

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE ROMANIAN CULTURAL SOCIETIES OF SIBIU IN SHAPING THE LOCAL AUDIENCE

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Abstract: Romanian societies, reunions or associations in Sibiu, established in the second half of the 19th century, contributed significantly to the education and training of the audience in this community. The present article highlights the role played by these institutions – Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People, Reunion of Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu, National Cultural Reunion of Romanian Craftsmen in Sibiu, The Music Reunion in Sibiu, in the build-up of an educated theatre audience. The pioneering activity carried out by these associations makes its effects felt today, leading to the informed and knowledgeable public of Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu. This article argues the sustained activity of the Transylvanian cultural associations in the second half of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century have created the foundations of a vibrant theatre community where one of the most important theatre events in Romania - Sibiu International Theatre Festival (FITS) – was born thirty years ago.

Keywords: theatre, performing arts, public, ASTRA, Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People, Reunion of Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu, National Cultural Reunion of Romanian Craftsmen in Sibiu.

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Sibiu, a community with a well-defined cultural identity at national, European and even international level, has evolved in the last three decades towards a model of urban regeneration through culture. Major cultural events, such as, for example, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival, are associated with the cultural, but also economic and academic evolution of the city, due to the emulation they have created around them, due to the cultural events of great value that they have offered in their program, but also owing to the large audience they have attracted during each edition. Equally, the Radu Stanca National Theatre of Sibiu manages to attract a large audience with each of its performances and has developed what we call "cultural tourism" around phenomenon-creations, such as *Faust*, performance directed by Silviu Purcărete.

The following question naturally arises: Is the audience of these cultural events or institutions a special audience, and does its preference for manifestations in the field of performing arts has its origin strictly in the contemporary period? To what extent does the audience in Sibiu present a series of peculiarities that have their origin, in fact, in past moments of Sibiu and Transylvania? These are questions that have arisen during recent the research that we have carried out in order to define the contribution of the Romanian

cultural societies in Sibiu towards the affirmation of a cultural and national identity through theatre. During these studies, we discovered that in the Romanian community in Sibiu there have been, since the nineteenth century, real concerns for an education of the audience, for attracting new audiences to the performing arts and for using theatre as a means of cultivation and education. On the other hand, the German community in Sibiu has developed a theatre in German that has its origins in much more distant times, and, in Sibiu, the first building with a theatre purpose on the current territory of Romania was inaugurated in 1788 (Necula and Maier, 2018, p. 63).

The research hypothesis from which we started the present study argues that the way of manifestation of the audience in Sibiu, the way in which cultural and artistic events are perceived at local level, are marked and were generated by actions and events from the cultural and historical past of this community. The education of the audience was a long process, carried out over at least two centuries, on a foundation built also by the Romanian intellectuals in Sibiu, which had as main purpose the emancipation of the Romanian population through culture.

The present study aims to identify how the activity of societies and cultural associations in this geographical space has come to define the behaviour of the audience in Sibiu. The research method is historical research, especially the analysis of press and archival documents from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that refer to the concerns of Romanian cultural societies in Sibiu for the cultivation of the audience through theatre in particular, and through the performing arts in general.

A delayed start

The most important Romanian societies, reunions and associations in Transylvania during the Austro-Hungarian Empire activated in Sibiu, including: Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA) – since 1861, Reunion of the Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu – since 1867, Romanian Music Reunion in Sibiu – since 1878. These reunions and associations contributed to the education and emancipation of the Romanian population in the province and had a significant contribution to the enrichment of the cultural and artistic life in this geographical area.

The Romanian audience in Transylvania met the theatre in Romanian language only in the second half of the nineteenth century, through touring

performances organized by the Romanian companies (Maier, 2020, pp. 61-68), during performances organized by amateurs, as well as through artistic manifestations prepared by the cultural societies in the province. The situation was no different in Sibiu, where theatre developed due to the efforts of the cultural reunions and associations that operated in this area.

The question arises to what extent the initiators of the theatre in Romanian language in Sibiu and Transylvania had to concern themselves with the education of the audience as well? The state of the audience in Transylvania in the nineteenth century can be inferred from the accounts of some actors, directors, initiators of the theatrical movement in the province. Relevant for the theme of the present study is the account of Zaharia Bârsan⁵, who organized the first Romanian touring performances in Transylvania⁶, and which illustrates in his memoirs the image of a completely ignorant audience, often at a first contact with theatre. Given that the audience did not have a minimum exercise of presence in theatres, the organizers of the performances could not take into account a difficult dramatic repertoire, but rather a choice of plays that would facilitate a minimal education of the audience and the removal of the public perception that theatre had exclusively the role of amusing the spectators. Zaharia Bârsan describes in his writings several such episodes relevant for the state of the Transylvanian audience in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century:

Between such circumstances, a theatrical tour through Transylvania with a more dramatic repertoire was an attempt, a bold endeavour. But I wanted to completely vanquish the idea that theatre is a comedy and that's why I started almost all of my performances with a serious play. What I had to endure! All too often the most subtle dramatic moments were destroyed by a roaring laughter. All too often in some roles I was afraid to do the right thing, lest the unusual audience start partying! (Bârsan, 1908, p. 8).

Given that the Transylvanian intellectuals were aware of the unsatisfactory state of the Romanian audience – and here we refer to the vast majority of the population, not to the few members of society who had frequent contact with the German-speaking theatres in Transylvania or even with the

⁵ Zaharia Bârsan (1878-1948) was the first director of the National Theatre of Cluj, founded in 1919. He was an actor, writer, poet. He was a disciple of Constantin Nottara, and at the beginning of 1903 he organized the first touring performances in Transylvania. He was a scholar of the Society for Theatre Fund, with the help of which he studied in Berlin, Vienna and Florence.

⁶ During the tour that Zaharia Bârsan made in the summer of 1906 in Braşov, Făgăraş, Sebeş, Sălişte; in Sibiu, despite the preparations, despite the promotion of the tour through posters, the theatre was empty, and the performances were canceled (Bârsan, 1908, p. 20)

European ones – serious concerns were manifested for the improvement of this situation.

Amateur companies, the basis for institutionalized theatre

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the theatrical activity in the Romanian language in Sibiu was provided exclusively by the companies of amateurs established within the societies and reunions operating in the city.

The largest company of amateur actors was formed within the Reunion of Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu and was made up of the members of the Reunion, craftsmen with preoccupations for the artistic area and talented reciters or even actors. Within this society Dumitru Axente stood out, typesetter-typographer and typography director, an amateur actor appreciated by the audience in Sibiu, who in time also took over the role of director of the ensemble of actors of the Reunion (Chirilă, 1946, p. 80.) The amateur actors of the Reunion, led by Dumitru Axente, organized two theatre performances annually, on the occasion of religious holidays, Christmas, Easter, Epiphany or Pentecost, during which they presented two or even three plays, some of them with complex casts, consisting even of 14 actors (Maier, 2022, p. 151).

In parallel with this theatrical activity that they constantly carried out throughout the entire activity of the Reunion, the craftsmen also organized a series of literary evenings. On the occasion of these events, initially organized exclusively for the members of the Reunion, the craftsmen also practiced their skills as actors by reciting poems, presenting fragments of Romanian literature, so in time they were able to play in the plays that the Reunion presented.

For its part, the ASTRA Association, encouraged at the beginning of the twentieth century the formation of amateur companies both in Sibiu and in the rural areas of Transylvania, and supported theatrical performances on the occasion of its general assemblies in the great centres of the province (Maier, 2022, p. 35) Subsequently, the association founded in 1923 a professional theatre company, made up of young graduates of the theatre or music schools in Bucharest.

Artistic education of the audience

The Romanian cultural reunions in Sibiu carried out an intense activity for the emancipation of the Romanian population through theatre, for the affirmation

of the cultural and national unity of the Romanians in the province, but they were also preoccupied with achieving a theatrical education of the audience.

We identified such an initiative in the Reunion of Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu, which later became the Reunion of Romanian Craftsmen, which constantly organized theatrical performances since 1897. The reunion offered its members and even the public in Sibiu literary evenings, organized monthly, consisting of readings, recitals and small plays, but also theatrical performances with one, two or even three plays. In the first decades of activity, during the performances presented in the halls of the Saxon community in Sibiu or of those organized in the Municipal Theatre, the leaders of the Reunion had to educate each spectator separately. The members of the Reunion went through each row of the hall and even the lodges, in order to explain to everyone in the audience that during the performance it was not appropriate to chat, they offered indications on how spectators had to react to the scenes presented, without excessive laughter, without overexpressing wonder, joy or mercy, because such manifestations could disturb both the spectators, as well as the audience (SJSAN, File no. VI, document No. 142).

In 1901, the Reunion presented in Sibiu *Wake not the Dead* by Ernst Raupach, translated and adapted by Teodor V. Păcățianu, trying to diversify the repertoire and to offer the audience dramas, not just comedies. The performance was well received by the Transylvanian press and by the audience that rewarded the amateur craftsmen-actors with long applause, but the inexperience of the audience was felt, the conclusion of the journalists being that "dramas are not yet for our audience; the undisciplined part laughed at the most tragic of scenes" (SJSAN, file no. II, document no. 51).

More than a decade away, in 1913, the situation was considerably improved as a result of the efforts that the leaders of the Reunion had made over the years for the education of the audience, the representatives of the middle class, of the craftsmen, already able to understand the importance of theatre for individual culture:

Our people now no longer say we go to the theatre to laugh, but we go to listen to what we are told and to draw the right teachings. Behold, that our Reunion with its theatres, with its conventions has so far contributed to the enlightenment, to the cultivation of the lower class of our people. Our theatre was and is a school, it is a bridge from the peasant and from the craftsman towards our own cultured class. It's the interest I was told the other day by some of our lower class men. [...] But what they said, although they are true, will not have a long span because the theatre

offered by our craftsmen will make us read more, learn to speak beautifully, learn to cultivate our feelings and to be human as one should be. (SJSAN, file no. VI, document no. 142).

Cultural societies have managed from the very first years of their activity to offer a diverse repertoire, despite the lack of audience training. For example, ASTRA presented in Sibiu, in 1905, on the occasion of the inauguration of the first Romanian theatre stage in Transylvania, plays from the Romanian dramaturgy, such as *Fântâna Blandusiei* by Vasile Alecsandri. On the same occasion, however, a second evening with theatre performances was organized, dedicated to world drama, staging the drama *Of Dishonesty* by Gerolamo Rovetta (*Gazeta Transilvaniei*, 1905, p. 1). A similar situation can be found in the case of Astra in 1923, when during the first Romanian theatre season in Sibiu a repertoire composed of 10 plays was presented. Of these, four were from the Romanian dramaturgy: *Pe malul gârlii* by Dimitrie C. Ollănescu-Ascanio, *Nevasta lui Cerceluș* by Petre Locusteanu, *Cain* by Alexandru Sabaru, *Fountain of Blandusia* by Vasile Alecsandri, and the remaining six plays were from the world drama: *Jeppe on the Hill* by Ludvig Holberg, *Scapin the Schemer* by Molière, *Bastard* by A. Bourande, *Civil Death* by Paolo Giacometti, *House of Clay* by Émile Fabre, *The Doctor in Spite of Himself* by Molière (Maier, 2019, p. 226).

The situation is similar regarding the Reunion of Romanian Apprentices of Sibiu, which has permanently alternated plays from the Romanian dramaturgy with those from the European literature. To illustrate the Reunion's concern for a diverse repertoire, the situation between 1897 and 1901 is relevant, when the craftsmen staged ten plays, most of which were plays from the local dramaturgy: *Vlăduțul mamei* by Ioan Lupescu, *Rusaliile* by Vasile Alecsandri, *Nu te juca cu dracu* by Iacob Negruzzi, *Iorgu de la Sadagura sau Nepotu-i salba dracului* by Vasile Alecsandri, *Plășii dela Baia* by Nicolae Andriescu-Bogdan, *Tovarăși nedespărțiți sau Sfântul Dumitru* by Carol Scrob, *O jalobă în atmosferă* by Nicolae Andriescu-Bogdan, *Drumul de fier* by Vasile Alecsandri, *O căsnicie* by George C. Ursachi, *Ruga de la Chiseteu* by Iosif Vulcan. Most of the repertoire was dedicated to Romanian works, but there was no lack of world drama: *Wake not the Dead* by Ernst Raupach, *Dangerous Neighbourhood* by August von Kotzebue, *Idil in the Countryside* by Juin and Flerx (Maier, 2022, p. 149.)

We can see that the Romanian societies and reunions in Sibiu were aware of the importance of the repertoire for the theatrical education of the audience. Despite the fact that the main concern of these reunions and societies was

directed towards the awakening of the national consciousness and the achievement of cultural and national unity, they understood that their effort had to take into account the universality of theatre as well. It is further proof that an approach with a very precise and particular purpose, such as that of the Romanian societies in Sibiu, could not remain isolated and confined within the limits of a theatre made with the sole purpose of asserting the national identity, but went beyond the borders of this endeavour, demonstrating that art succeeds, from a certain level, in becoming universal. We found a mention of this aspect in the Transylvanian press, proof of the fact that the intellectuals of the time had a good perception of the role that theatre and art in general could play in the history of a nation: "Art has a national character. Nor is there art without national character. But no matter how national art may be, as soon as it rises to a higher level, elements common to all people develop in it." (*Telegraful Român*, 1882, pp. 361-362).

Preoccupations after the Great Union

In the period between the second half of the nineteenth century and the Great Union of 1 December 1918, the education of the Romanian public in Transylvania was strictly the responsibility of reunions, associations or cultural societies, in the absence of political and cultural rights and freedoms for the Romanian community. After reunification, however, the cultural societies of Sibiu and Transylvania continued to contribute to the education of the audience in Sibiu, to promote the need for such education.

In 1921, when the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People added to its object of activity the cultural propaganda through theatre, its leaders supported the need for an artistic education of the audience, in addition to the national one, because "many companies from the old kingdom did not satisfy in terms of repertoire or dramatic art" (*Transilvania*, 1922, p. 456).

Another relevant aspect is the fact that in 1922, Nicolae Băilă, the artistic director of the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People and the director of the Astra Theatre Company, invoked the lack of theatrical education of the Romanian audience in Sibiu, disinterested in supporting the performing arts. Băilă supported the need to determine the Romanian society to value the artistic act at the expense of other recreational activities:

for our audience must first be weaned of luxury, of organizing expensive *teas*, to go more joyfully to a good theatre than to the dramas of cinema, etc., etc. And as bad habits and tricks are harder to unlearn, we must for a few years get to where one should already be. The beginning is hard and without sacrifices it can't be done. But the longer we delay, however, the sacrifices, which will have to be brought later, will be unmeasurable. (SJSAN, document no. 460/1922, f. 139).

We can identify in the lines of the Association's leader a good understanding of the importance that the education of the audience could have for the cultural life of a community, the fact that such an education was a long process, which had to be well prepared, and which was to only have visible results within a few years.

ASTRA was preoccupied with the training of a knowledgeable theatre audience not only in the big cities of Transylvania, but also in the small towns in the rural area. For example, during the General Assembly in Zalău, on 13 September 1926, the Central Committee of the Association requested that the artistic director develop a theatrical propaganda for the rural area, being "asked to visit villages, where artistic education would be done: theatre, declamations, choirs. [...] Let the peasantry be spiritually cultivated, urging emulation" (SJSAN, *Procese verbale*, III 61, *Procesele verbale ale Adunărilor generale ale „Astrei” 1920-1929*, f. 110).

The desire to create an informed, knowledgeable audience, able to appreciate the artistic act we have identified not only in the case of cultural societies that have developed theatrical activities throughout their existence, but also in other areas of the performing arts.

A mention referring to the Romanian Music Reunion in Sibiu refers directly to the express desire of those in charge of this society to achieve a musical education of the public through the organized events, and not to offer events that would occasion the audience moments of delight.

Opposed to the Romanian reunions of this kind, the Reunion of the Romanian Songs in Sibiu cultivates music not to produce momentary effects, which in most cases degenerates into musical frivolities, such as the works located and represented with much fuss by the choirs from Banat and elsewhere, but to improve the taste of the audience by reproducing the valuable works both in our national music, be it worldly – or ecclesiastical, but especially through the interpretation of the works of foreign authors, unknown to musical authorities. (Voileanu, 1905, pp. 21-22).

Naturally, the cultural societies in Sibiu were preoccupied with the cultivation and emancipation of the middle class of the society and especially of the peasants, but their approaches were not limited only to those social categories that did not have access to education, but extended to the cultured class, that of the intellectuals. Through articles published in the *Transylvania* journal, ASTRA promoted aesthetics and insisted on the need to enrich the knowledge of the cultural class in this field. Aesthetics was seen as a science of concern to nations considered to be truly cultivated, and beauty was regarded as a luxury intended for those belonging to the upper classes. "Who could argue that man could not live without looking at paintings and statues, without pursuing dramatic actions?" wrote Iosif Blaga (1904, p. 202). One could also live without the delight of the paintings of great artists or of some theatrical or musical performances, but "it is required of the cultivated man to be aware of everything that is happening inside him, with him, around him" (Blaga, 1904, p. 202). The aesthetics and education of a cultivated audience were also the subject of other articles published in the *Transylvania* journal of the ASTRA Association.

The public's access to the cultural act was also frequently the subject of discussion. "Why shouldn't the theatre, the museum, the exhibition, the concert be done for all? Why should only the one who has a lot of money be able to often go to the theatre and I repeat: why only the one who has a lot of money?" noted Emil Isac in a press article⁷ (1926, p. 583).

The effects of long-term efforts

We find that cultural societies have undertaken actions to cultivate the audience from all walks of life, both peasants, craftsmen and intellectuals, and have carried out these activities simultaneously.

The Reunion of Romanian Craftsmen in Sibiu was preoccupied with the cultivation of industrialists, craftsmen and apprentices and their training as an informed audience, through literary evenings and theatrical performances prepared monthly and biannually.

On the other hand, the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People activated in the sense of cultivating peasants, but also increasing the knowledge of intellectuals.

⁷ Emil Isac (1886-1954), poet, professor and publicist, corresponding member of the Romanian Academy, inspector of arts and theatres in Transylvania, member of the ASTRA Association.

The Romanian Music Reunion in Sibiu contributed to the diversification of the artistic education of the audience in Sibiu and to the promotion of universal creations in the musical field.

In the modern era, the public is attracted by artistic and cultural activities with a high degree of uniqueness, able to offer diverse experiences, but which highlight the feeling of local pride and stimulate the development of communities (Tomuş, 2013, p. 18). In Sibiu, the Sibiu International Theatre Festival was received, since its first edition, with an impressive openness, its success being explained "by the availability of the Sibiu audience in front of the quality artistic act" (Tomuş, 2013, p. 126).

We consider that it is precisely this openness of the Sibiu audience that can be explained through an education started a century before, through the approaches of the Romanian cultural societies in Sibiu. Even if it may seem that this contribution that the reunions and associations brought to the education of the audience, to the creation of a category of knowledgeable spectators was a minor one, in reality it created the premises of an education that was perpetuated over time, which was the basis for the training of an audience characterized by a vivid and constant interest in the artistic act.

To what extent can we identify a direct link between the intense and constant activity of the Romanian cultural societies in Sibiu to educate the audience and develop a theatrical culture and the current level of education of the audience in Sibiu and Transylvania? Even in the absence of direct evidence, we can conclude that the effort of these institutions to train the audience, starting from the basic elements of a theatrical education, is found in the way of manifestation of the audience. The cultural societies of Sibiu became aware of the need to carry out a theatrical education especially for the middle and lower class of the population, who were often at a first contact with theatre. Thus, their efforts for the training of an informed audience started with preoccupations for the acquisition of basic elements, namely the behaviour in the performance hall and the way of reacting to the facts presented on stage. Basically, these societies initiated most of the Romanian community in Sibiu in the theatrical field, offering the basic elements of an artistic education. After this first step, the education of the audience continued through the presentation of performances, which gradually began to address various dramatic genres, introduced drama instead of comedy and began to promote the pedagogical role of theatre. The contribution that the societies, associations and reunions in Sibiu have made to raising the level of culture of the

already trained audience, by promoting the notions of aesthetics, is also not to be neglected.

The education of the audience for and through theatre was not an isolated and random phenomenon, but a conscious action, programmed and prepared in detail by the Romanian cultural societies in Sibiu.

Re-valuing the steps taken by these institutions over a long period of time contributes to a better understanding of the behaviour of spectators and their particularities according to the different geographical and political areas to which they belong.

The efforts of the associations from Sibiu's past to raise the level of culture of the Romanian population, including the education of the peasants and the social categories that did not have access to education, represents the primary structure from which a community with a unique openness for the cultural act, for theatre and performing arts evolved, a community capable of managing and hosting some of the most worldwide appreciated manifestations in the field of performing arts.

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