

Disrupted Lives in Romanian Drama on the Recent War of Ukraine. Erica Moldovan's *Manichiura roșie/ Red Manicure* as a Case in Point

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Abstract: This paper will discuss the recent war in Ukraine as reflected in the disrupting events recorded by the media and used as material by emerging playwrights. We refer to Erica Moldovan's *Manichiura roșie/ Red Manicure* which does not account for the conflict from a military or political perspective but grasps the collision between two different human lives separated by age, gender, education and faith, the only characters in the play. The work was inspired by a 2022 article in which the dead body of a woman named Iryna lied unidentified on the streets of Bucha without anyone claiming it. Only after 30 days did her manicurist realize it was someone she knew due to the painted nails seen in a picture from the internet.

Keywords: emerging Romanian drama, Ukraine war, narrative therapy.

Introduction

Much has been said about the relationship between Russia and Ukraine, involving geopolitics, rhetoric related to the Russian world, Russian-Ukrainian unity and identity spheres; in the academic discourse prior to the conflict, there was talk of a 'war of words' that accompanied the armed one, an old alliance dating back to ancient times, more precisely to the 5th century BC when the historian and general Thucydides, in his *History of the Peloponnesian War*, distinguished between the true and the declared reasons (*prophasis* vs. *proscemata*) for waging a war¹. Today, we are left with the reference to a trap and the destiny for war along with the desire to avoid a

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¹ Igor Torbakov, "Ukraine and Russia: Entangled Histories, Contested Identities and a War of Narratives". In Olga Bertelsen (ed.) *Revolution and War in Contemporary Ukraine: The Challenge of Change*, Verlag, Stuttgart, 2017, pp. 89-90.

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conflagration². The discourse since the launch of what Russia called a special operation attempted to contextualize the situation by looking for causes and consequences and identifying the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin leader, his country's domestic factors and external pressures³. Its most diverse effects have been studied, the impact of the Russian Ukrainian crisis following the war being assessed even on global stock markets from the most remote parts of the world⁴.

Recent Ukrainian literature about the war emerged in 2014 when it was considered that the conflict with the former great nation began after more than thirty years of independence, a shadow in which other neighbouring nations also stood⁵; for a Translation Studies scholar, the figure takes the shape of a Proustian madeleine, a reminder of one's college years and an unpardonable mistranslation mentioned in class by a reputable academic, critic and practitioner protected by St. Jerome; drawing on French letters, the example referred to a translation into Romanian of *Concilium Tridentinum*, "le Concile de Trente" by "Conciliul celor treizeci"/ "Council of the Thirty".

The postcolonial discourse familiarizes us with the revenge of the colonized on the colonizer, translated into the large number of immigrants from various parts of the world assimilated into the Western European population (from a non-exhaustive viewpoint, people from Maghreb in France and French-speaking Belgium, Indians, Pakistanis and Nigerians in Great Britain, etc.). Furthermore, there is the case of post-Nazi Germany that received Turks (from Anatolia), just as any literature and film enthusiast

² See Graham Allison, *Destined for War. Can America and China Escape Thucydides's Trap?*, Scribe Publications, 2018.

³ Elias Götz & Per Ekman, P., "Russia's War Against Ukraine: Context, Causes, and Consequences", *Problems of Post-Communism*, 2024, 71(3), pp. 193–205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2024.2343640>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025.

⁴ Md Rajib Kamal, Shaker Ahmed, Mostafa Monzur Hasan, "The impact of the Russia-Ukraine crisis on the stock market: Evidence from Australia", *Pacific-Basin Finance Journal*, 79, 2023, pp. 1-27, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S105752192300114X>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025.

⁵ Pun in Romanian between 'urs' (bear) and the acronym of the Soviet Union (URSS). See Phoenix, *În umbra marelui URSS/ In the Shadow of USSR*, Cat Music, 2000, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cOs3cYUY17A>. Retrieved on April 7, 2025.

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knows about the good German through which an attempt is made to rehabilitate the image of the nation from World War II through fiction, also transformed into successful films that may be based on real facts⁶. However, in the Slavic world there is talk of a *de-facto* colonizer, apparently unique in the postcolonial methodology in which war hits the Ukrainian world as an extreme natural phenomenon of the cataclysmic type presented by state actors as a result of irresponsibility. Unfortunately, it also comes as an inevitability to provide the necessary therapeutic effect to the Ukrainian society expecting victorious narratives⁷, hopeful in a coming of Godot, tired of waiting for the barbarians, a counterpoint of a desert of the Tartars⁸. Even recent Ukrainian book covers depict something broken (a glass, a mirror) torn apart (a piece of paper) or mutilated (a face), unlike other more distant literary periods: *Oblivion* (2016) by Tania Maliarchuk, *Amadoka* (2020) by Sofia Andrukhovych, *Daughter* (2019) by Tamara Gorikha Zernia, *Call sign for Job. Chronicles of the invasion* (2023) by Oleksandr Mykhed and the anthology *Poetry without shelter* (2022)⁹. War is depicted as a result of loss (of one's home, the loved ones, memory, etc.), while also emphasizing the importance of connections, through which those affected become united in the attempt to stay together and in the desire to survive; in addition to the fact that war catalyzes previous traumatic human experiences, it becomes a source of kitsch and obscurity in literature, allowing its recording and recollection for

⁶ See Bernard Schlink, *The Reader* (1995) and homonymous film dir. by Stephen Daldry, 2008.

⁷ Olena Saikovska, "Narrating the war in Ukrainian literature (2014-2023)", *Bulletin of Mariupul State University*, Series: Philology, no. 30 (2024), p. 44, <https://visnyk.mu.edu.ua/index.php/filologia/article/view/166/162>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025.

⁸ Besides alluding to Beckett's work, we also refer to a more recent play staged at the National Theatre in Iasi that uses the absurd of the playwright mentioned above as palimpsest, i.e., *Venirea/ The Coming*, by Valeriu Stancu, directed by Ion Sapdaru, 2024, <https://teatrulnationaliasi.ro/spectacole/venirea-2/>. Retrieved on April 7, 2025. Any parallel that may be drawn with Jauss's horizon of expectation in fiction (Dino Buzatti's and J.M. Coetzee's novels, included) between Russia and Ukraine has unfortunately become real since 2022.

⁹ Olena Saikovska, *ibidem*.

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therapeutic purposes¹⁰ in the absence of the blinding absence of light at the end of the tunnel¹¹.

The Bucha Massacre in *Red Manicure* – a play by Erica Moldovan staged at the National Theatre in Iasi

War theatre has found its most diverse applications, which overseas involve recycling the classics of antiquity with the help of veterans. Thus, the *Theatre of War* project in the United States, in which Willem Dafoe also participates, is intended to be innovative, offering the audience scenes from *Philoctetes* by Sophocles; the guided discussions that follow aim at bringing healing, understanding, compassion and stronger connections in the victims of war, their families and the communities to which they belong¹².

At the National Theatre of Iasi, on the occasion of the centenary of the Great Union, a play that we have already discussed entitled *Theatre of War* was performed¹³; the war in Ukraine would give the audience the dramas *Red*

¹⁰ Olena Saikovska, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-52.

¹¹ Although it recounts the experience of incarceration in a secret prison, the Moroccan fiction is relevant for the healing power of storytelling that kept the inmates alive for nearly two decades. Cf. Tahar Ben Jelloun, *This Blinding Absence of Light*, translated by Linda Coverdale, Penguin, 2006.

¹² *Theatre of War Productions*, “Theater of War: Philoctetes: Willem Dafoe, Jason Isaacs, Nyasha Hatendi, and a chorus of Veterans”, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GeGYkcjd07Y&t=34s>. Retrieved on March 31, 2025.

¹³ *Teatru de război/ Theatre of War*, script by de Florin Lăzărescu, Lucian Dan Teodorovici and Cristian Hajdi-Culea, directed by Cristian Hajdi-Culea, National Theatre of Iași, 2017-2018, <https://teatrulnationaliasi.ro/spectacole/teatru-de-razboi/>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025. See also Ana-Magdalena Petraru, “Teatru de război – omagiul Teatrului Național din Iași la Marea Unire”, *100 de ani de rememorare a Marii Uniri. Actele Conferinței Internaționale pentru Dialog Intercultural DIVA DEVA, Ediția a XII-a, 10-12 august 2018*, Editura Mega, ISBN 978-606-020-055-0 & Editura Școala Ardeleană, ISBN 978-606-797-364-8, pp. 275-282.

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*Manicure*¹⁴ and *The Hague*¹⁵, directly inspired by the events on the Eastern Front. If the former is a play for a small stage based on the experience of two characters, victims of the special operation, the second delights the audience at the Great Hall, offering a larger public the trial of important statesmen led by the great leader from the Kremlin, who have made war-related decisions since 2022.

In what follows, we will refer to *Red Manicure* by critically reviewing it, while trying to avoid the biographical approach. Actress and director, Erica Moldovan begins to write plays to be performed on the stage of the Athenaeum or the National Theatre of Iași and beyond. Winner of *Lecturi/ Readings* project, the play was initially read for free to the public according to the rules of the competition, then the actual staging followed. About her work, the author shares that “it started on an April day in 2022, following an article I read about the broken destiny of a victim of the war in Ukraine. On April 2, first on Twitter and then on Facebook, a photo depicting the hand of a woman killed on the streets of Bucha went around the world. The victim, Yrina, had been recognized by her manicurist, precisely because of the distinctive manicure she had done for her just one day before the conflict in Ukraine began (February 24, 2022). I started looking for information related to this topic and thus I found out the story of Yrina, a 56-year-old woman who remained in Bucha, in the midst of the armed conflict, convinced that she would survive. Yrina’s story impressed me a lot. Then I got up from the couch, sat down at my desk and composed this “eulogy” for her, I created this fictional story of Yrina, who now bears the name Marta, transforming her into an immortal heroine. The play is my first professional dramaturgical attempt and would not have been possible without this impulse and a dash of inspiration, which I want to believe is divine.”¹⁶ The author’s desire, revealed

¹⁴ *Manicura roșie/ Red Manicure* by Erica Moldovan, directed by Irina Popescu-Boieru, National Theatre of Iași, 2023-2024, <https://teatrulnationaliasi.ro/spectacole/manichiura-rosie-2/>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025.

¹⁵ *Haga/ Hague* by Sasha Denisova, directed by Cristian Hajdi-Culea, Național Theatre of Iași, 2023-2024, <https://teatrulnationaliasi.ro/spectacole/haga/>. Retrieved on April 4, 2025.

¹⁶ Magdalena Popa Buluc, „*Manichiura roșie* de Erica Moldovan, în regia Irinei Popescu-Boieru, în premieră la Teatrul Național Iași, Uzina cu Teatru”, *jurnalul.ro*, Dec. 15, 2023, <https://jurnalul.ro/cultura/teatru/manichiura-rosie-de-erica-moldovan-in-regia-irinei->

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in another interview, was to portray the war “from a double perspective”, to rid the text of “exact political or military details, both to ensure its universality and longevity – in the hope that this situation of political crisis will have a finality as soon as possible – but also to be able to focus on the human aspects of the characters.”¹⁷

As a (secret) law of attraction to the play in question, the director notes “the sensitive and lucid analysis of the way in which tragedy is reflected on ordinary people, on collateral victims, on those considered ‘cannon fodder’, ‘calculable losses’ in the absurd and relentless game of the powerful, but lacking a moral compass and scruples.”¹⁸ On Erica Moldovan’s undeniably qualitative work, Irina Popescu-Boieru also testifies to the reading public that she would have preferred that the day for such a staging had not come, for the writing’s topicality to have been surpassed; it would have been better for it to have reached the rank of ‘historical play’ which, unfortunately, did not happen. The particular near us serves the universal everywhere, the characters, simple victims, not war heroes, reaching the rank of ‘symbol’. In the fight for survival, a range of feelings appears (compassion, revolt, etc.) crowned by hope in the wisdom of those who started this conflict to end it as quickly as possible, too¹⁹.

A local perspective on war and its psychological effects is offered to us by a less known interwar work through the perspective of the professor of the Higher School of War back then and the methods of the Romanian-German armies in which spiritual factors of defeat or victory are brought into discussion; thus, fear and the instinct of preservation oppose the instincts of property and family, the need for social justice, the consciousness of solidarity,

[popescu-boieru-in-premiera-la-teatrul-national-iasi-uzina-cu-teatru-951270.html](https://www.muzeulliteraturiiiasi.ro/evenimente/lecturi%C2%B3-spectacolul-manichiura-rosie-de-erica-moldovan/). Retrieved on March 31, 2025.

¹⁷<https://www.muzeulliteraturiiiasi.ro/evenimente/lecturi%C2%B3-spectacolul-manichiura-rosie-de-erica-moldovan/>. Retrieved on March 31, 2025.

¹⁸ Magdalena Popa Buluc, *op cit., ibidem*.

¹⁹ Magdalena Popa Buluc, *ibidem, passim*.

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honour or duty²⁰. Also, the classic *Art of War* by the Chinese general is perfected in the armed conflict against which the play unfolds; it is not known whose fault it is, and whether the indications were clear or not and it does not matter, either; the orders were executed²¹ as the screen in the background was projecting war scenes accompanied by gunshots and explosions that scared the two characters who appeared to be mother and son but were not. He was injured and she was helping him as best as she could. Her red manicure strikes us in contrast to the grey tones given by the room where the two share their memories and give each other hope to go on; the painted nails are a textual element comparable to a round character distinguished from flat ones²². The young man is injured, immobilized in bed, in the absence of a stretcher. She also goes out, finds some food, dry bread or water taken from the hand of a dead person on the street, with the value of holy communion, in a free interpretative stance (in which even the can of fish gives strength similarly to the Son of God who animated the crowd when he multiplied the bread and the fish); we subscribe to the insights given by the Italian semiotician who coined *opera aperta* and gave us a few walks through the narrative forest that could just as well be a dramatic one. If we were to draw on the morphology of the fairy tale in Formalist thought, we would retain an absolute villain who would steal, arrive in flight and immediately begin to act at the state level, cause ‘bodily injury’ or ‘a sudden disappearance’²³; the opponents would be embodied by the enemy troops who seem to be approaching from everywhere, there is no question of heroes (of war), only victims who are each other’s adjvants. The narrative therapy between the two tries to capture the glass half full, the bright side of things. Translated into existentialist psychosophy/psychotherapy, the lies are told by the one lying on the couch

²⁰ Cf. D. Caracostea, *Aspectul psihologic al războiului/ The Psychological Aspect of War*, revised edition, introductory study, notes and bibliography by Eugenia Bîrlea, preface by Ioana Bot, “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, Iași, 2015.

²¹ Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* [PDF], Capstone Publishing, 2010.

²² Cf. E. M. Foster, *Aspects of the Novel*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1927.

²³ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, University of Texas Press, 2009, p. 32, https://monoskop.org/images/f/f3/Propp_Vladimir_Morphology_of_the_Folktale_2nd_ed.pdf. Retrieved on April 7, 2025.

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(here an improvised stretcher, in the absence of a hospital bed): only what brings joy is mentioned (high school years, young love), what saddens, hurts or brings anger is left aside²⁴. The mature female character also relives more unpleasant memories from her married life, which are sweetened by the maternal fulfilment. This helps her sew up the open wounds of the boy who could have been her son or son-in-law, after she pours on him what trace of disinfectant she has left in her purse. The wounded young man controls his reactions as best he can, he is an agonizing mass of flesh who struggles in pain and bites whatever he can get his hands on (a towel stuffed in his mouth) in the hope of mimicking a silent way that the vigilant and omnipresent enemy will not detect.

The war is what dehumanized them and destroyed their lives; the daughter could not save her 70-year-old mother or end her suffering although others showed mercy to their children in more problematic contexts²⁵; a turn of events worthy of classical dramaturgy is displayed by the young man pretending to be someone he was not, getting agitated every time the female character, a kind of adoptive mother in the play mentioned his parents, asked where they lived in Bucha, possibly to look for them, only to give up any initiative as her survival instinct dictated so she assured him that they had to be fine. In the end, it turns out that he is actually a deserter from the Russian army who enlisted for money although his mother begged him not to leave and he was wearing the clothes of a Ukrainian on the street to escape the soldiers who could be looking for him. Except for this, all the memories unearthed for therapeutic purposes were true; before the tragic end of the two characters, ugly forgotten events from the past surfaced, similarly to the husband's confession to his wife on the deathbed as in Dürrenmatt's *Pledge* in which the exemplary consort confessed his crimes. Here, in *The Red Manicure*, equally brilliant until the end, we are being taken to the red room where ghosts reside

²⁴ See Irvin d. Yalom, *Lying on the Couch*, Basic Books, 1996 in which a therapist would have his patient talk about the events in his life and the states produced: *How does it make you feel? Mad, bad, glad or sad?* quintessence ironized by another character in the narrative.

²⁵ A more cynical approach in which a mother kills her son suffering from bone cancer by administering him an injection and then goes to prison is the one in the film *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime*, dir. Philippe Claudel, 2008.

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or horrors from Gothic fiction or modern thrillers²⁶ come from the shadows; yet, despite being prepared for the worst, we only find out about the infidelity of a young wife towards her violent husband²⁷ and a son's theft of money from his father for cigarettes in adolescence. The two end up in a mother-son embrace under the rain of bullets from the enemy who finds them before the curtain is drawn.

Conclusion

The universality of *The Red Manicule* and its relevance for the theatre of war were demonstrated through the numerous analogies that can be made as an exercise in imagination and intertextuality starting from the drama of two characters who could have been mother and son in the face of death. Their lives were disrupted, but they found the strength to ease each other's suffering in their last moments through narrative therapy from which lessons can be drawn for future generations. Although there are many examples from practice, we preferred to stay in the literary realm and brought up Russian formalism (V. Propp), Italian semiotics (U. Eco), existentialist psychotherapy (I. D. Yalom), in addition to war discourse from the interwar era in Romania (D. Caracostea) or universal classics (Sun Tzu). Among the issues, we touched on the impossibility of ending the suffering of a relative who knows that end is coming (in the play the daughter cannot kill her mother), possible in another medium (that of the film, through *Il y a longtemps que je t'aime*, 2008); last but not least, the red of the painted nails as a motif and symbol is inexhaustible, the comparisons going all the way to the American classics of the 19th century (Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*).

²⁶ Among others, *The Red Room* by H.G. Wells (1896) rendered in Romanian as *Salonul roșu* by Corneliu Papadopol (1991), and *Les Chambres Rouges*, dir. Pascal Plante, 2023 (*Camerele roșii* in Romanian).

²⁷ The red of the painted nails could symbolize the scarlet letter sewn on the adulteress' dress in classic American prose. See Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

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