



Doctoral School for Theatre and Performing Arts

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THESIS SUMMARY

The theatrical phenomenon of Sibiu in the context of the avant-garde of the 20th and 21st centuries

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The thesis, entitled *The theatrical phenomenon of Sibiu in the context of the avant-garde of the 20th and 21st centuries*, sets out to investigate the emergence and evolution of avant-garde theatrical manifestations in the Romanian territory, beginning from the early decades of the twentieth century. The study commences with an examination of the influence of avant-garde European ideas on the formation of experimental theatrical movements in interwar Romania. It then explores the evolution of experimentation and artistic innovation in theatre during the latter half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, with a particular focus on the theatre phenomenon in Sibiu. In this context, the paper examines the transformations of the performing arts and the redefinition of the modern director's function in relation to the major political and social changes that occurred over the decades under analysis. Last but not least, the study aims to identify some of the most important landmarks of contemporary theatre, bringing into discussion initiatives of the National Theatre "Radu Stanca" Sibiu. These initiatives, which possess an experimental character, are analysed from the perspective of the author's personal experience as an actor of the Sibiu theatre.

The thesis is structured in three chapters, preceded by an argument and followed by conclusions and a bibliography, following a chronological organisation with the aim of highlighting the evolution of theatrical artistic movements. This approach makes it possible to analyse how the major political, economic and social transformations of the twentieth century have influenced culture and art on a global scale.

The opening chapter, *Romanian interwar theatre and the values of the European theatrical avant-garde*, provides an introduction to the European artistic avant-garde, focusing on the primary avant-garde movements and their influence on Romanian theatre. In the subsequent subchapter, titled *Avant-garde. Experiment and Innovation*, the research establishes a series of landmarks necessary to define the experimental approaches of the interwar period in Europe, highlighting the fundamental characteristics of the avant-garde. Concurrently, the analysis delineates an understanding of the transformation of theatrical artistic experimentation and innovation during the first half of the 20th century, thereby establishing a series of methodologies for exploring the experimental phenomena that emerged in the Romanian context, influenced by ideas and concepts emanating from the European milieu. The analysis identifies five themes of the artistic avant-garde, which serve as benchmarks in the analysis of the experimental manifestations:

- A. **Human - Artist:** The artist and the human being became the focus of avant-garde preoccupations in the early 20th century, challenging the search for new meaning and the development of forms that opposed the suppression of the spirit by oppressive reason. At the same time, the artist-performer was given the task of transforming and becoming *total* in expression and substance.
- B. **Language:** The avant-garde revolutionised theatre by reforming language, following two directions: the language of the dramatic text and the language of the stage. This reform entailed the rejection of traditional norms, adopting a modern language full of linguistic innovations. In terms of scenic expression of language, a concern for the expressiveness of the body was developed, transforming the actor into an instrument of non-verbal artistic expression.
- C. **Types of space:** Avant-garde theatre introduces the redefinition of the stage space, starting from the concept of "purging" the performance space, and the reform of the stage space proposed the renunciation of the realistic representation of life, favouring an expressivity based on suggestion and aesthetic innovation, a trend that runs through the entire European context of the time.
- D. **Relation to space:** The new theatrical paradigm focuses on the condition of the actor-performer, in which physical expression is defined in relation to the performance space. The elimination of unnecessary elements requires the establishment of a fundamental relationship between the artist and the space, configuring a freedom of creation measured by self-awareness and mastery of all the means of artistic expression.
- E. **Syncretism of the arts:** The concept of syncretism in the arts is characterised by the role of the director in orchestrating the artistic performance through the deliberate integration of various forms of artistic expression, including light, colour, music, sound, photography, projections, and more. Syncretism, in its fundamental nature, involves the harmonious convergence of these disparate forms of artistic expression without compromising their aesthetic integrity or expressive autonomy.

The study's preliminary conclusion posits a relationship between avant-garde, experimentation and innovation, with the objective of elucidating the distinctions and commonalities between these concepts. The act of experimentation in art signifies a deliberate modification of a given phenomenon, with the intent of subverting prevailing norms and the

potential for innovation. The avant-garde is distinguished by its transitory, high-intensity manifestations, while the experimental approach entails the exploration of a specific phenomenon. Conversely, innovation, regarded as the favourable outcome of a successful experiment, is derived from a comprehensive understanding of tradition, which artists deconstruct and reinterpret. In this process, tradition is not eradicated, but rather transformed, resulting in the emergence of innovative aesthetic forms that are in opposition to the conventional.

The research contained in the second subchapter, entitled *Identity and Cultural Recontextualization*, follows the Romanian theatrical avant-garde in the interwar period, in the context of a comparative analysis of the evolution of Romanian theatre in relation to European theatre. It also highlights the impact of the cultural, economic and political recontextualization imposed by the aftermath of the First World War in Romania after 1918, which was faced with difficulties in managing the newly emerged context. The inter-war Romanian theatre functioned according to the French model and most of the influences came from Western Europe (France, Italy, Germany) as well as from the Soviet area. The study discusses the various problems faced by Romanian theatre and focuses on: 1. The organisation of Romanian theatres, centrally managed under the direct influence of the political factor; 2. The economic factor, determined by budgetary fluctuations and by the political and economic crises that occurred in the Romanian inter-war society; 4. The paucity of Romanian-trained directors, given the establishment of the first directing school in 1948; 5. The reluctance to embrace change, which is specific to Romanian society throughout its history, outlined by the low number of spectators willing to participate in less conventional manifestations of theatrical performance. These elements represent seminal landmarks in the analysis of the interwar Romanian theatrical phenomenon in relation to the evolution of the European avant-garde, thereby establishing a clear direction for the proposed study.

The subsequent focus of the research comprises the analysis of artistic experimentation and innovative approaches in interwar Romanian theatre, with the aim of delineating the spaces in which these artistic events occurred. Therefore, emerges the need to distinguish between state-subsidised theatre and independent groups, which are referred to as "avant-garde groups" or "new theatre groups".

The new theatre groups sought to assimilate European avant-garde artistic concepts, endeavouring to effect authentic forms of reform within the domain of Romanian theatre art.

During the inter-war period, a plethora of theatre groups emerged in Romania, coalescing around ideas and under the leadership of some of the most prominent figures of the time in literature and art: Tudor Vianu, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Ion Pillat, Scarlat Froda, I. D. Ștefănescu, Al. Dominic, Dem. Theodorescu. The list also includes the following figures: Sergiu Manolescu, Victor Bumbescu, Alfred Hefter, Barbu Fundoianu (also known as Benjamin Fondane), Lina Fundoianu, Armand Pascal, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Emanoil Cerbu, G. M. Zamfirescu, Tatiana Nottara, Alexis and Dinu Macedonski, amongst others. In the 1920s and 1930s, the groups *Insula (The Island)* and *Poesis* were formed in Bucharest, drawing inspiration from Le Vieux Colombier, *Teatrul nou (The New theatre)*, *Studio*(1921), *Atelier* (1923), *Masca (The Mask)*, *Treisprezece și unu (Thirteen and one)* and *Zig-Zag*(1931) and, in Iasi, *Teatrul Liber(The free theatre)*(1922), groups that campaigned for rethinking the conventions of the theatrical tradition and approaching new forms that reflected the needs of interwar society. Despite their relatively brief existence, characterised predominantly by theoretical discourse, these groups exerted a profound influence on the evolution of Romanian theatre. Among their recommendations for conferences and performances, their artistic programme included renowned writers such as Maurice Maeterlinck, Paul Claudel, Remy de Gourmont, Frank Wedekind, Georg Kaiser, Ernst Toller, George Bernard Shaw, Franz Werfel and Ivan Turgheniev, among others.

The activity of groups formed in the interwar period around avant-garde ideas and approaches is indicative of a concern for reform of the Romanian theatrical phenomenon. Furthermore, it demonstrates the need to explore and propagate authentic Romanian ideas about the artistic destiny of the theatre.

An analysis of the steps taken by the subsidised theatres highlights the direction in which the theatrical phenomenon was evolving within the official state institutions. The analysis of the activities of the subsidised theatres reveals the influence of prominent figures of the time, including Paul Gusty, Scarlat Froda, Ion Marin Sadoveanu, Soare Z. Soare, Victor Bumbescu, Vasile Enescu, Victor Eftimiu, Aurel Ion Maican and Victor Ion Popa, among others. The present research focuses on two significant moments with a major influence on the theatrical phenomenon: the activity of the director Paul Gusty in the early 1920s, who stood out for his ability to adapt and for his openness to modernization of the theatrical performance, and *Școala de regie experimentală (The School of Experimental Directing)* founded by Camil Petrescu in 1939 when he was at the helm of the National Theatre in Bucharest. The objective of this institution was to establish a collective of

actors who would compete and evolve in tandem with the directors, whilst exploring diverse forms of theatre within a liberated environment.

The experimental activity of new theatre groups and subsidised theatres demonstrates the need for the development of Romanian theatre in line with European trends, and provides insight into the manner in which the Romanian theatrical phenomenon has integrated external influences in an attempt to define authentic artistic approaches.

The sub-chapter entitled, *The key personalities of the Romanian inter-war theatre and their innovative thinking*, provides an analysis of the work of three of the most significant theatre figures of the Romanian inter-war period: Haig Acterian, Soare Z. Soare and Ion Sava. A closer look at Acterian's professional career reveals his connections to the European artistic avant-garde, as evidenced by his association with figures such as Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov and Edward Gordon Craig. These influences contributed to his development as a theatre practitioner and cultural diplomat. His critical and essayistic works address various aspects of theatrical reform, ranging from the fundamental concepts of theatre to the transformation of theatrical education and the delineation of directing within the act of theatrical creation. The analysis of his works, *Pretexte pentru o dramaturgie românească* (*Pretenses for a Romanian Dramaturgy - 1936*) and *Gordon Craig și Ideea În teatru* (*Gordon Craig and the Idea in Theatre – 1936*), *Organizarea teatrului* (*Management of Theatre – 1938*), and *Despre tragic* (*On the Tragic – 1939*) and *În limitele artei* (*Within the Limits of Art -1939*), demonstrates the interweaving of his concerns about the evolution of Romanian theatre with the five major themes of the European artistic avant-garde. His directorial oeuvre includes several shows staged in the reformist spirit of his ideas in the early 1930s, such as Lajos Zilagy's *Pasărea de foc* (*Firebird*), Franz Cammerlohr's *Habakuh*, Henri Bernstein's *Veninul* (*Venom*), and George Bernard Shaw's *Cuceritorul* (*The Conqueror*). He also directed two documentary films: *Malaxa* and *Munții Apuseni* (*Apuseni Mountains*). The study provides a delineation of Haig Acterian as a theatre figure who demonstrated a genuine concern for the evolution of Romanian theatre, bequeathing a legacy of concepts and ideas that exerted a profound influence on the Romanian theatrical phenomenon in the twentieth century.

The paper focuses on the artistic endeavours of Soare Z. Soare, highlighting his ability to navigate the rigours imposed by the official Romanian theatres while advocating for artistic reformation. The study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of performances staged at the National Theatre in Bucharest, encompassing: *Năluca* (*The Phantom Lady*) after Pedro Calderón

de la Barca and *Shylock* after William Shakespeare(1921), as well as *Hamlet*(1941), emphasising the director's concern for reform and the development of directing art, and the artistic evolution of Soare Z. Soare's work associated with the five themes of the European artistic avant-garde (human - artist, language, types of space, relation to space, artistic syncretism), a perspective that was also influenced by directors Karlheinz Martin and Max Reinhardt.

The analysis of Ion Sava's endeavours combines the study of his theoretical work, through essays and articles published towards the end of his artistic career, and his work as a director at the National Theatre in Iasi and then at the National Theatre in Bucharest. Ion Sava advocated for a comprehensive reform of the theatre system, commencing with the repertoire proposed for staging, the calibre of actors' training, the standard of technical staff training, and the modernisation of the stage. This perspective is articulated in his article *Proiect de organizare a teatrului românesc* (*Project for the management of Romanian theatre*), published in January 1945 in *Democrația*. In this article, Sava employs a stylistic approach reminiscent of Italian futurism. The negation of Ion Sava's ideas is also strongly influenced by Alexander Tairov's *Chamber Theatre*. In order to identify the elements tangential to the European avant-garde directions, the study examines the performance *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, staged in 1945 at the St. Sava High School under the aegis of the National Theatre in Bucharest, considered one of the reference performances in Romanian theatre of the last century, with the *mask* at the centre of the creative process. The mask thus assumes the role of a medium for the articulation of the performance concept in its entirety, thereby metamorphosing the theatrical artistic act into a manifestation of Ion Sava's reformative concerns.

The second chapter of the paper, titled *The Re-theatralization of Theatre and the Romanian Post-War Theatrical Phenomenon in the Context of the Sibiu Theatre*, traces the evolution of the Romanian theatrical phenomenon in the post-war period, which was characterised by political instability and the transformation of society under the conditions imposed by a totalitarian regime. The research focuses on the artistic endeavours of the Sibiu Theatre, starting in 1949, and analyses the artistic activity of four outstanding Romanian directors: Radu Stanca, Aureliu Manea, Iulian Vișa and Silviu Purcărete.

The study of the approaches developed in the State Theatre of Sibiu begins with Radu Stanca, one of the most important personalities of Romanian culture. The study identifies the concept of a "Euphorionist Theatre", which aimed to introduce an authentic theatrical aesthetic

development by combining theatrical tradition with modern performing arts norms. The study also analyses four articles published by Radu Stanca: „*Reteatralizarea*” *teatrului* (*"Reteatralization" of theatre*) – *Teatrul*, 1956, *Metafora în arta regiei* (*Metaphor in the art of directing*) – *Tribuna*, 1957, *Tragedia și modalitatea ei scenică* (*Tragedy and its staging modality*) – written in 1960, published in *Tribuna* in 1967, and the staging of the performance *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*), performed at the State Theatre in Sibiu in 1960. The performance that was staged after Caragiale's play captured Radu Stanca's unique directorial concept and is an example of his efforts to materialize his ideas on theatrical reform, which he wrote about in his article *Recitind pe Caragiale* (*Re-reading Caragiale*) – *Romania Viitoare*, 1947. Radu Stanca's directorial career is indicative of the evolution of the Romanian theatrical phenomenon in relation to the themes of the European avant-garde (human - artist, types of space, relation to space, artistic syncretism), which underwent a transformation in the second half of the 20th century into directions of artistic experimentation directed towards a certain aesthetic thought and style.

The subchapter *Sibiu Theatre and the Evolution of the Directorial Experiment* commences with an analysis of the performance *Rosmersholm*, which was staged by Aureliu Manea in 1968, based on Henrik Ibsen's original play. This analysis is undertaken with the intention of establishing the coordinates of an evolution of the Romanian director's art. The study delves into the oeuvre of Aureliu Manea, widely regarded as a "visionary" of the art of directing. It examines the experimental nature of the rehearsal process and the interpretation of dramatic texts, influenced by Jerzy Grotowski's "poor theatre" and ritualistic approaches. The performance *Rosmersholm* is indicative of the director's early creative endeavours, characterised by a quest for the total artistic dimension. In this performance, the minimalism of the performance space serves to complement the unique interpretation of the dramatic text, thereby exploring the psychological dimensions of the characters. Furthermore, it emphasises the director's success in creating a new dimension of Romanian theatre and in pushing the boundaries of theatrical performance. The reform proposed by Manea influenced the perception of the process of artistic creation for artists and audience members alike, redefining the relationship between actor, audience and stage space.

The study follows the activity of the director Iulian Vișa in the State Theatre of Sibiu in the early 1990s, a period of significant societal instability in Romania. The study argues that Vișa's appointment as the theatre's director marked a period of rebirth for the theatre and the cultural life of the city. The analysis in this subchapter of the paper focuses on the revival of the Sibiu theatre,

exemplified by *Chang Eng* by Göran Tunström, *Cartoteca (The Card Index)* by Tadeusz Rózewicz and *Decameronul (The Decameron)* by Alexander Hausvater after Giovanni Boccaccio, the shows staged by Iulian Vișa upon his return to the country. Following a period of seven years spent in Denmark, Iulian Vișa returned to Sibiu to take up the position of rebuilding the theatre, a time marked by considerable political and social upheaval in the wake of the 1989 revolution. Under Vișa's leadership, the theatre produced these shows that exerted a significant influence on the development of Romanian theatre. The reform proposed by Vișa offered the possibility of consolidating a performing arts institution with a constant concern for the promotion of different forms of performing arts. The trajectory of the State Theatre in Sibiu was profoundly influenced by the period under Iulian Vișa's direction, and in the subsequent decades, it emerged as a preeminent Romanian cultural institution in the 21st century.

The research continues with an analysis of the work of the theatre director Silviu Purcărete, who has staged several performances in the theatre in Sibiu (which became the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre Sibiu in 2004). The part of the paper dedicated to Silviu Purcărete focuses on the 2012 production of *Călătoriile lui Gulliver (Gulliver's Travels)*. The study proffers an analysis from the vantage point of the European avant-garde, encompassing the human-artist, linguistic, spatial, and relational dimensions of space, as well as artistic syncretism. This analysis explores the evolution of these concepts throughout the 20th century and their integration into the theatrical landscape of the 21st century. *Călătoriile lui Gulliver (Gulliver's Travels)* is presented as a series of improvisational exercises, based on Jonathan Swift's original work, and coordinated by Silviu Purcărete. These exercises explore play and playfulness, which are fundamental to experimentation, and create the context for free creation and the premises for an innovative artistic approach. The performance's distinctive approach to the visual element, symbols, language and the dimension of the theatrical performance, in the meta-reality characteristic of Purcărete's artistic universe, emphasises the experimental quality of the performance and establishes another significant moment on the axis of innovative initiatives of the theatre in Sibiu.

In the third chapter, *Radu Stanca" National Theatre Sibiu and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival - Space of the Romanian theatrical experiment of the last decades*, the activity of the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre Sibiu and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival is analysed, with a focus on their influence on the evolution of Romanian theatre through the innovative initiatives developed and presented within the two institutions. The study, also, underscores the

pivotal role of actors in catalysing theatrical innovation through the diversification of artistic expression. The initial segment of the research delves into the symbiotic relationship between the two institutions, accentuating their function in establishing a dynamic theatrical core, receptive to diverse performing arts forms. The subsequent analysis focuses on three key areas of the actor's involvement in artistic innovation: firstly, the development of interpretative techniques through the exploration of physical theatre and the restructuring of stage language; secondly, the impact of the digital environment in the context of multidisciplinary theatre; and thirdly, the role of the actor in performances oriented towards community involvement.

The presentation of the approaches initiated by the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre Sibiu in partnership with the Sibiu International Theatre Festival commences with the study of the performance *Ora în care nu știam nimic unii de alții* (*The hour when we knew nothing about each other*), after Peter Handke, which was staged by Leta Popescu and Bogdan Spătaru in 2023. This performance illustrates the reinterpretation of non-verbal language in the context of a production with a large cast. The study also explores the concept of multidisciplinary theatre, in which the actor integrates digital tools in the creative act, investigating the phenomenon of theatrical digitalization in the context of the 2020 pandemic. Consequently, the projects *Daruri teatrale* (*Theatrical gifts*), *Spectacolele-lectură „Virgil Flonda”* (*The "Virgil Flonda" Reading Performances*) and *Scena digital* (*The Digital Stage*), the primary initiatives launched by the National Theatre "Radu Stanca" Sibiu and the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in response to the challenges arising during the period of restrictions, are analysed. In a similar manner, the research examines the *Consultații Poetice* (*Poetical Consultations*) project, which was implemented in collaboration with the Théâtre de la Ville in Paris. This project serves to highlight the evolution of community-involved theatre in the pandemic and post-pandemic context.

The final sub-chapter delineates two fundamental dimensions of contemporary theatre research: *creative freedom* and *the relevance of the artistic act*. The analysis emphasises the importance of creative freedom in the discovery of new theatrical aesthetics and in the articulation of an authentic artistic discourse, following two directions: outer freedom, determined by the social and political context, and inner freedom, characteristic of each artist. The paper also elaborates a series of critical observations on the evolution of Romanian theatre, with an emphasis on the ways of innovation in the performing arts, and on the relevance of the artistic act in the digital age.

This study proposes a novel perspective on theatrical experimentation and innovation by analysing the Romanian and European theatrical phenomenon, following the innovative approaches and the evolution of performing arts in the socio-political contexts of the 20th century. In the framework of the thesis, theoretical and practical landmarks have been elaborated that can serve future research in the field of performing arts, emphasising the value of a free approach in the practice of directing and acting. The analysis of experimental approaches and innovative initiatives, specific to the theatrical context in Sibiu, demonstrates the theatre's ability to create a link between tradition and modernity. The findings of the research substantiate the hypothesis that theatre art is not confined to merely reflecting reality, but possesses the capacity to provoke, inspire and transform the contemporary audience by addressing the avant-garde directions (human – actor, language, types of space, relation to space, artistic syncretism) that have evolved throughout the twentieth century and that influence the experimentation in the performing arts of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: theatre; avant-garde; experiment; innovation; artistic syncretism; language; tradition; digitalization;