

Călin CIOBOTARI \*

## Classical Dramaturgy and the Abuse of Interpretation. From Patrimonial Tradition to the Politicisation of Tradition

**Abstract:** Our text aims at bringing into discussion a series of attitudes of the interpreter (here, the Director, the result of his hermeneutical act being the Show in itself) in relation with the classical theatre text. In other words: a contemporary director reads a classical text, interprets it and builds a show on it. How much of the world of the text will be found in the world of the show? To what extent does the text remain a mere dialogue partner and how much is it exploited, politicised, and changed into a pretext for showing off an identity unknown to the text? In a similar way, we are interested in studying this kind of behaviour in the Romanian cultural area, where the relationship between the director-interpreter and the classical text of the Romanian theatre accounts for more general attitudes of the Romanian intellectual person in relation to his own tradition.

**Keywords:** interpretation, tradition, stage director, Caragiale, Chirița.

Our text aims at bringing into discussion a series of attitudes of the interpreter (here, the Director, the result of his hermeneutical act being the Show in itself) in relation with the classical theatre text. In other words: a contemporary director reads a classical text, interprets it and builds a show on it. How much of the world of the text will be found in the world of the show? To what extent does the text remain a mere dialogue partner and how much is it exploited, politicised, and changed into a pretext for showing off an identity unknown to the text?

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We are considering three stages of this relationship:

1. The interpretation of the classical text as on stage/staging representation. The interpretation is now limited to a large bow before the text seen as an untouchable and unchangeable heritage. This attitude is present until the 1970s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The director's fundamental question is: *how shall I*

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\* Lecturer Habilitated, PhD, The Faculty of Theatre, "George Enescu" National University of Arts, Iași, Romania; e-mail: calinciobotari@yahoo.com

*stage/interpret this text without altering its essence?* The show becomes a sort of museum whose main exhibit is the text.

In the Romanian area, this paradigm has particularly survived due to the National Theatres, whose main purpose, provided by their functioning regulations, is to preserve and promote the national cultural heritage. However, this phenomenon is more general. It is related to what we could call “the statue effect”, namely the conviction of a community that statues are more important than what it is alive. The effect of statue is intimately related to a blockage in a patrimonial past, which is indisputably superior to the present. The same statue effect is responsible for the Romanian cultural mythifications. See Eminescu’s case, “a national poet”, who is now in the hands of the sale assistants at Kaufland and the waiters at “Bolta Rece” restaurant.

2. The interpretation of the classical text as a starting dialogue with it, at the present moment. According to Gadamer’s language, the director’s perspective is aiming at the perspective of the text in order to approach it. The performance is decided specifically when the “horizons merge”. In Peter Brook’s performances, the attitude is based on Shakespeare’s plays imposing itself as a *mainstream* of the classical text reading until the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The director’s fundamental question is: *how shall I stage/interpret this text so that its essence becomes relevant for the questions, restlessness, and anxieties of the contemporary individual?*

Although this attitude is considered old-fashioned in the European theatre, in Romania it is still successfully used by certain directors who are encouraged by the ambition to present the classical text from a completely new perspective, but without changing anything of the text itself. On the occasion of a public speech concerning the disputes about the exploitations at Roşia Montană, the director Radu Afrim used to call it “our cherry-tree orchard”. The essence of Cehov’s text was in full agreement with the situation of Roşia Montana, the orchard being guilty for everything we are losing today, whether guilty or not. For many inhabitants of Iaşi, cutting down the lime trees on “Ştefan cel Mare” Boulevard symbolically meant cutting down that orchard of Cehov’s world. The lime trees were our orchard.

3. The interpretation of the classical text in a monologue-like approach instead of a dialogue-like one. The director is not interested in starting a dialogue with the text, but in using it as a mere support for making his/her own voice heard (or the voice of the group which he/she belongs to). The tradition embodying that text is completely ignored or, on the contrary, it is explicitly instrumentalized in order to legitimize certain values. The attitude has become prevalent for the European direction of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The director’s fundamental question is: *how shall I stage/interpret this text so that its essence becomes my essence by any means?*

One of the most relevant examples in this respect is the text readings used by Thomas Ostermeier, a famous German director, on Ibsen's texts. Mostly disinterested by other interpretative strings, the director only cuts out of these texts the discussions related to money, transactions, and business. His performances based on Ibsen's plays have become a way of criticising the European capitalist society even if Ibsen and his plays didn't want that. Another example of interpretation which forces the text relates to the readings of the Polish director K. Warlikowski on Shakespeare's plays and to the concern of building his performances on the characters' sexual ambiguities. In the Romanian theatre space, such interpretative plot twists are practised by Radu Afrim. In his staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at Iași, Shakespeare's forest becomes the Forest café. In another staging in Bucharest, the action of *Năpasta (The Pest)* by Caragiale takes place in a beauty parlour.

It is this very third stage that is opening a very interesting debate about abusive interpretation and the subordination (politisation) of tradition. The theatre, probably one of the most live arts of the humanity, may become a rather accurate barometer for the attitudes of a community in relation to its own tradition.

The relation that the people of the Romanian theatre have with tradition is a contradictory one. Fewer and fewer of them, especially the elderly, continue to talk about a sacredness of tradition. The texts of Caragiale, Delavrancea, Kirilăscu, or Alecsandri must only tackle what they were meant to. However, most of them have another attitude, a completely different one: these texts must be forcefully made to match the today's "Romanian realities". When this is not possible, the classical text is simply abandoned. It is, for instance, the case of the Romanian historical drama.

### **A closed subject: the historical play**

Nine of ten Romanian people in the field of theatre, be they actors, directors, or theatre critics, writhe when they hear our historical drama plays. *Apus de soare, Vișorul, Vlaicu Vodă, Despot Vodă, or Alexandru Lăpușneanu* are titles which nobody wants to hear about, although they are well written plays and most of them based on Shakespeare's model, with clearly constructed conflicts and acceptable characters as regards actors. No one contests them as dramatic writings; however, almost everybody seems exasperated by the historical theme. The situation in Romania is strange in relation to the European space. In the French theatre, any staging of Hugo's historical texts is a real celebration; the English theatre could not be imagined without Shakespeare's historical plays; in Russia one needs a lot of courage to say that one is not interested in the historic plays of let's say Lev Tolstoi or

Puşkin. In Germany, apart from the experimental delights, staging Goethe, von Kleist or Schiller remains a responsibility that cannot be avoided.

On the occasion of the Centennial of Romania, there were some attempts to reread the Romanian historical drama, the most remarkable of them being *Vlaicu Vodă* at Excelsior Theatre, directed by Horia Suru. The result was doubtful underlying our lack of desire to (re)connect to the tradition of this type of text. In the best case, we are reminded of the historical dramas in a parody note. Radu Afrim, for example, has the habit of ironically quoting from them.

Eventually, what are the reasons for this impossibility to resonate with the tradition of the historical text? Here are some possible answers:

(a) A feeling of embarrassment towards a history that we consider inferior compared to other histories.

(b) The diminution of the authentic nationalist feeling.

(c) The excessive use of historical texts in the communist era by ideologized/ideologising staging and protochronism.

(d) The impossibility to find echoes of *those* characters in *this* present.

### **The obsession about Caragiale**

The abuse of interpretation in the Romanian theatre is a result mainly of the attempt to satisfy point (d) at any cost. We are only interested in what is right for us or what we think is right for us. Ştefan cel Mare or Vlaicu Vodă are no longer possible in the Romanian society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In other words, the directors-interpreters no longer have a purpose as concerns them. Things are completely different in the case of Caragiale, since he is unanimously considered the main psychoanalyst of the Romanian people. The interpretation of his texts no longer takes into account the temporal contexts or the local colours, the nuances of the line, but it violently attacks the text making it sound as if it were written today. For each character, we are looking for a correspondent in the present time, completely changing the initial atmosphere and sacrificing the original picturesque. Thus, a pattern-like Caragiale, a pre-made Caragiale, a Carrefour-like Caragiale is born. Interpretation becomes usage. The interpreter cancels any distance, any precaution as concerns *O scrisoare pierdută* (*A Lost Letter*) or *O noapte furtunoasă* (*A Tormented Night*). The classical text and the tradition which the text contains cease to speak to us, the merge of horizons being a rude *connection*.

Throughout time, all prejudices related to the way Caragiale should be interpreted were transferred from the interpreter to the public/audience, the situation becoming even more complicated. The audience enters the theatre hall with a set of expectations which few directors tend to ignore. The audience want Zoe to strikingly resemble ordinary politically mundane characters; they desperately want Pristanda to be the picture of the obedient and

corrupt policeman, just as one could not imagine Caragiale's politicians differently from what they look like on television by their full name. The director-interpreter will meet these expectations at the expense of the real dialogue with the text. The text and tradition are seized, cut out, and violently attacked through abusive adaptation.

### **Chirița syndrome**

A rather similar situation is seen in the case of the contemporary readings on *Chirița* by Alecsandri. The hermeneutic abuse relates to the strictly negative reading of the famous female character and to the effort to align the classical prototype of Bârzoii's wife with a recognizable typology of the present time. However, unlike Caragiale, whose texts become silent when facing the abuse, Alecsandri's *Chirița* opposes updates so that the modern performances clearly display their conflict with the text. Tradition refuses the performance, its aesthetics frequently turning into kitsch or nonsense. To enter a true dialogue with Alecsandri's *Chirița* implies giving up those "negative prejudices" which the same Gadamer draws our attention upon. It means giving up seeing the character unilaterally and observing, among other things, how much *Chirița* goes beyond her time, how advanced her life conceptions and ideas are for the 19<sup>th</sup> century, how much tragedy this comical character hides, and how much frustration for being born in an inappropriate age.

### **Conclusion**

From the perspective of the Romanian theatre and of its interpretations, the relation with tradition is a bizarre one. For somebody studying it from the outside, the mixture between swears and smooth epithets towards tradition would probably seem shocking. It would also be shocking to see how much hypocritical oblivion we are capable of. To violently attack tradition (sometimes until denial) and ignore it by omission – here are the two poles defining the relation between the director-interpreter and the classical theatre text. The relation between the same director and the foreign text involves a different debate. The changes of the hermeneutic behaviour are astonishing. As for this, maybe some other time...