



Women as Part of the Theatre Audience in 19th Century Romania

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ABSTRACT. Social change in the nineteenth century resulted in a significant transformation of women's status in the Romanian Principalities. Influenced by the Western civilization, women's interest progressed from the private and domestic field to the social life. Their social status evolved at the same time with the society itself and their playing a more active role in society caused a major change in the mentality of the nineteenth century. The Romanian women of the élite were more educated and began to get involved in the social life and to have an impact on it. The Romanian theatre of the nineteenth century is a place where women are present both in the audience and as actresses.

Keywords: Romanian theatre, 19th century theatre audience, Romanian women in the theatre audience

Social change in the Romanian Principalities of the nineteenth century resulted in a significant transformation of women's status. Influenced by the Western civilization, women's interest progressed from the private and domestic field to the social life. Their social status evolved at the same time with the society itself and their playing a more active role in society caused a major change in the mentality of the nineteenth century. The Romanian women of the élite became more educated and began to get involved in the social life and to have an impact on it.

The Romanian theatre of the nineteenth century was a place where women were present both in the audience and as actresses: both as consumer of the theatrical act and as a participant in it. The historian Nicolae Iorga showed that women were actresses (one of the first jobs that the Romanian women embraced) and also supported the founding of the Philharmonic Society: "middle class women were courageous enough to show themselves to the audience playing roles in comedies and melodramas. In

the patronage committee from Wallachia there are two women: Irina, the wife of the poet Iancu Văcărescu, and one Mrs. Castriș.”¹

We must keep in mind that, in this period, the theater was an active space: plays were constantly written and they were played on the stage, even if the authors' aim was not to achieve literary distinction, but a purely practical one, to “fill the bill.” Nor should we overlook the fact that the theater was the only art form that could satisfy the need for public entertainment at that time: the interest that is distributed today between theater, film, music, books, television and the internet just turned then to the stage (and to books, newspapers and magazines). It is also important that, in the next century, the theater lost its popular aspect, the competition (represented at the beginning only by cinema) meant that a smaller number of people went to the theatre.

The evolution of Romanian theater, “from the amateur troupes of the 1820s and 1830s, having lots of enthusiasm and zeal, but lacking formal education and harassed by endless financial difficulties, to the more organized companies at the end of the century, was long and difficult.”² This very rapid development was possible because the theater was, in addition to literature, education and press, part of the movement that championed the nation's progress, the unity and independence of the Romanian state, and due to the activity of personalities such as Vasile Alecsandri, Mihail Kogalniceanu, Costache Negruzzi, Matei Millo, Mihail Pascaly, Costache Caragiali: the pioneers of Romanian theater.

The status of women in society and the relationship between women and men are two of the most interesting problems of the modern period, a period marked by great cultural political, economic and social change. During this period, women began to question the “right” roles of men and women, the ideas promoted by men, the dominant group in the Romanian society of the time. Male-dominated structures and institutions formed the most important frameworks of thought and action in society. Under the influence of the Western lifestyle, in the nineteenth century, women's interest changed from the domestic to the social world: the women from the upper and middle classes left their house and “went out into the world.” Thus, the differences between the women from the early nineteenth century and the ones after the mid-century are astounding. Their status evolved with the society itself. Women of the élite gained their freedom to move in society, directed and influenced social life, participated to the political life and were patrons of the artistic life and of the modernizing movements, fought for the ideal of the Union, took an interest in their education.³

Western influence resulted, as shown, in the attention given to female education. The results of this interest in educating girls were not slow to appear. The ladies in the upper and middle classes began to be interested in culture. They used to read, but also they used to go to the theater. A valuable example for our research is provided by Cesar Bolliac who went to the

opening of the Great Theatre of Bucharest on the 31st of December 1852, and noted the presence of women in the audience: “ladies of high rank, their heads flashing with diamonds” sat next to “the modest women of the bourgeoisie with simple muslin dresses.”⁴ The number of people who attended this celebration of the theater was so great that the price had gone up a great deal, a ticket in the pit raising to one *galben*. The opening of the theater occasioned not only the presence of nobility, who took the boxes, which sparkled with the elegant and luxurious dresses of the ladies, but attracted all the social classes; some of these people even wore the old Oriental costumes.

A true revolution in the mentality of the time occurred once the women showed themselves in society. Romanian society of the nineteenth century wanted to enjoy all the benefits of the European social life. Theater was not only a place to spend some leisurely time, even with an aura of prestige, but also a meeting place where women and young people displayed their jewelry and modern clothes, the latest fashion from Paris or Vienna. In Jassy, in 1840, “the theater served more as a meeting place with new acquaintances, for exhibiting brilliant clothes or for sharing gallant anecdotes. Occupants of the boxes were continually talking, sometimes laughing at a frivolous or double meaning line of the play,”⁵ noted Dr. Ig. Weinberg.

Until the establishment of the national theatre, the Romanian audience had the opportunity to see performances of foreign troupes. Analyzing the Romanian translation of the French repertoire played in the 1830s, Elias Regnault noted that “each new French representation is a day of celebration” and that “these shows light the pride to people of all social classes.”⁶ “The amusement of the rich people is the French theater”, wrote, in 1838, Hubert, the French consul of Jassy.⁷ Characteristic of the Romanian audience was their preferring the sentimental and melodramatic plays. Also, the vaudevilles were much enjoyed: they had the same popularity in the Romanian Principalities as in France. The vaudeville offered the social and moral dimension to life that the Moldovan-Wallachian society needed. These plays were well received by the Romanian audience, a fact demonstrated not only by the French plays represented on stage by the French theatre companies but also by the fact that vaudevilles were translated and adapted into Romanian.⁸

The plays that dealt with women’s issues in their many aspects seemed to please the audience, and especially the women. Some plays passed directly to the Romanian repertoire (*Catherine Howard*, *Mathilde ou la Jalousie*, *Lucrecia Borgia*, *La Soeur de Jocrisse*, *Le Demon at Nuit*, *Le Bataille des Dames*, *Le Gamin de Paris*) and others were very successful even if they were played in French (*Clarisse Harlow*, *Jenny l’ouvrière*). The play *Jenny l’ouvrière* was appreciated in an article that appeared in *Gazeta de Moldavia*, no. 11 of February 5th, 1851:

The audience was inspired by this play's charm and sense of grace, by the natural and noble performance of the actors who played in a natural way and also by the leading role actress Ami Rolan, who knew how to paint the delicacy and tenderness of the main character, her efforts to save her parents from shame and misery, and the torture of her love for a man who still had not understood her noble sacrifice. In several scenes she knew how to touch and move the audience, some of the people there burst into tear.

In addition to Bolliac's article (mentioned above), written on the occasion of the opening of the Great Theatre in Bucharest, when he mentioned the women in the audience who were socially different, there is another important article that proves the fact that women came to theater. Some critics of the performances wanted to see tragedies represented on stage, not only comedies, and women are called upon to support the tragedy. The theatre critic Theulescu wrote an article in *Curierul* in which he called for

young ladies who decorate the theatre with their beauty and who shed tears during several scenes of the play performed the previous evening (the melodramatic comedy *The Card Player*) please wipe out your tears (...) and use your unique influence to encourage the representations of such plays, melodramas and tragedies, so that they could achieve the purpose for which they were written.⁹

At the first examination of the first Music and Arts Academy, Societatea Filarmonică, in 1834, one of the most important actresses of that time, Eufrosina Vlasto, had a huge success. She was appreciated both by critics and the audience: "The noble ladies in the audience gave her rich gifts with the occasion of each performance."¹⁰ Therefore, women were not only interested in watching the performance but also showed their support to the actresses. Eufrosina Vlasto was not only a beautiful and pleasant actress, but also a wonderful singer. She tried unsuccessfully to debut at the Paris Opera House, then went to Italy, where she had a resounding success under the stage name of Marcolini. She also had a brilliant success in Paris, but decided to return to the Romanian stage, where she became known especially for tragedienne roles.

We know that the audience of Romanian theaters in the first decades of the nineteenth century was largely aristocratic and (apart from the premiere in Jassy of the play *Iașii în carnaval* by Alecsandri and the great public enthusiasm that encountered the premieres of the Romanian troops) did not take a stand against what was happening on stage, was not active, did not exhibit significant reactions or attitudes to the shows, apart from their absences from the performances in Romanian. Paul Cornea shows that what the theatre lacked until 1850-1855 was the popular character. Theatres of the 1840s began to open slowly to the middle classes, but even in 1859 the boyars were blamed for not coming to the Romanian plays.¹¹ Mircea Angheliescu indicates that nobility and the modest audiences who spoke only

Romanian did not come to the Romanian theater, and the cause must be sought not in the lack of professional actors, nor in the contempt shown for contemporary Romanian plays by the pretentious and ridiculous men and women *à la mode* (as shown in the play *Conversații* by Costache Faccà), but in the absence of a repertoire that could interest them.¹² The repertoire up to the 1840s is totally devoid of any actual, immediate connection with the audiences' real life. Thus, the nobility and high society preferred the Italian Opera, even in 1859-1860, a fact shown by both Ollănescu and Massoff.¹³

The European theater makes, at the end of the nineteenth century, the step towards modernity. The Romanian theatre appeared later than in European countries with a rich theatrical tradition, but had a quick evolution, skipping steps, reflecting the dynamics of Romanian society and culture during that period, "stepping, at the end of the 19th century, to its classical age."¹⁴ Even if, at first, both the performances and the dramatic works were clumsy, the merits of the pioneers of Romanian theater is that they were trying to overcome the inherent obstacles in the beginning, using the foreign models, but developing important indigenous elements. An important fact is the emergence and development of the audience and of the theatrical and dramatic criticism.

Although the most important people involved in the theatre business in the Romanian Principalities were men: Ion Heliade-Rădulescu, Costache Caragiale, Matei Millo, Vasile Alecsandri, we believe that it can be said that women played an important role in the theatrical culture of the nineteenth century, and a part of this role is the support they showed to the theatre.

NOTES

1. Iorga, Nicolae (1911), *Femeile în viața neamului nostru: chipuri, datine, fapte, mărturii*. Vălenii de Munte, Tipografia Neamul Românesc: 137-138.

2. Cornea, Paul (1980), *Regula jocului. Versantul colectiv al literaturii: concepte, convenții, modele*. Bucharest, Eminescu, Colecția Sinteze: 252.

3. Ciupală, Alin (2003), *Femeia în societatea românească a secolului al XIX-lea între public și privat*. Bucharest, Editura Meridiane, 118-120.

4. Cornea, Paul. *cited work*: 256.

5. *Iașii în vara anului 1840*. Trad. G. Bogdan-Duică, in *Convorbiri literare*, 1926: 650, *apud*, Cornea, Paul. *cited work*: 255.

6. *Histoire politique et sociale des Principautés Danubiennes*, Paris, Paulin et Chevalier, 1855: 190, *apud*, Rădulescu, Ion Horia (1965), *Le théâtre français dans les pays roumanis (1826-1852)*, Paris, M. J. Minard Lettres Modernes, préface de M. Raymond Lebègue: 40-41.

7. Archives du Ministère des Affaires Etrangères, Paris, Correspondance commerciale, Jassy, doss. No. (1837-1841), f. 194, rapport du 15 mars 1838, *apud*, Rădulescu, Ion Horia. *cited work*: 40.

8. Théophile, Gaultier. *Histoire de l'art dramatique en France depuis vingt-cinq ans*. Paris, 1858-1859, vol. I-IV, vol. IV: 114, *apud*, Rădulescu, I. H. *cited work*: 85.
9. Trifu, Constanța (1970), *Cronica dramatică și începuturile teatrului românesc*. Bucharest, Editura Minerva: 240.
10. Ollănescu, Dimitrie C. (1981), *Teatrul la români*. Ediție îngrijită, prefață, note și comentarii de Cristina Dumitrescu, Bucharest, Editura Eminescu: 178.
11. *Românul*, no. 116, 20 Oct. 1859, *apud*, Cornea, Paul, *cited work*: 256-257.
12. Angheliescu, Mircea (1996), *Clasicii nostri*. Bucharest, Editura Eminescu: 90
13. Ollănescu, Dimitrie C. *Cited work*: 259; Massoff, Ioan (1961), *Teatrul românesc de la obârșie până la 1860*. Bucharest, Editura pentru Literatură: 447, 396.
14. Vasiliu, Mihai (1995), *Istoria teatrului românesc*. Bucharest, Editura Didactică și Pedagogică, Colecția Akademos: 30.

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