, *The Temptation*, *Children at School*, *Shepherd with Sheep*, *Old Grigore and the Calf*, *Country Wedding*, *The Working Man and the Lazy One*, *The Cuckoo from the Lime Tree*."¹³ Surely, the puppeteer, unaware of books, collaborated with other creators in the world of popular theater, as well as with family members; we can infer his memory, improvisational skills, and desire to remain connected to the audience, in a socio-political context where censorship didn't leave much room for free expression.

¹¹ Horia Barbu Oprișan, *Teatrul popular românesc* [*Romanian Popular Theater*], ed. cit. p. 209

¹² Archive of the Museum of the Romanian Peasant, Horia Barbu Oprișan Fund, Folder 4

¹³ Horia Barbu Oprișan, *Teatrul popular românesc* [*Romanian Popular Theater*], ed. cit. p. 209

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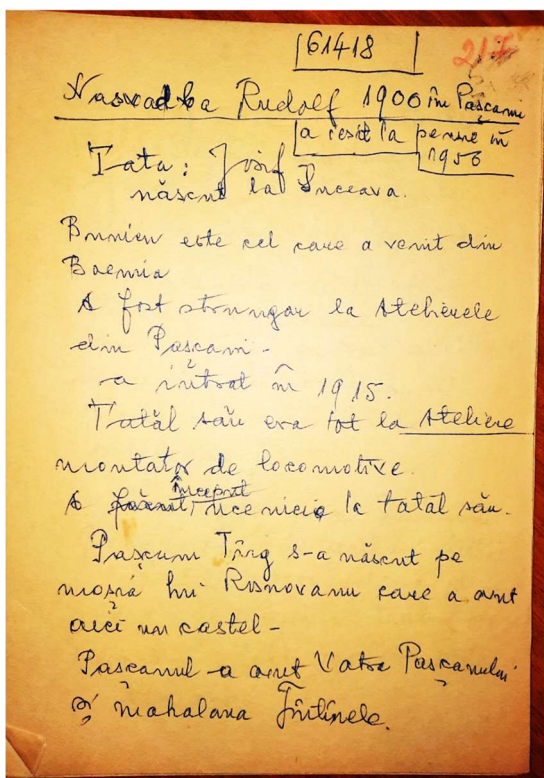
In 1974, he enjoyed recognition for his perseverance and passion; he was invited to the Village Museum – alongside Ion Borțea, Ion Ciubotaru (from Piatra Neamț), Rudi Nesvadba, and others, in an event initiated by the "indefatigable" Margareta Niculescu and organized by the "Institute of Ethnology and Dialectology"; Ioana Mărgineanu documented the moment in the "Teatru" Magazine¹⁴, associating it with an aura of tenderness (how else could she have done it...?), but which helps us understand the inventive restlessness of the popular puppeteer. The corroboration of the information we have leads us to notice his evolution, his adaptability, and creativity – with one condition: to overcome the limitations of prejudice, complacency, and inner turmoil.

However, Rudy Nesvadba's story, whom the author calls the "patriarch of puppetry, because he marks a moment in the history and life of puppet theater"¹⁵, is different - it introduces us to the realm of urban influences. I effortlessly and joyfully found the already famous photograph from his old age in the digitized database, also published in specialized works or websites; fortunately, I will also find the accompanying notes in the archived files. The

¹⁴ Ioana Mărgineanu, *Jocuri populare cu păpuși la Muzeul Satului* [Popular puppet games at the Village Museum], în Revista „Teatrul”, nr. 11, anul XIX, noiembrie, 1974, București, pp. 82 - 85

¹⁵ Horia Barbu Opreșan, *Teatrul popular românesc* [Romanian Popular Theater], Editura Meridiane, București, 1987, p. 209

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existence of the theater troupe at "Mihail Sadoveanu" College in Pașcani, named after him, makes us reflect on the need for role models and the unknown impact of encounters with the art of puppeteers. His artistic journey reminds us of the importance of the actor training of the puppeteer, because: "Before becoming a puppeteer, Rudy was an actor. In 1911, a Polish man – Kwasznewski – a turner at the workshops (CFR Pașcani Workshops – note) organized the first theater troupe. Rudy was part of this troupe and received his 'baptism' on stage on December 27, 1911."¹⁶ His professional portrait also includes two other traits, recognizable in the case of the other two examples presented:

initiative and creativity. We also note the role of his father in the appearance of "Gogu", the mechanical puppet, in 1966, a character that accompanied him until 1984; in fact, the researcher's testimony sparked my desire to find out what was not published: "With what Rudy narrated to me, I could fill a book that would be a delight and an illustration of what his father could concoct."¹⁷ Some stories have remained untold, in the files that I eagerly open with feverish excitement; through them, I discover not only new aspects of the history of the professional family but also some that take me back to the space of my childhood travels; Vatra Pașcani was a peaceful place, where human relationships had a certain warmth, also invoked by Horia Barbu Oprișan.

Returning to his father, of Czech origin, settled in Pașcani in 1886, we can understand the genetic heritage received. "His father was a handyman, skilled at everything and especially ingenious. He loved the theater for which he showed a special inclination."¹⁸ Vitality seems to be a family trait. The fact

¹⁶ Idem, p. 210

¹⁷ Ibidem

¹⁸ MTR Archives, "Horia Barbu Oprișan" Fund, Folder 4/ Tab 234

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that Rudolf Nesvadba retired in 1956 and launched "Gogu" on stage in 1966 indicates the creative energy of this artist; the number of pages (from the archive) with observations referring to him demonstrates the admiration he received, fully justified, and the fact that he was seen playing at the age of 83; moreover, Horia Barbu Opreșan considered him "the last puppeteer from the splendid gallery of puppeteers from Moldova."¹⁹ It would be interesting to know what exactly determined him to use this name for his character, widespread at the time; for now, we can only imagine.

The notes from the "Files," about his biography, bring to light lost images of a place marked by an apparent patriarchal tranquility, but also the changes that have occurred over time. The repertoire of the "CFR Club" in Pașcani helps us in this regard: This group represented: *The Barber of Seville*, *Baba Hîrca*, *The New King*, *Heidelberg of Old*, *Potas Perlmutter*²⁰, *Don Vagmistnn*, *Disaster*, *Take*, *Ianke and Cadîr*, *R.O.R.* by Karl Csapeck. He played in all the plays, always being the main character.

He played in this troupe for 25 years without interruption.

After the Second World War, he played at the Club – at CFR: *The Communists*: M Davidoglu; *The Storm*: Ostrovski; *The Fires of P.*: Gh. Dimitrof (bulgarian).²¹ However, the theater performance is the result of collective work; the documents offer interesting information about the directors or set designers involved: "At the beginning, their theater had a director in Cimpoară – he was the station chief; for *Baba Hîrca*, the direction and the idea of putting the show together were by Isac Gheorghe who was at that time involved in the movement in Pașcani. Manole Popescu, an engineer at the Workshops, was the first to do the set design for many plays – then those in the workshops materialized them. He also painted the first curtain.

The large curtain was painted by Cristea Dumitru – storekeeper at the materials store in the 1930s.

This Cristea Dumitru was a graduate of the Belle Arte from Cluj and, not having where to work, he got a job at the Workshops in Pașcani. From this moment on, this Cristea made their decorations until he moved to Iași."²²

The history of theater takes on new nuances; places and times that seemed devoid of theatrical ferment reveal new facets, even if they are related

¹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰ Probably an adaptation inspired by the American silent comedy "Potash and Perlmutter" (1923)

²¹ MTR Archives, "Horia Barbu Opreșan" Fund, File 6148, File 220 - 221 (pp. 4 -5)

²² Idem, 221 -222 files, (pp. 5 -6)

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to what we call "amateur theater," a subject that deserves more attention – it can offer unexpected information about the cultural life of those complicated times. It is important for researchers to overcome the limitations of prejudices and programming that can dilute curiosity.

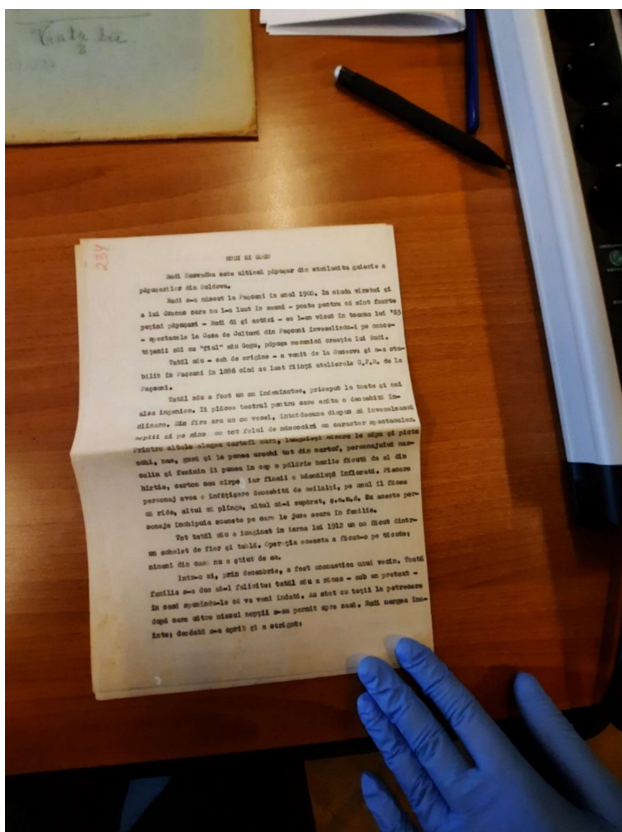
II. *Shapes*

The puppeteer's body becomes a kind of chrysalis, from which the animated form is born; it is not just an object, but a materialized extension of a desire shouted out to the world (at any risk). All three puppeteers, to whom we have referred, help us understand that it is not (only) the complexity of the animated system – the puppets – that fascinates the audience. The photographs from that time show us that the puppets played in the "panoramas" were made in a style devoid of aesthetic refinement, in a primitive style (reminiscent of the kai-rai puppets of the nomadic animal breeders from 12th century Japan), but full of expressiveness, carrying the energetic charge of belief in their mission. They had chosen this way of life and followed it with commitment. "This theater, somewhat strange if we look at it in its entirety in the provinces – I refer especially to Oltenia - was actually a theater of professionals not like *Irod, Jianu, Bujor, Nunta* and the other plays of this theater. Except for Moldova, where the young men and some younger peasants went to the areas of Roman, Iași, and Neamț – not in many villages - during the winter holidays, turning it locally into a popular theater served by peasant actors, in the rest of the country – especially in Muntenia, Dobrogea, Oltenia, and Transylvania – it was and is a theater only for professionals."²³ The puppets used in these shows are presented in numerous works, so we will not go into technical details. Their simplicity became expressive through interpretation; meeting them represented a moment of liberation – the audience heard their unspoken thoughts, saw fragments of life in metaphorical forms, and could laugh (or at least smile).

It is worth emphasizing the impact of the mentorship relationship, of transmission from one generation to another, on the forms of performance and – especially – on the types of puppets used, which can be identified both in specialized works and in the documents preserved (still) in archives. Thus, the pages dedicated to "Rudi and Gogu" help us understand the role played by Rudi Nesvadba's father in his artistic formation. The identified fragment brings to our attention a spectacular form that is less talked about, approached by him: "By nature, he was a more cheerful person, always willing to cheer up the children and himself with all kinds of spectacular inventions. Among other

²³ Horia Barbu Oprișan, *Teatrul popular românesc [Romanian Popular Theater]*, ed. cit., p. 191

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things, he would choose large, elongated potatoes, which he would carve and paint eyes, nose, mouth, and would put ears, all made of potatoes; he would put a funny hat made by him from cardboard or scraps on the male and female characters, and a flowery headscarf on the woman. Each character had a different appearance from the others, one he made to laugh, another to cry, another to be angry, etc. With these characters, he imagined sketches that he would perform in the evening with his family."²⁴ The information outlines not only idyllic domestic sequences with influences from Czech and German

culture (within which puppet theater was present and in the education of children – including in the 19th century), but also the practice of a form of animation theater still used and known as "vegetable theater." Reevaluating the spread of such practices in the interwar period could change our perception of the theatrical techniques used in Romania at that time, could diminish prejudices regarding manifest theatrical forms.

Even the history of "Gogu" is not devoid of the influence of Iosif Nesvadba, who "imagined in the winter of 1912 a man made of iron and sheet metal."²⁵ The story went on, and the passage of time represented a good ferment. "Gogu, the mechanical puppet, is the result of what his father saw. He imagined in 1928 a giant, mechanical puppet that he wore around the house and yard, delighting everyone. It was not difficult for Rudi to imagine a puppet that would move its hands, feet, and head. Gogu is made of thick, pressed cardboard. It looks like a ten-year-old child. Inside, Rudi built a system with

²⁴ MTR Archives, "Horia Barbu Opreșan" Fund, File/File 234

²⁵ Ibidem

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springs and levers that he manipulates. For this purpose, he left a hole in the back of Gogu, a hole that cannot be seen because Gogu stands with his back somewhat stuck to Rudi, he being the one who operates the mechanism from the inside with a hand inserted through the hole."²⁶ Ventriloquism, although not widespread, was present. Its use in a dictatorial context can mean more than we are willing to admit at first glance – it can equate to an exercise of freedom in a world of pseudo-freedom.

A brief journey into the silent world of archives has allowed us to revisit the work of Horia Barbu Oprișan and realize the need for reevaluating information about popular puppeteers. Our thoughts urge us to reflect on a possible reorganization of informative resources regarding the history of animation theater in Romania – a puzzle of unknown theatrical destinies, but ones that have often produced unforgettable emotions. Each reader has their own perspective, born from their own concerns; each spectator has their own reception, born from personal quests; the lesson of freedom of choice represents a possible point of convergence.

Let us tip our hats to the readers and the audience, as Rudi's puppet used to do in the past.

"Rudi: Hat off! We're in the hall and people are looking at us.

Gogu: (Pretends not to hear. Looks at him inquisitively and mischievously.

Rudi: Can't you hear? Hat off! Take the hat off!

Gogu: (Looks at him again, takes the hat somewhat playfully, and puts it down on the floor)."²⁷

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²⁶ Idem, unnumbered

²⁷ Ibidem