



Gender Studies Applied to Theatre
TERRITORIES TO RECOVER.
THEATRE THROUGH THE GENDER
LENS by **OLTIȚA CÎNTEC (COORD.)**

*Teritorii de recuperat. Teatru prin lentile de gen/
Territories to Recover. Theatre through the Gender Lens*

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Abstract: This bilingual volume brings together contributions from the field of drama and performance studies viewed from the perspective of gender as distinct discipline. The ten texts collected in the edition discuss diverse issues in Romanian and international theatre (German or Italian), famous figures in the field (Phia Ménard), different characters in texts, bringing into play feminist perspectives and touching upon the masculine and the feminine. The love for women is prophesized within the larger framework of territories to recover, grounds to be gained reminding one of the uncharted and unexplored land symbolised by Moby Dick in American fiction.

Keywords: theatre criticism, Romanian and international performances, gender studies, liberating narratives.

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The volume coordinated by professor Oltița Cîntec, theatre critic, doctor in Theatre Studies, associate professor at the Faculty of Theatre at George Enescu National University of Arts in Iași, contains Romanian specialty texts translated into English by Carmen Tărniceru and Mircea Sorin Rusu, ten in all, covering a wide range of minutely discussed topics related to gender in theatre studies.

The first article is an introductory one and belongs to the coordinator herself, bearing the same title as the book. Thus, in “Teritorii de recuperat”/ “Territories to Recover”, Oltița Cîntec speaks about female artists as “a young stage presence” (p. 159) with much to recover considering history (i.e., his story, as feminists argue) from a sociological viewpoint, in which male actors prevailed. The matter of stereotypes and inequality in art is considered drawing on absurd theatre (S. Beckett) with reference to the author’s previous research¹. She pleads for a “balance in artistic and technical jobs” (p. 160) bringing into play the case of a debate organized by a former student of hers, *Directing, a feminine noun*². Furthermore, she provides statistics supporting her allegations in favour of men in theatre and against women, hence the need for territories to recover. O. Cîntec ends her introduction by mentioning the fact that the volume belongs to an editorial project of FITPTI, the International Festival for Young Audiences

1 For a full picture, see Oltița Cîntec, “Reprezentări ale femeii în artele spectacolului actual. Câteva abordări succinte” In Marinela Rusu (coord.) (2023) and “La Edinburgh Festival Fringe 75”, *Observer cultural* (2022).

2 For the full transcript, see Oltița Cîntec, Marinela Țepuș (14 Nov. 2019) “Regie, substantiv feminin”, *Scena.ro*

of Iasi that started in 2008 and had her as curator and lists the previous eight volumes that have come out since 2015 (pp. 161-162).

The second article, “Male/Female/Diverse – An Exploration of Gender Identity in German and Italian Theatre”/“Masculin/ feminin/divers – o explorare a identităţii de gen în teatrul german și italian” by Irina Wolf explores the challenge from the two genres starting from the idea that female characters in classical theatre have unfortunate fates, hence the support for the women’s rights in the respective German environment since 2016 (p. 163). A female quota much subjected to criticism was introduced because positive discrimination was required for social change³ (pp. 164-166), yet most significant performances such as Hamlet were continued to be directed by men (p. 167). In Italy, diversity was experimented by means of transgender characters due to Samira Elagoz, winner of the Silver Lion for *Seek Bromance* at the Venice Theatre Biennale in 2022, among others (p. 168). The last part of the research overviews Liv Ferracchiati’s trilogy on gender identity consisting of *Peter Pan guarda sotto le gonne*, *Strabat Mater* and *Un eschimese in Amazonia* in which stress on the FtM transition is seen as a “mental journey” in shaping one’s identity in the world with less focus on bodily changes despite some mental drawbacks (p. 174).

In “Phia Ménard sau lupta unei artiste cu materia. Interdisciplinaritate și transidentitate”/“Phia Ménard or the Struggle of an Artist with Matter. Interdisciplinarity and Transidentity”, Mirella Patureau acknowledges she hesitated in her choice of the title as she aimed at an interdisciplinary “overcoming of boundaries between scenic subjects” (p. 175). The female artist has sought balance since her youth when she had her first job as juggler and was part of a circus before she founded her own company. The author argues that Ménard’s “complicated relationship with her body increased her artistic sensitivity” (p. 178) and in 2008, when she started transitioning towards her new trans identity, her duality afforded her better playfulness with basic elements such as water or wind than it was possible before, hence her cycle on air, *The Afternoon of a Föhn* on music by Debussy that could benefit from Bachelard’s critical methodology as proposed in *Water and dreams*⁴ (pp. 179-180). Taking an interest in thermal/climatic conditions and their relation to mood changes, she will collaborate with a transgender philosopher in Brussels on *In the Mood*, “a work on gender and affective states” (p. 181). She will work with melting ice on another project, *PPP* and then *Vortex* in 2011 in which “the individual is surrounded by ventilators as in a cage for

3 For more details see Sabine Leucht, Petra Paterno, Katrin Ullmann (coord.), *Status Quote* (2023), pp. 76-77.

4 For the original edition, see Bachelard (1942).

wild animals” (p. 183). At the Avignon Festival in 2018, she will present *Saison sèche* which deals with patriarchy considered to be oppressive on humanity, in general and women, in particular (p. 184). Later, at the same festival, in 2021 she will come with a(n immoral) trilogy (*The Mother House*, *Father Temple* and *Forbidden Encounter*) initiated several years earlier bringing together “three contemporary stories that put into perspective the birth, then the destruction of Western civilization” (p. 187). The author concluded that Phia Ménard gave Europe “a Laic Prayer”, faith in otherness and belief in the existence of an alternative for a better world.

Daniela Şindilean’s “*Nici – nici, de fapt, ȝi – ȝi: MDLSX*”/“*Neither – nor, in fact, both – and: MDLSX*” tackles the difficulty of talking about identity and brings into play Jeffrey Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, with its “multi-layered and multi-generational stories” (p. 193). Mentioning several pathologies related to gender identity, she also discusses a 2015 Italian staging of the novel, a free adaptation, *MDLSX*, “a magmatic territory where fiction and autobiography intertwine” (p. 196). Freedom and becoming are at its core, the performance mesmerizing its viewers by throwing them in mixed emotions (p. 197).

In “*Femeia în primele texte dramatice româneşti*”/“*Women in the First Romanian Dramatic Texts*”, Anca Haţiegan argues that Transylvania with its multi-religious and multi-ethnic character favored “the emergence of incipient forms of theatre in the Romanian language starting with the half of the 18th century” (p. 202). The Greek Catholic schools of the time had a say in this, even from the 16th century, along with Reformed educational units in which Saxons and Hungarians learned and acted in school plays (not only in Latin, but also in German and Hungarian), both religious and lay in character (p. 203). The first dramatic writings in Romanian date back to the 18th century, as well, and the author chooses to focus on the “comical-satirical” play, *The Bishop’s Judgement* or *The Lad and the Maiden* accounted for by N. Drăganu in 1923 (Drăganu, 1924, p. 245). Rediscovered by the critic Mircea Popa in the late 80s (Popa, 1979, p. 12), the play talks about the denial of paternity, a theme more minutely dealt with later by female playwrights Constanţa Dunca (1843-1923) and Sofia Nădejde (1856-1946) in their works (p. 208). The “male-favorable perspective” is undeniable, the woman being “the temptation of the devil” (p. 209). Baroque in its production, *commedia dell’arte* in style, “typical for Renaissance carnival shows” (p. 210), it was probably the result of “collective writing” and historical facts inspired it (p. 211), also drawing on Romanian folklore and international tales for the creation of the woman from the devil’s tail (pp. 213-214). In a patriarchal stance, the woman’s world is shattered when her husband, the Moldavian king, dies, yet, despite the tragic event, the “script (...) was first and foremost meant to provoke laughter” (p. 216). Last but not least, despite the caricatural depiction of the woman in the

work, male characters are not always portrayed to inspire respect in the emergent Romanian playwrighting of the 18th century (p. 217).

Iulia Popovici's "Scurt excurs despre prezența femeilor regizoare în teatrul din România"/"Brief Excursions on the Presence of Female Directors in Romanian Theatre" deals with "a main topic" of the Romanian art scene of the recent years focusing on "the manner in which gender shaped the professional experiences of (theatre and film) female artists in Romania, focusing on abuse, sexism and manifest misogyny" (p. 218) against the background of the #metoo phenomenon. Theatre critics and professors argued that public theatres are dominated by male directors, whereas independent ones favour women directors⁵ (p. 219). I. Popovici asks several research questions, and we are invited to answer them, give our opinion on whether "gender awareness automatically generates a feminist approach of gender issues" (p. 220). "Niche manifestations" such as Cristina Modreanu's feminist project *Hedda's Sisters. Empowering Women Theatre Artists in Romania and Eastern Europe* (2018) and Givulipen Theatre Company tackling Roma identity and feminism are illustrations of an interest in woman-related art expression in our country (*ibidem*). With respect to the former, a personalized reply coming from people working on it reads as follows: "There were (...) many moments when our feminine sensitivity resonated as one."⁶ (p. 224) However, there are no qualitative and quantitative analyses that allow proper interpretation of the data supporting a higher number of female graduates than directors proper after the graduation of the respective program (p. 221), despite views in the field⁷. Further on, the author provides her own analysis of gender representation in public theatres for the seasons 2017-2018 and 2022-2023, respectively (224). I. Popovici's calculations based on the data available to the public for big theatres such as Radu Stanca from Sibiu, the National Theatre of Cluj Napoca, the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, the Vasile Alecsandri National Theatre in Iasi, the National Theatres of Bucharest and Timisoara (pp. 226-235), etc. afforded her to reach the conclusion that "*gender index* for the quota of shows directed by women as part of the repertory" was "weighing to half a point the shows co-directed by a man and a woman" (p. 225). Last but not least, she also accounted for the trend of female directors in approaching gender issues and found that feminism was rejected, or political action was taken when militantism was not included to a certain extent, against the background of a much debated 'generational issue' (pp. 237-238).

5 See Popescu, M. (2015) "Stereotipuri pe scena teatrului". In Mircea Vasilescu et. al., *Stereotipuri feminine în cultura română*, p. 59.

6 See Modreanu, C. (2016) "Teatru feminist. Câteva concluzii la final de proiect", *Scena.ro*

7 Drăgănescu, C. (2017) "Despre femei, feminism și teatrul independent. Interviu cu Catinca Drăgănescu", interview by Iulia Popovici, *Observator cultural*, issue 890, September 22.

Mihaela Michailov's "Teatrul eliberatoarelor narațiuni. Pentru o re-dramatizare feministă a lumii"/"The Theatre of Liberating Narratives. Towards a Feminist Re-Dramatization of the World" is an essay which purports "to reflect on the narrative imagination and transforming social structures of a feminist, queer theatre which transcends the male-female binaries." (p. 243) Feminist culture in our country benefited from the creation of local programs, in addition to translations from seminal feminist works, i.e., Elena Vlădăreanu's initiative leading to Sofia Nădejde awards or Alina Purcaru and Paula Erizanu's *Un secol de poezie română scrisă de femei/A Century of Romanian Poetry Written by Women* in three volumes which came out at Cartier Publishing House. Similarly, theatre consolidated its discourse in the field, topics ranging from domestic violence, maternity or uses and abuses of workforce migration (p. 244). Texts for performances written by women (Alexa Băcanu, Mihaela Drăgan, Nicoleta Esinencu, Alexandra Felseghi, Alice Monica Marinescu) displayed political relevance with a personal touch allowing "a systemic, multi-referential analysis" (p. 245). It is argued that through language, feminist theatre undermined 'conservative discourse frameworks' and, in support of her claim, the author discusses *Evanghelia după Maria/The Gospel According to Mary*⁸ on which *Housewife Apocalypse* was based. Here, "male presence supremacy" is destabilized as technique referencing the biblical text, also proposing reflection on economic, cultural or politic frameworks labeled as oppressive (p. 247). Male-female binaries are transcended, and research questions invite us to assess the way in which we employ "the force of theatre to create a shared space for (...) propelling imagination" (p. 250). To summarize, the voices in Esinescu's play mentioned above plead for "revendication" and the "derailing of history occupied in Heaven and on Earth by Fathers and Sons of the single creative word" in the rewriting of "the biblical story from the point of view of the Mother who is being asked for forgiveness and who is being given her words back – her whispered, so little heard and among us descended words." (p. 252).

In Oltița Cîntec's "Genul biologic, genul scenic"/"Biological Gender, Gender on Stage" the injustices of history are pointed out, drawing on international press: "826 of the total of 981 Shakesperean characters are men and 155 women, i.e., 16%. Of all the parts with more than 500 lines, only 13% are female parts. Rosalinda from *As You Like It*, the most generous female part (actually a mix of genders) from the work of the bard as a whole, has 730 lines, while the much-craved Hamlet part has 1539" (Higgins, 2012). Characters of uncertain gender are also dealt with by means of Silviu Purcărete's *Faust* and

8 *Evanghelia după Maria* (2019) a performance by Nora Dorogan, Nicoleta Esinencu, Kira Semionov, Doriană Talmazan, written by Nicoleta Esinencu; Co-produced by Theatre Rampe and Teatru-Spălătorie.

Mephistopheles's character played by an actress; her "subtle transactions" subscribe to Stanislavski's approach demanding empathy and compatibility to the character in "a cocktail of contained genres" with "many diffuse meanings" (p. 256). Power and control games are at play and Mephistopheles is more than a travesty taking the malefic to the level of a social construct (p. 260). Imaginative involvement was a must during the COVID 19 pandemic as in the case of *The Gamblers* produced at Sibiu, a play in which the devil had a part and a conman was played by a woman who managed "to correlate the cerebral with the intuitive" (p. 265). Andrei Șerban's *Lear* (2008) is also analysed due to its "all-female cast" and the "gender indecision" implied by the character of the fool (p. 266). A parodic surprise comes from Alexandru Dabija's *Gaițele/The Jeering Jays* (2002) in which "the travesty reinforces the comical resources of the text by sustaining the paradoxes" (p. 271) illustrated by "a very masculine Fräulein" (p. 273). O. Cîntec identifies sources of the grotesque in *Ubu Rex with Scenes from Macbeth* from Marin Sorescu National Theatre of Craiova where the travesty was also employed along with theatre-within-the-theatre where Mère Ubu becomes Madam Ubu and "the pastiche is reinforced by overponderability, excessive make-up, unnatural gestures" since "the actor takes its character in the direction of the bearded woman, the carnivalesque through his (...) displayed masculinity" (p. 275). Finally, *M. Butterfly* (2007) from the Odeon Theatre is assessed to show how a male actor plays a man pretending to be a woman (p. 276); in the context of "theatricality" and "the metaphor of the directional approach", "the aim of the travesty is delusion, a camouflage of masculinity behind the coordinates of femininity" (p. 278), only to afford the author to conclude that it creates a connection to the spirit of the present (p. 281).

Oana Cristea Grigorescu's "De la masculin la feminin în spectacole cu miză politică"/"From Masculine to the Feminine in Performances with Political Stakes" draws on Carmen Lidia Vidu's performances of documentary theatre in the pipeline emerged through reinterpretations of recent history (p. 283) to ethically and aesthetically contrast masculine and feminine in the scenic discourse (p. 284). In her criticism of macho discourse which she finds subversive, the author gives the instance of Andriy Zholdak, a "contested director" working for the National Theatre of Sibiu between 2022-2023 where he staged *Romeo and Juliet* with Siberian actors, mostly students sexualizing the story excessively and proceeding towards "the instrumentalization of the female body (...) and the internalization of gender violence" (p. 286). *The Untamed Shrew* as staged at the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre is a case of moderate aesthetic feminism which "parodies the reversal of the power relationship between men and women, the pitfalls of radical women's emancipation, and the slippages of chauvinistic

feminism and political correctness” (p. 288). *The Housewives Apocalypse*, already dealt with by other contributors to the volume, is seen by the author as an embodiment of pure and feminist commitment due to its appurtenance to the “activist political art that subordinates the aesthetic (...) to the political message” (p. 291). Moreover, its merit lies in the settlement of the biography of a painter who fought for gender equality in its inception, namely Artemisia Gentileschi (p. 293). Radu Afrim’s *Herbarium*, adapted from Simona Popescu’s poems collected in *The Book of Plants and Animals* and staged at the National Theatre of Târgu-Mureș testifies to a land of fluidity, permitting passage spaces from dominance to reclaiming equity, according to O. Cristea Grigorescu (p. 294). Jean Genet’s *The Maids* at the German Section of the Theatre in Sibiu proposes us a “gender reversal” that “shifts the focus from the critique of social class dominance to that of the control and violence of the male-led world.” (p. 295) Far from exhausting the field, the article accounted for strategies that are active and aesthetically efficient in their transmitting of a political message, be it direct or indirect (p. 297).

In the last article of the book, “Iubesc femeia...”/“I love women...”, Cristina Rusiecki manifests her ‘boundless solidarity’ with all abused and objectified women, feeling that in the Western world it is up to a woman to get the power she wants (p. 299). She proposes *reduction* as a key word for “stripping the woman of her complexity and multiplicity of nuances” (*ibidem*). In her approach, she pleads for shades based on historical contexts and uses Andrei Măjeri’s *Heroids* of Ovid played at the Mihai Eminescu Theatre of Botoșani to justify her interest which is not directed towards the position of the woman as victim, but the recovery of female assets: “empathy, confidence, overcoming the condition of being *seduced and abandoned*” (p. 301). The feminine and masculine in the traditional family are grasped via *Nora 2. The doll’s house* directed by Andreea Vulpe from the Andrei Mureșanu Theatre in Sfântu Gheorghe, Ibsen’s original text giving the opportunity to go beyond “the paradigm cliché, man – head of the family – decisiveness – responsibility – authority versus woman – inconsistency – weakness – submission” (pp. 305-306). Emotional freezing is what characterizes Simon Stephens’s *Harper Regan* mounted at the Maria Filotti Theatre in Brăila by Vlad Massaci, showing us the journey of a coy woman in her odyssey, seminal for “British loneliness and *emotional evasion*, a *national vice*” (p. 310) as the critic Michael Billington put it. C. Rusiecki’s panorama ends with Alina Nelega’s *Ever After* by director Gabriel Cadariu for the Puppet Theatre in Baia Mare, a fairy tale retold in a technological era in which heroes and dragons needed refreshing and Cinderella takes the form of “a subjective narrator, bearer of a well-defined ego, (...) tired of sitting with a lost gaze waiting for the docile and boring Prince Charming” (pp. 315-316).

If we were to draw a conclusion, we would go to the final lines in the last article of the book which comprises a wise reflection on changing times and the feminine paradigm's conquest of new territories that will only expand with the advances of digital technology and AI development, inviting us to future research. In the meantime, this work is highly recommended to those interested in theatre, performance and gender studies at the intersection with history and literature.

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