

## ***The Same, Always Different. A Look Towards the Adaptation and Translation Phenomena of the Contemporary Stage Productions***

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to direct the reader's attention to the phenomenon of adaptation and translation, indisputably present among contemporary theatrical productions. The innovation of the rewrites of canonical works is one of the directions towards which the worldwide theatrical phenomenon of recent years has been directed. The justified questions that may arise when researching such performances could be: is the adaptation/translation of a work inferior to the one from which it was inspired, or does it transcend it as value? Do we still need the old canonical stories, are they still relevant to today's societies? Why and how do we revisit the works of other epochs and make them talk about the world now? What can such creation offer the public and how much does the evolution of stage art depend on the response received from the receivers of the artistic act?

**Keywords:** dramaturgy, directing, adaptation, translation, aesthetic experience

Without subestimating the capacities of the large public to decrypt and understand the ideatic substrates, we can see the theatre as "a Bible illustrated for those who do not know to read, and the dramatic author a laic predicator who spreads the ideas of his time", by that referring of the educational role that the art of dramaturgy has and that is put in the service of the performances. But the parable offering would not be possible without the animation of the text with the breath of life, without which everything would be only a "paper-soul" (expression used by Eugenio Barba in *O canoe de hârtie* for naming a written character, not yet incarnated by the actor). The absolute completeness arrives when we forget that we are facing an artefact made by the hands, mind and the feeling of a craftsman. Never the art should try to compete with life, but to transcend it. To show not only a man in "flesh and blood, but the body in an extatic state", where the main look is oriented towards the

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## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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inner movements, the soul motives and the interior dynamic which take shape of scene actions. “Theatre [...] has value only with a magical connection, against reality and danger.” But, in contrast with the way that Artaud used the phrase that precedes his manifest about the Theatre of Cruelty, here we refer to *danger* as the combining place of balance with unbalance, of doubt with certitude, of affective shadows with the illuminated conscience. The dramatic writings and, above all, the transposed form on stage should be capable of restore “the social pulse, historical pulse, humankind drama [...] and the true color of landscape and spirit.

Frequently this type of adaptation to the “current vibe” seemed to upset those who do not know to come across the concepts of *revisiting* the great classics, or the *rewriting* of the canonical dramaturgy. A relevant example would be the production of *The seagull* which Eugen Jebeleanu created at the National Theatre in Bucharest and where a huge number of spectators, with or without expertise, expressed their disapproval regarding the revolutionary elements which the director used over the chekhovian model. The new way of thinking the character Medvedenko, the one in which we can find his homoerotic fascination for Treplev, generated a wave of scepticism. The tragic death of the protagonist in the IVth act is caused by the crime of passion of the teacher. The director proposes a new ending to the play, destroying the mystery of the apparent solitary and unhappy young writer. A vehement supporter of the old principles could ask: ‘With what right comes this modern stage directing that touches the oeuvre of the dramaturge and interpret it however he wants?’ The answer could come also as a question: ‘With what right comes the chemist to take the oil of God from the ground and transform it in thousands of new materials? With what right comes the laboratory researcher that separates the water molecule in H and O?’ This openness of the old forms to the reinterpretation helps the permanent update of the theatre with the present time generating new meanings. Ion Sava, in an article titled *Pitic –Manifest teatral (Democrația, 21 ianuarie 1945)*, describes the romanian theatre the following: “Theatre is not a convenient means of recollection, of the need for contemplation, of rest fun [...] it is a battlefield [...] To disappear the nostalgia of the unspoiled romantics” . Sava even proposes a kind of Theatre Laws, principles that include the following aspects: 'Fight against: Theatre – cafeluta, digestive. Theatre – somnolin, repasant. Theatre – teacher who wants to train idiots. Theatre – pulpit, from which morals are preached at the brothel. [...] The Romanian –theatre, which must have – good or bad – because it is Romanian.” The theatre towards which Sava tried to orient the romanian postbelic stage and the theatre for which Eugen Jebeleanu also militates is that of spontaneity, simultaneity, where the actions on stage synchronize with the speed of action and reaction of the contemporary society.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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But the final answer that should be searched is not if the text preserves or not his dogmatic character, but if he succeeds in reaching the artistic value. 'The work cannot be played on the basis of the validity of his thesis'<sup>1</sup>, event though the ideatic direction could ease the reception process of the whole artistic product as a whole, by the public. And still, the theatre stage is a babilonia of tastes, values and artistic directions and those things give his undoubtedly charm.

Following the trajectory proposed by J. Goldfinger și A. Horsley<sup>2</sup>, the adaptation as a stage writing method must respond to an imperative need to tell a certain story of a certain time understandable for the contemporary public. The essential questions that this new layout should be capable of answering to are: *why* do we need to tell this story and *why* the public wants to hear it now. The contextualisation and the describing of the cultural and the socio-political background of the source-story is important, but, it is also relevant to redefine and adapt this landscape in large, in relationship with the dynamic of the current society. This rephrasing of the context will help for a faster comprehension, the same way as the clear formulation of the intentions and the purposes will create an instant response of the receptors. Either the new proposal remains or not true to the original, it implies coherent dramatical actions which conduct the evolutionary arch of the characters towards the denouement which can be a victory, or aswell, a tragic loss.

The first step is, then, the encounter and the familiarization with the text and the establish of the motivation behind the choice of that work and not anything else. This *gesture* of choosing implies not only a literary or esthetical preference, but also an appetite for enlarging the knowledge and the will of developing an expertise regarding this object of interest, thing that takes time, dedication, passion, generosity, but also innovation, commitment, or even risk. Also the delimitation of the type of adaptation should be a initial phase of the creative process (either it is a time adaptation where we *mirror* the original reference, or another one in which we fabric another paradigm) We must not lose the idea that the final objective is the scenical representation. Therefore, the theatrical value should not lose in front of the literary value).

A successful adaptation illustrates humankind behaviour in a relatable way that keep inside a relevant message for the people of nowadays, but including also the

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<sup>1</sup> *Dialogul neîntrerupt al teatrului în secolul XX*, volumul II, p. 252.

<sup>2</sup> Jacqueline Goldfinger, Allison Horsley, , *Writing adaptations and translations for the stage. A guide and workbook for new experienced writers*, Routledge Collection, New York, 2023.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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original message, adding new nuances. The difficult task is to produce a memorable show.

In a certain way, the directing activity could be seen as an adaptation work in itself, because it transforms the literary medium in a stage reality, adding theatrical mechanisms to literature. However, we will present here the adaptation as a re-writing procedure of a canonical text in a new narrative formula.

Another aspect of interest is about the rights of the author. When we want to make an adaptation after a pre-existing text, we need to research the regulations regarding the author rights. For example, in America, a work ceases to belong to its rightful author after 70 years<sup>3</sup>.

In stage writing, the principle of literary universe *externalization* should be an essential condition that must be repeated as a mantra. The new-created text must prove its availability to be transposed in a show and it must prove its relevance to contemporaneity. It should be able to illustrate an enriched alternative of the written material, on which the public could project his memory belonging and their knowledge and eventually to live an authentic esthetical experience.

The translations, on the other hand, can be identified as the process of conversion of a text from a certain language to another, without losing its ideatic interior. It exists, mainly in theatre (but also the poetry is included in this category), things that are difficult to translate. Colocvial expressions, phrases that come from a specific region, or local references could be a hard task for the translator. Here comes the creative spirit, who must find alternatives, equivalences. The translations could be seen also as a way of building bridges between, because they give the literature the possibility of free circulation, border crossing movements, or even time travelling the eras. But also, it is a way in which the big state forces could impose themselves to those that are smaller, the minorities. Any known foreign language can serve as a tool in which we come closer to another space-time, discovering cultures, ideas. But, the ultimate aim of art (if we follow Aristotle's theories) is to recompose not only the exterior face of the world, but also the *invisible* content that comes within with numerous significations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem, p. 19.

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## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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The responsibility of a writer/dramaturg who translates or adapts a text is that the story gets in time the force of influencing the social perceptions and to modify (altering or evolving) the human attitude towards the reality.

Another help in understanding the stage adaptations is given by Linda Hutcheon și Siobhan O'Flynn<sup>5</sup> who are trying to reduce the stigma given to this genre of creation, the status of 'inferior' work, which reduces the value of the original piece to that of a recycled reference. The art of storytelling has almost everytime a trajectory that has lost its localisation in space and time, but that it is kept alive by the reactualisations. Even if the new version will appear (more or less) unfaithful to the original, this approach could amplify the idea of the text, and not a total desacralisation, as it could be thought. All the art work have intercultural links and influences from other existential spectres. „Adaptation is a repetition, but a repetition without replication.”<sup>6</sup> could be a good definition of the integrant and inclusive character based on another one. It exists also different types that nuance the relations. An author of adaptations can 'borrow' an idea, or he can transform it into another one. He can translate a creative process, or it can cross it in certain points. He can bring a critic or an elege to the original.

A category could be the transposition. Here it is possible to change the medium (from literature to film, from show to film, or the other way around), or of the genre (from tragedy into comedy or viceversa). The context could also be changed, the point of view from which the story is seen. Of course, the material can be extended or condensed.

The adaptation can hide his reference, voluntary. But even in this case it is about a consented act, a „creativ și interpretativ”<sup>7</sup> act, an ”intertextual extended commitment”<sup>8</sup>, resulted from a ”second, but not secondary” work of art.<sup>9</sup> The plagiarism (the unassumed act of, nicely said, intelectual 'borrow') cannot be included in the adaptation sector.

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<sup>5</sup>Linda Hutcheon, Siobhan O'Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, second edition, Routledge, New York, 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ibidem, p. 7

<sup>7</sup> Ibidem, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Idem.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 9.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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One of the capabilities of the adaptation process is that of divising the form and the content, the expression from the idea and to enrich one or the other. The question that raises after all this procedure is: how can we keep the *spirit* of the original work? It is the challenge of those art-gatherers who should be able to show. But then, can we talk about them as creators or only as *interprets*? Our attempt is that of trying to integrate in the art field with full rights, because it is not only about an idea already thought, but also about its path through another sensibility, talent and other interests and visions.

The fidelity kept for a reference could make guilty the practitioners of adaptation and it can include in the group of *imitators*. But the *mimesis* has been since the beginning from the evolution marks of the art. The challenge is to prove, besides the illustration that is already known, the personal layer of experimentation of the chosen material, the capacity of invoking new ideas by accessing the pre-existed ones.

The oral storytelling is not the only method of expressing a narration. It can be transformed into text (literature), image (drawing/painting), sound (music) Povestitul prin viu grai nu este singura metodă de exprimare a unei povești. Ea poate să se metamorfozeze în text (literatură), imagine (pictură), sunet (muzică) and action (theatre, film and even video gaming). This large horizon of accomplishment opportunities diversifies the receptional experience of the artwork. It can become exciting to test how a public from nowadays responds to a text, a story that comes from a total different period of time. New technologies help this updating system and their implementation in this super-fast-developing era. The transmission of a cultural heritage, along with the transfer of the genetic heritage helps the humankind progress, being a phenomena that transcends generations. The thing that makes the difference in the survival of a story is its capacity to penetrate and stabilize in the new cultural environments. But the really impressive thing is not only the ability to exist, but also the ability to enrich the new inhabited space.

All forms of expression of an idea have different forms of materialization, with a particular energy and a specific way of communication. Whether we refer to rhythm, gesture, sound, movement, utterance, image, writing, the arts can coordinate these tools in their favor, the one that the creator has chosen. Theatre, in comparison with other art forms that are mainly temporal (music, literature), or mainly spatial (painting), has the advantage of gravitating between both axes. Another win of acting is that it can use all the skills that are coming from the other branches of art, as it is a cumulative practice. Music will dissolve, direct or intensify a specific emotion, being catalyst of atmospheres.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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The transposition of a text into a stage choregraphical production implies a condensed and essentialized language – the movement. The path from film to acting it is also possible, if we intensify the performativity of the act. The loss of reflectivity is the danger when it comes to scenical artificiality. On the other hand, when we choose to tell a story by mouth or by images projected on the screen, it can slow down the kinesthetic response to that interactive proposal of the performance and to diminish the speed and intensity of their reaction, by including a sort of distance between the piece of art and the consumer of the artistic product.

Even though the cult literature came up after the theatrical manifestations (ritual type of happenings) it managed to reach the level of the first one very quickly, absorbing some of its qualities and even add some layers that were impossible to exist in concrete form. Movie industry has immediately recover the historical gap with the older art fields and it offered the viewer microdetails that in theatre were hard to be noticed.

The financial difficulties could infect the subtle substrates of an art piece, building only an external construction, undefined conceptually. Yet it is not recommended to think that a stage performance is not capable of restoring the human interior. Not only books can make a deep incision in the affectivity and thinking muscle. The speech in the present tense gets the message very close to the receiver. The incarnation of a character by an actor cannot bring to life the written image dreamed by the author, but it can enlarge its borders, by his own individuality.

Is any transposition from text to stage performance an act of adaptation? In theory, the concrete form of a text cannot preserve all the nuances of the writing. But as we already mentioned before, adaptations are those who reclaim their artistic gesture as a conducted process in which a canonic work is modified into a new creation. The paradox of this procedure is that the inspiration source is both hidden and exposed, simultaneously.

Even if we refer to ideas that, apparently, are the same, they do not stay unchanged. The adaptation become the space of re-creation, interpretation and re-reading of a story, by the esthetical and intellectual pleasure of dialogue with the old references. The excess of adaptations that refer to the same source-work could be motivated by the playmarket success which can seduce for commercializing a recipe that has proven its functionality and relevance, from the economically, psychologically and culturally point of view. It is what will soon be a *brand*, for which it already exists an audience, won by those who did it before. So for those who are new, they need to find their place and convince the audience, or if not, 'invent' the right public.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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The triumph of an art adaptation appears when the product fulfills the expectantions of the public and those who are not initiated yet are being convinced by the offer, living the experience *tel quel* and the subject found the ideal form of manifestation. Each artistic form implies a work of different mental reception. Listening a text implies a work of conceptual decodification. Looking to a show implies the use of the senses and persepction channels. In the first case, we receive a serie of information to which we shall construct a vivid mental projection. As for the last case, we must sive significance to the images and sounds. These are procedures of identification, projection and integration.

The distance between the work piece and receiver differs. A movie almost does not let you enough time to think or imagine anything else apart from what is projected. A theatrical show, on the other hand, provokes strong emotions by mirroring us into the characters, but it also protects us by the stage-audience distance, between the maker and the witness. An immersive show will force even more the proximity to the public, integreting it actively in the stage process. However it may be the distance between those two poles, the physical, intelectual, psychological echoes are evident for both. Even reading, the active reading, asks for a meaning investment for the words given by the author and not only a passive lecture oh the phrases. The reader is included in the esthetic process because it is actively and creatively working to decodify the signs of the text. He becomes a co-author of meaning. An obstacle could be his hesitation in letting himself conducted by the interior world of the artist. The resistance towards convention or artificiality can also reduce the the richness of the aesthetic experiences.

‘The institutionalization of an environment’<sup>10</sup> refers to the establishment of a standard-perspective regarding that environement (exemple: idylic movie scenes with music etc). But it is mandatory for any artwork to find its relevance to the contemporaneity, all depending of a favorable context of manifestation. The historical time, the cultural phase encountered, or the production backround can help or destroy a new creation. The translation of a story from a culture to another is easier and easier, thanks to globalization, but we should take into consideration the imminent changes of style and references that could occur in order to be unstarstood by the new public. The adaptation for new times and spaces could be seen as a antropological phenomena of, ‘indigenization’<sup>11</sup> of new structures who inhabit local environments unconquered until then, settling in the new context of time, race, religion and history. The society

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<sup>10</sup> Linda Hutcheon, Siobhan O’Flynn, *op.cit.*, p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p.150.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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is free and responsible for the choice of ideas which he wants to plant in the soil of his culture.

As the natural selection, the cultural selection has different levels of fecundity, longevity, dynamic of mutations, (un)stability, fidelity<sup>12</sup> to the source. It could seem like it is about the same story and it is truly "the same, but different"<sup>13</sup>. The joy of familiarity and the curiosity for the new is nourished by this dialogue with the past, by the similarity of the alteration, by constructing a form for something that already has one, by being yourself and someone else at the same time. The adaptation does not annihilate the old meaning, but it brings these alive organisms with the potential of giving birth to new life forms of existence, if they encounter some favorable life conditions. In the human imaginary land "adaptation is the norm, not the exception"<sup>14</sup> which reaffirm the base principles of a society.

The language is now not only a simple reality function, but it became a tool capable of creating the state of affairs of the world. The word names but it also invents. And what the dramaturgs choose to say by their work is not only about their personal beliefs, but also about the social and cultural, political, economical, historical context in which they are growing.

The emergence of digital platforms and of free circulation of information helped the receptivity of the public, the enlargement of accesing any type of experience, to the speed of spreading a phenomena, to the global mobilization in forming common interests, tastes and predilections, but it also brought disputes, among which the attention deficit who is more and more noticeable and which the public expects to receive permanent stimulation and challenges.

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 167.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*. (in original: *the same and yet not*).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 177.

## THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

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