

*Theater Criticism in Search of Lost Identity. Stories of
Professionalization*

Book review: Miruna Runcan, *Teatrul în diorame. Discursul criticii teatrale în comunism. Fluctuantul dezgheț 1956-1964* [Theater in dioramas. The discourse of theater criticism in the communist era. The fluctuant thaw 1956-1964] (București: Tracus Arte, 2019)



Miruna Runcan's book, *Teatrul în diorame. Discursul criticii teatrale în comunism*, subtitled *Fluctuantul dezgheț 1956-1964*, joins the recent attempts to explore, from a rhetorical and ideological perspective, the discourses of

Romanian criticism that coagulated during the communist decades. What distinguishes this volume, however, from similar endeavors, most focused on literary criticism, is precisely its focus on theatrical criticism, in the wake of an older preoccupation of the author both with regard to the particularities of the critical phenomenon in the performing arts in our country (materialized in the volume *Critica de teatru: încotro?*), as well as facing the evolution of the theater during the communist period (see *Teatralizare și reteatralizare în România*).

The present work thus benefits from a double perspective - historical and analytical -, managing to engage the reader by being both instructive and exciting. Thus, any factual accounts are mirrored by accounts of the backstage maneuvers, as the text analysis itself goes hand in hand with broad contextualizing paragraphs. *Teatrul în diorame* has the seductive quality of not abandoning its readers in the mire of chronological events, also avoiding the barren landscape of de-historicized text analysis. Throughout its more than 300 pages, it guides them through a continuous motion between concrete and abstract, particular and general. For example, in the case study centered on Liviu Ciulei's show, "As you like it", and on the controversy that the production generated in the era, the people involved are not portrayed strictly through their stated positions, but benefit from ample side-notes, of both a speculative and biographical nature, in the penumbra of their professional and ideological motivations (be these implicit or explicit).

The period chosen by the author, between 1956 and 1964, is marked by a relative thaw (whose buds can be traced from the beginning), followed by a short, but brutal refreezing (in 1958) and a new relative reopening in the end. This temporal cut-off allows a thorough investigation of the forms in which the critical discourses were incarnated at the end of the Stalinist period, the whole approach being based on the dichotomous relationship between normative and (the dominant) aesthetic criticism.

In this context, the *Teatrul* magazine is the main documentary source of the research, largely due to the fact that its establishment, at the beginning of the period treated by Miruna Runcan, marks the beginning of the (re) professionalization of theater critics. Thus, as the author has well intuited, the aforementioned publication is perhaps the most generous

source of scientific material for tracking the changes that led to the partial break with purely ideological criticism and for uncovering the "double discourse" - a phenomenon also largely discussed in this volume. However, the book maintains a skeptical, or rather lucid, tone in relation to the motives of the protagonists of the thaw, consistently followed in tandem with the metamorphoses of Romanian politics - in turn treated contextually.

From a structural perspective, *Teatrul în diorama* reunites seven main sections/chapters and an Addenda - meant to present the researched era in its specific color and to reveal, through a case-study, the almost engineered way in which celebrity and influence were constructed during the first communist decades.

The first chapter includes both the argument for including the critical discourse in the studies of the history of the theater - in subtext a slightly exasperated plea, addressed to the researchers, to (no longer) ignore the intimate connection between the theatrical work and the specialized literature that it generates - and an introduction to the antonymic relationship (although the two positions are not, in fact, always mutually exclusive) between normativity and aesthetic autonomy.

The second chapter marks the beginning of a taxonomic effort of the author, applied to the *Teatrul* magazine, which delimits the strictly dogmatic reviews from those written mainly from an aesthetic standpoint, following them in their historical evolution. Next, Miruna Runcan paints the picture of the brief and brutal refreezing of 1958; the reader is provided here with a list of keywords that have marked the dogmatic imaginary of the period, with examples of how those obsessions, with all their intrinsic and profoundly traumatic absurdity, were applied. Thus, the case of the playwright Ana Novac's fall into disgrace is followed closely, due to it being an example for the way the system manufactured its scapegoats.

The so-called interlude about the show "As you like it" constitutes the third section of the book; applied and punctual, the author looks at the ways in which the struggle for retheatricalization reaches a positive denouement, encouraged by a more permissive political context.

The fourth section deals with the expansion of theatrical criticism in areas more and more guarded from the interference of official ideologies and how it manages to assume an ideologically uncontaminated (or less

contaminated) axiology, gradually separating from socialist realism. The relaxation of Romanian politics is thus reflected by an opening towards other cultural and geographic spaces, which generate a series of subgenres, classified and widely characterized by the author.

The fifth chapter looks at the evolution of the socio-professional status of the theater critic in communism, in terms of its relation to the profession, the artists, and the authorities.

The sixth section is perhaps the densest from an analytical perspective. At this point, the specificity of discourses about theater is revealed through rhetorical analysis. Again, it follows the way in which theater criticism turns against dogmatic textocentrism, rediscovering its hermeneutic vocation. Moreover, the author unmasks, relevantly, the semantic tension between the "dramatic review" and the "theatrical" one, also noting the stylistic conventionalism of most texts on theater. However, the most captivating pages (perhaps even in the entire volume) remain those dedicated to the great exceptions, to the reviewers devoted to the theatricality of the theater, portrayed in passages imbued with both nostalgia and admiration.

The concluding chapter reiterates the importance of researching the archives for understanding the history of performing arts in all its complexity. The author poses a series of questions regarding the status of the theater critic from both the past and the present. The section also foreshadows an expansion of the research into the rest of the communist timeframe.

Miruna Runcan's approach has two important merits: one, she prospects a virgin territory with a contagious investigative enthusiasm, which could inspire the potential specialized readers. Then, she completes the picture of the retheatricalization of Romanian theater, once again demonstrating the documentary potential of theatrical criticism.

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