

Miruna Runcanu, *Teatru în diorame. Discursul criticii teatrale în comunism. Fluctuantul dezgheț 1956-1964*. [Theater in Dioramas. The Discourse in Theatre Criticism during Communism. The Fluctuating Thaw 1956-1964], Tracus Arte, 2019, 341 p.

A very important book that deals with the subject of the recent past and which was recently released is Miruna Runcanu's volume: *Theatre in Dioramas. The Discourse in Theatre Criticism during Communism. The Fluctuating Thaw 1956-1964*. Definitely, one of the first things that sparks one's interest is the title, as it is both specific about the information included in the volume and idiomatical, thus successfully creating an intrigue. The reader understands exactly from the beginning what is the subject of the book and what to expect further (theatre criticism in communism, between 1956-1964) but they may also be intrigued and curious about the author's perspective (what the author means by "theatre in dioramas"). This title introduces the reader to two different concepts: politics and art. A third hint is that the work aims to bring into discussion criticism as a cultural ingredient, often omitted from the discourse in the cultural, artistic space. This omission existed during the past regime, and persists until today, both in Romania and abroad, as the author points out: "An eternal Cinderella (theatre criticism) in relation to art criticism, especially the literary one, and in relation to its own environment, the theatre." The absence of this professional discussion is all the more intriguing, since theatre criticism has become one of the specializations included in many Arts Universities after the fall of the communist regime in Romania. Just by reading the title, one can realize that the idea of this research represents a unique approach, as no other initiative of this kind has been identified, at least not one carried out in a language of international circulation. This fact is mentioned by the author herself from the beginning.

The book is well structured and this may be noticed at once, by reading the table of contents: precise contextualization, presentation of the evolution of critical discourse structures, relevant case studies, permanent exemplification. The author sets the general framework in which the critical discourses are developed, derived from ideology. She also characterizes the period as a "fluctuant Thaw," marking the period 1956-1958 as a Thaw in the cultural space, characterized by openness and cultural liberalization, followed by a "refreezing" of about two years, so that between 1961-1964 there would be another Thaw, the last during the Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej regime.

This volume is structured in seven chapters, having the *Theatre* magazine as the main subject of analysis, as this magazine was released in 1956. The first chapter *Arguments for a historical research of the discourse of theatre criticism in communism* presents the author's argument in favour of the necessity of this research, and a summary of the main discussion developed in the volume. It

also contains information for contextualizing the period, the differences between normative and axiological criticism, as well as the evolution of theatre criticism in relation to international theatrical directions. The author underlines the relationship between directors, scenographers, actors and the critical reviews regarding their artistic creations, as *Theatre* magazine released in 1959 a series of debate articles called *For the prestige of dramatic criticism*, in which artists were invited to express their opinions on the directions in which theatrical criticism should develop, thus to practice a “criticism of the criticism.”

The second chapter, *Political contexts, ideological norms*, comprises an analysis on how ideas of the political agenda were disseminated in the public space, and the way in which the results of the reports and analyses of the Theatre People’s Conferences and especially the Party Congresses were reflected in all the cultural publications, especially in *Theatre* magazine. In this chapter a case study is presented, entitled “the Novac case”: the virulent attacks against the show based on Anna Novac’s play, *What kind of man are you*, staged in 1958, were actually grounding the implementation of new targets with regard to using specific terms: impatience, revisionism and negativism.

The third chapter, *Interlude: As you like it battle. A case study*, is focused on a case study regarding the show *As you like it* by William Shakespeare, directed by Liviu Ciulei, staged at the Municipal Theatre in Bucharest, in 1961. The chronicle of the show published in *Theatre* magazine by Mircea Alexandrescu opened a larger discussion, in which the show was accused of being experimental, instead of strictly respecting Shakespeare’s play: “*As you like it* would only be an experimental show, in which I don’t know if the objective was to make a demonstration of direction and scenography, to the detriment of the text, but it succeeded for sure in that direction.” (p.80). This chronicle was followed by many debates and responses in the print media, and also live, including one from the director. The importance of presenting this episode resides in the accuracy of the presentation, using exact quotations from magazines of those times, attributed to each participant, thus excluding the possibility of fabulation, an extremely widespread practice in the historical world. It also gives us the chance to portray the professionals in the field, a portrait resulting from the construction of their arguments for or against the show, from the works that they cite and from the interpretation they make through connection to the international theatrical context.

In the fourth chapter, *The discourse of theatre criticism, the Thaw and the rediscovery of the aesthetic dimension of the theatre*, the connection of the Romanian theatrical movement with the one abroad is emphasized, but discussions regarding the function of the director or the evolution of the content of the theatrical chronicle are also included, from the attention given to the text to the attention given to the performance. An important point of the chapter is represented by the reports and interviews conducted during the Thaw, by

Dana Crivăț, Sergiu Fărcășanu, Camillo Osorovitz etc., in which they present the theatrical world outside Romania. Apart from the permanent ideologization which stigmatized the commercial theatre made in United States of America or other Western countries (the Broadway reports of Sergiu Fărcășanu), we are introduced to the story of Broadway cinema and theatre of that period, to Peter Brook's special view on theatre (Peter Brook gave Dana Crivăț an unique interview), or to the activity of Magician's Lantern from Praga, the world's first multimedia theatre (Camillo Osorovitz, a famous scenographer, visited Prague and wrote an article about it).

The fifth chapter, called *Critique of the theatre criticism*, reunites the positions that different artists of the Romanian stage expressed and which opposed the function of the theatre critic. Thus, in the *Theatre* magazine, in 1958 the deputy editor Florin Tornea inaugurates the section entitled *Chronicle of chronicle*, where articles that recommended collective chronicles were published (A. P. Marțian), as well as participation of critics in rehearsals, debates with critics after premieres that were to be transcribed and published (Irina Răchițeanu), the necessity of the theatre critics to use rehearsal journals and to follow the evolution of the show, without being limited to the reception chronicle of the evening of the premiere (Val Mugar).

Last, but not least, chapter six - *Evolution of discourse structures: genres, stylistics, rhetoric* includes a retrospective of the evolution of critical discourse but also an account of the structure of the *Theatre* magazine, also presenting some specific chronicle styles, such as those of Ecaterina Oproiu, Florian Potra or Dan Nasta. The last chapter - *End of Stage* - discusses the answers to some essential questions regarding the status and role of the theatre critic from the researched period, rhetorical questions, as stated by the author: "the world of Romanian theatre stubbornly avoided its history and reconsideration" (p. 301). It also contains the *Addenda*, a very well documented case study about director Sică Alexandrescu, relevant to how an artist could reach the peak of his career if there was a pact with the political power.

There are some other very important topics in this volume, which I will only mention: the cases in which theatre criticism was so impactful that it modified the final form of a show, the fact that at that time there was no professional interest on theatre theories (there were only isolated translations on this subject and only from Soviet authors), "re-theatralisation" and moving the attention of the critics towards the scenography and the visual component of a show. Last but not least, one of the important contributions of this book to the history of Romanian theatre is the fact that it offers complete characterizations of the most important directors by presenting their activity in the arena of theatrical debates of that time (Lucian Pintilie, Liviu Ciulei, David Esrig, Lucian Giurchescu).

The book is a necessity in the field of editorial appearances in the Romanian academic sphere, firstly because it proposes an analytical and critical perspective on the communist era, as an act of retrieving a historical period that contributes to our reconciliation with the recent past and implicitly to contain the nostalgic perspective. From this point of view, the book is the result of a very good documentation of that period, important in the history of Romanian theatre. There is information related to the organization of the *Theatre* magazine, the target audience, but also to the different types of critics, with different educational backgrounds, different political orientations (politically employed, i.e. party members - Mircea Alexandrescu, Margareta Băbăruță or non-employed, with shorter collaborations - I.D. Sârbu, Ștefan Augustin Doinaș, Mira Iosif, Ecaterina Oproiu), but also with different styles of writing (some authors were more oriented to literary and dramatic criticism and others paid special attention to the staging of the shows).

A particularity of the volume is the tone and role that the author chooses for herself: a kind of referee, who records the movements of the “players,” but which allows the reader to decide alone which are the teams, which team scored higher and which is the final score. The author’s writing style may stir confusion with regard to the type of book they are reading. Due to the dynamics and the direct and indirect characterization of characters, one may ask if they are reading an adventure novel about the theatrical world of critics and artists of the period, acting in Romania and worldwide, or if the book illustrates the evolution of the theatrical movement in communist Romania. This aspect contributes to transforming the volume into a rich in information, very easy-to-read book.

In conclusion, I’m optimistic about the ability of this work to stimulate the appetite for more research on the topic, thus broadening the perspective over the entire period when theatre criticism was practiced in communism. It is our hope that more researchers will be interested to contribute on the subject in future collective volumes and complete the project, as it has been designed from the very beginning.

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