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- Summary -

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Summary

Key words: Comedy, the comic, Romanian contemporary comedy, tragicomedy, tragic farce, theatre of derision, comic cruelty, black comedy, the Absurd, inter-textuality, heterogeneity, hybridization, impure dramatic form, comic character, typological schemes, stage directions, theatricality, *mise en scène*, theatrical show, director, actor

The PhD thesis *Forms and formulas of contemporary comedy* focuses on the Romanian comedy, with the aim of investigating and determining tangible directions in its evolution, as a reflection of the new socio-economic, political and cultural realities. The doctoral research has as **objective** the analysis of a certain segment of the Romanian contemporary dramaturgy, which is the comedy, from the point of view of its forms over the past decades and its recurrent aesthetic formulas in this dramatic type. The offers an alternative to the studies that have been done until now, through the thematic approach, the emphasis on the heterogeneity of the comic plays of the past 40 years, through the highlighting of the hybridization and of the tragic, dramatic and grotesque or even absurd intrusions in the comedy, through the use of modern analysis. These all contribute to its **originality**. The **novelty** of the thesis stems from the analysis of a dramatic form of the Romanian literary space that has not enjoyed much research in the contemporary era. Starting from the premise that comedy cannot be approached marginally, circumstantially, but it needs to be given the necessary attention, we have pointed out the types of comedies recurrent over the past decades, correlating them with the current European and Romanian dramatic research. An approach of the forms and formulas existing nowadays sheds new light to this field that can be relevant to creating a picture of the current society, but also of the conceptions and visions referring to the artistic and literary fields.

We combined in the research the analysis of the literary aspect, of the textual creation as such, as well as the scenic aspect, the theatricality of comedies. The emphasis was, however, on the comedy as dramatic text, the contemporary *mise en scène* being only the means through which we created the detailed analysis of the comic phenomenon. The present study aims to investigate new critical and hermeneutical directions in the field of dramaturgy, in close connection to the current interest trends.

The motivation for choosing the theme was a subjective one, through a predilection for dramaturgy in general, and for comedy in particular, but also an objective one, stemming from the lack

of a similar paper at the moment of beginning the research.¹ We have chosen to study a period of transition from a communist, totalitarian regime, to capitalism and democracy, in order to point out the impact of the social shifts on the dramatic literature. In this context, we have observed how the Romanian comedy itself is influenced by these changes, thus responding to History. In the plays we have encountered traditional, classical structures, tributary to the rule, but also experimental, postmodernist forms, the absurd and derision, the theatre of cruelty etc., which are part of the reforming process of the European aesthetics belonging to the second half of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st century.

In the beginning we have carefully outlined the investigation field. The emphasis is placed on eight playwrights: Marin Sorescu, Dumitru Solomon, Teodor Mazilu, Ion Băieșu, Horia Gârbea, Adrian Lustig, Vlad Zografî and Matei Vișniec. The choice is based on the fact that their plays are a useful and efficient support for demonstrating the proposed hypothesis. Moreover, there were also objective reasons considered, starting from the importance given to them by the literary critique, as well as their fame, and their impact in the literary and performing fields. **The aim** of the thesis is not to create a literary history, nor to classify the comedies of the abovementioned playwrights according to value, even if there are suggestions in this direction. On the contrary, the attempt is to outline the predominant characteristics of each of the abovementioned playwrights, in order to create an analysis of the recurrent comic forms of the past decades.

From a structural point of view, the doctoral research contains an introduction that identifies the aim, four chapters, each with a clear direction, and with corresponding subchapters, followed by final conclusions and bibliography.

The first step of the analysis was to define comedy and the comic. Therefore, in the initial chapter, *Comedy and the comic - theoretical aspects*, we make a journey into the way this aesthetic category is perceived as well as its representative dramatic form. Starting from the observation that a general unitary theory of the comic is utopian, we have performed a closer analysis of the aesthetic phenomenon. Multiple definitions of the comic have resulted from the psychological, philosophical, aesthetic, linguistic studies, having as their main core the contrast between opposite elements. We used as sources an entire range of theoreticians, aestheticians, from Aristotle, to Immanuel Kant,

¹ At the present time, a volume approaching the Romanian comedy was issued, written by Justin Ceuca, *Aventura comediei românești: 1780-2009/The Adventure of the Romanian comedy 1780-2009* (Cluj-Napoca, Editura Casa Cărții de știință, 2013). This work outlines the most important moments regarding comedy in our countries, but does not deal exclusively with the past year, thus establishing certain coordinates of this dramatic form in the Romanian literature.

Schopenhauer, and Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson and Jean-Marc Defays, Marian Popa etc. Laughter was approached as "substance" of the comic, as its specific reaction. An entire subchapter is dedicated to a historical perspective on comedy, pointing out the moments in which we encounter important changes in the structure, themes, characters or situations of this dramatic form. All these were aimed at creating the link to the contemporary literature. As a melting pot of contradictions, comedy changes together with social evolution, and starts to be characterized by absurd, derision, playful attitudes, heterogeneity and desecration at the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st.

The analysis itself starts in the second chapter, *Forms and formulas of contemporary comedy*, from several terminology classifications required in the dramatic area. A closer look into the critique of universal dramaturgy sheds light on an interesting array of terms, especially regarding the comedy of the past years. As a theoretical basis, we focused on several recent studies in the field, such as those of Michel Corvin, Marie-Claude Canova, Alain Couprie, Emmanuel Jacquart, Catherine Naugrette, Jean-Pierre Ryngaert and others, but also some belonging to Romanian theoreticians such as Marian Popescu, Maria Vodă Căpușan, Justin Ceuca, Constantin Cubleşan etc. Recent specialized dictionaries (few in number, but well documented) were also used, including those of Patrice Pavis or of Anne Ubersfeld. This chapter aims to perform a descriptive-analytic research on the contemporary Romanian dramaturgy. By presenting the main accepted forms of contemporary comedy: the tragic farce, the tragicomedy, the theatre of derision, the absurd comedy, the theatre and comedy of cruelty, we intended to emphasize the hybrid and heterogenic character of the Romanian dramaturgy. Each text has at its core derision combined with a tragic, risible, comic, grotesque or burlesque aspects. We investigated to which extent the dramatic tradition is preserved, and in which manner, if these methods are used, but also what aspects of novelty characterize the comedy of the past decades. One subchapter focuses on the gradual structuring and presentation of the elements of comedy, starting from the dramatic action, and then focusing on space, time, dramatic language and characters, with the aim of collecting the necessary means for our interpretation. With this aim in mind, we have also resorted to a short presentation of the recurring formulas of the contemporary Romanian comedy: the realism, absurd, postmodernism, in the attempt to identify the formal, thematic etc. influences in the chosen texts. The study unfolds gradually, based on the chosen themes and issues. We did not aim to keep a chronological analysis of the plays, but we focused more on a thematic and structural approach, in order to achieve an integrated picture of the respective period of time. The '70s and '80s bring a rebirth of the dramaturgy during communism, and the comedy in this period intersects, accidentally or

intentionally, with tragedy and drama (historical drama or the drama of ideas). The years after 1989 are blurry and dominated by cultural and literary confusions. In the abovementioned decades, we have observed the manner in which the chosen playwrights use "hybrid forms" as a mirror of the reality marked by social, economic and political distress.

The following subchapters offer a critical study of the plays of the chosen playwrights. Firstly, the focus is on Teodor Mazilu's plays, one of the playwrights that rely on the satirical comedy and on irony regarding various human categories. The universe of his tragicomedies belongs to imposture. We are, therefore, faced with an *upside-down world*, dominated by anti-value, duplicity and cynicism. Ion Băieșu is on the same page through the *post-Caragiale slum* approached in his comedy. The subchapter dedicated to this playwright starts from the idea that the periphery is chosen as a dramatic space, but it is a modern slum, with its borderline typologies, with their peripheral and garrulous spirit. The absurd is present also, and the daily life is in the foreground. We then analyse the interferences of the comedy with the drama of ideas, based on Dumitru Solomon's plays. We have identified a special type of comedy, the "intellectualized" comedy, with cultural, literary and historical traits. These intrusions have an ironical substance, full of secondary meanings. History is another theme that we focused on in the present paper. Playwrights like Marin Sorescu or Vlad Zografi bring new views on historical events, especially from an ironic perspective. We have reached the conclusion that their writing goes beyond the status of historical plays and rise up to the level of symbols, mystifying suggestions, baldly combining tragic-comic elements with allegorical ideas, and with possible hints towards the theatre of the absurd. We then focused on the analysis of productive characteristics of the contemporary comedy, such as intertextuality as sign of postmodernism. The previous framework of models is the basis for the de-construction and (re) construction of a new, subversive, creation, which is usually caricatural or ironical. Irony acquires a critical, rhetorical function. Although the play seems different, the same masks are present together with scholastic and cultural images of the times, identified in the present creations, and recognized in contemporary visions with a "weak" reinterpretation. The analysis focuses on several current tragicomedies, especially those of Horia Gârbea, but also those of Adrian Lustig or Vlad Zografi. The results point to the fact that contemporary plays cultivate the comedy of cruelty and black comedy; there is also a certain inclination towards a comedy of disaster, such as that of Adrian Lustig, in which the visual or textual violence reaches high peaks of intensity, at the same time maintaining a humorous character. Hybridization is ever present in the current theatre. Playwrights create heterogeneous plays, choosing from a variety of styles and literary forms, ambiguity and

multiple meanings. In this respect, the best example would be Matei Vişniec. The playwright adopts as means of expression derision, the absurd, creating works in which irony, parody, the hilarious or even the grotesque dominate. We have emphasized also the fact that the plays of certain analyzed authors are not equal from an aesthetic point of view. Teodor Mazilu, Matei Vişniec, Ion Băieşu, but also playwrights that focus on history from an ironical, postmodern viewpoint (Marin Sorescu, Vlad Zografi), are representative. In our opinion, Matei Vişniec is the closest from the Romanian playwrights to the transformations and directions of the European theatre.

Therefore, from this chapter on, the theoretical part of our study is combined with the relevant applications for the ideas and concepts analyzed. The contemporary comedy loses its generic purity, being characterized by a mixture or hybridization of the tragic, drama, the grotesque, the frightening and, last, but not least, the comic. The authors return to the classical models (Ion Luca Caragiale, Vasile Alecsandri), but also to the ones after World War II (Eugen Ionescu). We encounter plays that illustrate the theatre of derision, that exhibit ambiguity, nonsense, polysemy. The tragic and the comic mix together in specific existential situations, and the plot points towards a certain pseudo-pessimistic view on mankind and life in general. A correspondence can be identified between what is being written abroad and the choices of the Romanian playwrights. We have tried to link the personal analysis of the works of each playwright with the investigations of the literary and/or theatre critics. The argumentation is realized with a personal critical note, based on numerous examples from the text. We have proved that Romanian contemporary comedy presents a continuous mixture of apparently conflicting registers (comic, tragic, dramatic), regardless whether we are referring to subjects, situations, characters or language.

Therefore, this chapter has a hybrid character, specifically through the simultaneous approach of the eight playwrights, based on the general themes present and the characteristics of the plays. As we have shown, what unites them is the inclination towards "impure" forms of comedy, towards heterogeneity. The predominant themes are politics, history, mediocre existence. The favourite setting belongs to peripheries, illustrating an existential and behavioural side of the inhabitants of the slums. The recurrent features in the plays are irony, parody, the ridiculous, intertextuality, the absurd, the derision.

The third chapter, *The character in the contemporary comedy*, deals with the new tendencies in the study of the contemporary dramatic character. The analysis of the comic character forms an important part of the present thesis. Starting from the premise that the character is the "driver" behind a

play, it is its centre, and dramaturgy cannot exist without it, we have studied the way in which characters represent the image of changes occurred in the contemporary comedy, but also the correlations between the manners of analyzing and defining them and the situations in which they take part. Starting from the current studies referring to the comic character (such as those of Maria Vodă Căpușan, of Georges Zaragoza, Robert Abirached, Jean-Pierre Ryngaert etc), we have chosen certain reading indications that we applied to the Romanian contemporary comedy, closely following the relationship between the direction of analysis of the character, its typology (the character type), and its role as element of the system of other characters, as a common element of a group. It is interesting that most of the scholars analyse the dramatic character from a double perspective: as a "construction" of a playwright that endows it with own existence and features, and as a scenic representation through an actor that will "embody" all of those mentioned before. In this sense, in the work *Les termes clés de l'analyse du théâtre*, Anne Ubersfeld examines the character through its nature, as a:

„key notion of the theatre, (...) textual notion, whose function is to be an element of a narrative section (...) support of a human being, part of a complex collection of signs, which is the performance.”²

Traditionally, the comic character, a construction of the text, is characterized based on its name, its role in the plot and the action, and its own speech. Therefore, the first suggestions and mentioning of the protagonists, as well as the structure of the creation are found in the list of names (the so called *dramatis personae*). They are the support for subsequent interpretation, since names can provide social, economic, historical and cultural clues regarding the character. Moreover, the character is defined by its actions by the manner in which it is involved in the dramatic script. The action and the character are in a close relationship, each supporting the other, since one without the other cannot achieve the "dramatic illusion". The protagonist is also defined by its own language. Its lines, the dialogues, the monologues, all create a specific image which forms *its text*. In theatre, they represent the most important traces of the characters, since they are construed by what they say and the way in which they interpret this (assumed) role.

The following subchapters follow the mapping of the comic resulting from the way in which the characters act in certain give situation, from the situations in which they are involved or their interferences with the others. We have shown that characters create a structured microcosm, which relies on interdependency. The groups appear, firstly, on the background of the family (in the parenting or couple framework), where common traits are dissensions, misunderstandings, mistrust. However, we

² Anne Ubersfeld, *Termenii cheie ai analizei teatrului*. Iași, Editura Institutul European, 1999, p.62

notice that they are comic couples, because they do not experience a "real" suffering, but one they are miming for the pragmatic purpose; these situations carry the irony of the author. Within the groups (which are built on oppositions and resemblances), the comic stems from the conflicts. Regardless of the point of focus (the social, economic, family level), the reactions that cause laughter are the ones following conflicting actions. An extremely interesting and productive relationship in the comedy is the one between master and valet (with all its forms). Moreover, desecration creates an universe favourable for developing various connections. The characters are connected through the inability to transcend, to overcome the spiritual (and not only) mediocrity. They are also linked through the conclusion that they themselves discover, which is that there is no purpose to things. We could dare say that this is the cause of the buffoonish exasperation present in the play, but it is also a new absurd aspect of comic. The second analysis level of this part is done through the perspective of the individualization of the comic characters. The characters of contemporary comedies cannot be analyzed exclusively based on the groups to which they belong, but also taking in account certain features that individualize them, thus resulting in dramatic typologies. The approach that we propose has an innovating character through the fact that it refers both to characters from the traditional comedy, but also to tragic characters, both typologies being present in the contemporary Romanian comedy. The comedy is the source for the social typologies, the human ones (each comic play of the present period presents certain typological schemes), the king and the buffoon - omnipresent in comedy, the fool (type derived from the category of the buffoon, whether it is institutionalized, or it only has an abnormal, changing, unpredictable, behaviour, with unexpected lines). The Ancient tragedy is the source for individualized characters, with a complex personality, with a psychology that evolves during the play. We find the image of the hero (now dominated by distress, incertitude, anxiety), but also the image of the destiny, portrayed by the Divinity. The embodiment of the destiny (re)appears in the contemporary plays as ludic, parodic, ironic representations of a "compromised" divinity. In modern comedies, the heroes are transposed whether as historical or mythical characters, or as regular people, who want to overcome the barriers of mediocrity. Therefore, the contemporary comedy brings shifts of the character, which becomes a reflection of the existential transformations of the time. This chapter proves the fact that the analysis of the contemporary dramatic character must encompass its representation as an individuality, but also in the context of the relationships it has, of the complex system that it belongs to, for a complete and complex analysis of its involvement in the text. In the forms of the contemporary comedy, the character appears as representative of heterogeneity, of the mixture of various registers.

The final chapter *Images/elements of the theatricality of the contemporary comedy*, is dedicated to theatricality, the forms and means of the *mise en scène* of the past decades. Starting from the idea of a text-stage transfer, and the hypothesis according to which a play is not characterized only by its text, but also by the ways in which it can be performed, presented to an audience, we have reached the conclusion that it is important to point out the current means through which the comedies can transform when performed on a stage. It is important to analyze the manner in which the text and the scenic representation can be combined, so that the comic layer is preserved. It is also important to identify the textual indications of the authors in order to (re)create, (re)configure at the extra-literary level the performances that cause laughter, but also meditation regarding the human condition.

The contemporary comedy requires more complex reading indications, and its performance on the stage becomes a difficult act. The chapter proves the fact that the *mise en scène* of contemporary plays requires a collaboration between "co-authors" of the play. Not only the director is a creator, with the power of transmitting a universe, through his or her vision, but also the actors and spectators become active elements of the performance. Through correlations with the performances of the comedies that we analyzed from the textual point of view, we have identified the relations between the stage (and all it means - actors, props, actions) and the receiver who is the spectator. Nowadays, the *mise en scène* requires various practices (with examples from the performances of the theatre in Sibiu), it combines interdisciplinary arts (in this respect, maybe the most interesting are the involvement of the mass media), it leads to the invention of diverse visual and plastic forms, the performance leaves the stage and happens among the spectators. The stage is not always the traditional one, new spaces are introduced, open spaces, which allow for stringer connections between audience and performance. Moreover, we have pointed out the fact that although the emphasis is more on the influence of the script over the performance, the text of the comedies does not fall to the second place, but becomes the centre for the creation of new images, which try to bring a contemporary note to the character. In our analysis, we also studied the *blocking* or the stage directions, as connection between text and performance. They can be exterior to the lines (when we discuss about directions regarding the interactions), but also internal, providing indications for gestures, mimics, tone, but also actions of characters and their involvement in the presented events. We pointed out the fact that the stage directions do not offer only indications for the *mise en scène* of the plays, but are real "images" of the message of the text, are an integrated part of the text, illustrating the characteristics of the dramatic "form" where they meet, combining processes specific to comedy, tragedy or drama.

As a conclusion, our PhD thesis proposes an analysis of the contemporary Romanian comedy of the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. The focus remains, we believe, on the literary side. A part of the thesis is dedicated to the scenic aspect, but only as a purpose of emphasizing the dramatic text and creating a general picture of the comic phenomenon of the past decades. Through a methodical and analytical research, we have shown that Romanian playwrights of the period choose hybrid forms as a means of expression, represented by tragicomedy, black comedy, the theatre of derision, the absurd comedy, the tragic farce or the comedy of cruelty. Most often, in these plays, "the comic, the tragic, as the strict and the informal dissolve together"³, leading to theatrical hybrids. The novelty does not result from the authors' predilection for this "impure comedy", but from the constancy and continuity of the mixture between tragic, dramatic and comic. Today's comedy becomes an answer of the reader and/or spectator to the negativity of existence.

We have shown that, in the contemporary comedy, the reflection of reality is done through various means: at textual level, through irony, parody, derision, absurd, burlesque, and at an extra-textual level, through performances which emphasize particularly the nonsense and ridiculousness of the existence. The dehumanization, the *upside down* universe, the reversal of values the desecration and political ideologies, are present in the contemporary comic discourse in the themes, the relationships among characters, in the language and the vocabulary used.

At the core Romanian comedies we discover a serious meditation on humanity and existence. Therefore, the Romanian contemporary comedy, illustration of the vision of playwrights on society, life and culture, remains a living art, and its vitality and energy are the proofs of the constant transformations of dramaturgy with the evolution of the human condition.

³ Jean-Marc Defays, *Comicul: principii, procedee, desfășurare*. Iași, Editura Institutul European, 2000, p.32.

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