
READING BETWEEN THE LINES.
REVISITING THE HISTORY OF
PUPPET THEATRE IN MOLDAVIA

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Abstract: The history of puppet theatre in Romania (and implicitly in Moldavia) still has much to offer; previously unknown information, scattered through the Archives (State-National, local, etc.) or stored in museums' or libraries' holdings, awaits discovery and deciphering. Researchers, students, or enthusiasts of this field apparently do not have the time necessary for unconditional searching, reflective reading, and the connections born from a particular vision. There also remains the expectation of thoughts slipped between the lines, which call for a lively, engaged, synthetic and... profound reading; from this can spring interdisciplinary approaches and new reflections on unnoticed or ignored attitudinal models in the world of puppet theatre. In this sense we will draw attention to three "case studies," cut out from the history of theatre in Moldavia—from Iași. In fact, three examples through which we can approach three attitudinal models—Teodor T. Burada, Natalia Dănăilă, and Constantin Brehnescu or puppeteers whose names have been lost over time—urge us to revisit the history of this art and compel us to read between the lines.

Keywords: history of puppet theatre in Moldavia, Iași, censorship, attitudinal models, Teodor T. Burada, Natalia Dănăilă, Constantin Brehnescu.

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Introduction

The history of puppet theatre in Romania (and implicitly in Moldavia) still has much to offer; previously unknown information—scattered through the Archives (State-National, local, etc.), or stored in museum or library deposits—awaits discovery and deciphering. Researchers, students, or those passionate about this field apparently do not have the time necessary for unconditional searching, reflective reading and the connections born from a specific vision.

However, there also remains the expectation of thoughts slipped between the lines, calling for a vivid, engaged, synthetic and... profound reading; from this can spring interdisciplinary approaches and new reflections on unnoticed or ignored attitudinal models in the world of puppet theatre. In this sense we will bring to attention three "case studies," in fact three examples through which we can approach three attitudinal models excerpted from the Archives, reference volumes and memoir volumes; memoir-type volumes are rarer in the area of puppet theatre. Revisiting the history of theatre from Moldavia, the National Museum of Romanian Literature—the collection "History of Romanian Theatre" and the history of the "Lucaefărul" Theatre in Iași bring us closer to marking three important stages in the regional history of this art, still considered a "children's art".

And yet, without wasting words, even these three examples offer the necessary framework to approach strong themes such as: censorship, the involvement

of puppeteers, the need for vision and awareness of the role of elites in preserving values and identity (national/local/professional)—an expression of the roots of uniqueness that generate diversity.

Research Methods

The study is based on correlating information offered by theatre history, memoir-type literature and museum information; the ideas presented are an invitation to further research, to the real valorization of documents—while it is not yet too late. Forms, quantitative criteria, formalism may distance us from the essence of research within what we call “artistic research”; the usefulness of revisiting is determined by the challenges of young people who today are at the beginning of their careers. Sir Ken Robinson defined the current stage as “a world gone mad,” referring to the overturning of values through perception:

We live in a world that’s shaped by the ideas, beliefs and values of human imagination and culture. The human world is created out of our minds as much as from the natural environment. Thinking and feeling are not simply about seeing the world as it is, but having ideas about it, and interpreting experience to give it meaning. Different communities live differently according to the ideas they have and the meanings they experience. In a literal sense, we create the worlds we live in. We can also re-create them. The great revolutions in human history have often been brought about by new ideas: by new ways of seeing that have shattered old certainties. This is the essential process of cultural change. (Robinson, 2011, p. xvi)

Acceptance of interventions by power factors aimed at blocking free expression—regardless of form or time—can only succeed if people lack awareness. Interdisciplinary approach and analytical reflection constitute an instrument for reevaluating possible models and triggering an attitudinal state based on knowledge and civic-mindedness alike.

Thus, we will first focus our reading on some well-known works. Information may go unnoticed if we are not concerned by the urgency of understanding the role of elites in promoting freedom of expression as a non-negotiable value of a society. If Ioan Hangan (who inspired V. Alecsandri in writing the “little song—Ion Păpușarul”, published in 1867 in the journal *Convorbiri Literare*), a successor

of Vasile Drăgan and Ilie Păpușarul, had been only a puppeteer whose activity was banned for having violated “civil rules”, he certainly would not have been a subject of interest for the cultural personalities of the era. The authorities’ reaction to these popular, traditional spectacular manifestations points to the existence of an oppressive, opaque system. Thanks to Burada, we have access to the content of that Order:

Care for public morality is also one of the Commune’s main desires.

National customs do not consist of immoral, scandalous and unclassifiable games that are perpetrated through songs and actions by puppeteers in private houses and in public streets, so that parents with children, daughters, the young and any individual blush at the sound of them.

The Mayor assumes a sacred duty, that in support of public morality to put an end to all these scandalous games.

Therefore, this measure is made known early, by posting and by beating the drum on all the streets of the city, and the honorable Prefecture of Police is invited to execute this measure with full exactness¹ (Burada, 1975, p. 39).

The quotation is accompanied by an explanatory note: “Acta «Păpușilor» and of «Irozilor» which stopped from playing memorable games in the future celebrations of the Birth of Our Lord Jesus Christ, no. 156, from 1864, found in the Iași Town Hall Archive.”² (idem)

Behind the declared good intentions and the care for “public morality”, a form of brutal censorship was exercised. A perfidious form of manipulation, as old as the world and still active: placing lies around the semblance of truth. The concern for the public is demonstrated by a fragment from the presentation of this theatrical play:

The puppets called to perform also present their show; upon entering the house, the puppeteer asks those present how they want the Puppets to perform, on the street or on the little stage, or: straightforward, or with

1 In the author’s translation. In original: „Îngrijirea pentru moralitatea publică este și ea una dintre datorințele principale ale Comunei. Datinile naționale nu constau în jocuri nemorale scandaloase și necalificabile, care se comit prin cântări și acțiuni de către păpușari prin casele particularilor și pe străzile publice, încât părinții cu copii, fiice, tinerimea și orice individ înroșește la auzul lor. Primarul își impune o datorie sacră, ca în sprijinul moralității publice să oprească cu totul aceste jocuri scandaloase. Prin urmare, încă din timpuriu se face cunoscut această măsură, prin afișare și batere de darabană pe toate străzile orașului, iar onorabila Prefectură a Poliției este invitată a executa în toată exactitatea această măsură.”

2 In the author’s translation. In original: „Acta «Păpușilor» și a «Irozilor» ce s-au oprit de a nu mai giuca jocuri nemorale în serbătorile viitoare a Nașterii Domnului Iisus Hristos, nr. 156, din 1864, aflată la Arhiva Primăriei din Iași”.

enclosures, with curtain or without curtain, in other words, I want decent expressions or obscene ones. Thus it now remains only for the taste of those who pay to decide for one or the other.³ (Burada, 1975, p. 30)

The invoked care for “public morality” remains... without subject; but (even then) whoever shouted louder from the podium of power imposed the direction of the moment.

In fact, censorship continues today—in masked forms; behind the promotion of a false concern for morality may hide manipulative and restrictive intentions meant to limit (up to annulment) any action by those who do not correspond to the standards imposed by power. Reading the *History of Theatre in Romania*, volume I, two short notes urge us to count and observe that the acidity of language and the concern for the quotidian were aspects not overlooked by any regime in which “vigilance” was elevated to the rank of virtue: “The prohibition of irozi performances was already from 1864.” (ed. Oprescu, 1965, p. 120)

Nothing about the reaction of intellectuals, about attitudes preserved over time; nothing about the 37 years of useless censorship, which naturally caused a stagnation in the evolution of expressive forms of this type... Only a few words which, combined with the information provided by T.T. Burada, compel us to return to a strong question: How is it possible that people abandon those who, in essence, express their revolts, anxieties, frustrations? The “puppet” play comprised (regardless of variant) a synthesis of what dissatisfied the community, the ordinary person and yet... questions still float in the air: Where do possible answers belong—in the “pyramid of needs”, in inherited fears or in a certain frivolous indifference that slips beyond time, space or organizational form? Then, however, there were voices that opposed:

As a result of this order [editor’s note: Acta păpușilor], the puppet play was stopped in Iași for many years, until December 1879, after the insistence of Ioan Hangan, a famous puppeteer, and several citizens, among whom was in the first place the storyteller Ion Creangă, the Town Hall allowed the puppet play again. Later this play was stopped again, for the same reasons, and then, in the winter of 1897, after my insistence, they allowed their play, as mentioned in ancient times.⁴ (Burada, 1975, p. 39)

3 In the author’s translation. In original: „Păpușile chemate să joace și ele reprezentația lor, intrând în casă, păpușarul întreabă pe cei de față cum vor ei să joace Păpușile, pe uliță ori pe budiță, sau: de-a dreptul, ori pe înconjuratele, cu perde sau fără perde, cu alte cuvinte, vreau expresiuni cuviincioase ori obscene. Rămâne deci acuma numai la gustul celor ce plătesc a se pronunța ori pentru una, ori pentru alta.”

4 In the author’s translation. In original: „În urma acestui ordin, jocul păpușilor a fost oprit în Iași, timp de mai mulți ani, până când, în luna decembrie 1879, după stăruința atît lui Ioan Hangan, vestit păpușar, cît și a mai multor cetățeni, între cari era în primul loc și povestitorul Ion Creangă, primăria a încuviințat din nou

Even if (officially) the persecution lasted from 1864 until 1897, after 100 years, no one risked positing interpretations or subversive accents—career, financial security, freedom could be put at stake just for bringing to attention the necessity of puppeteers’ freedom of expression. In 1965, when the Academy’s volume appeared in Bucharest (where through the “Tândărică” Theatre three editions⁵ of the International Puppet Festival had been organized) the preparation of the volume *Puppet Theatre in the World* was underway; but paradoxically, Vasilache was (still) in the shadows. The opening toward the development of the puppet art was wrapped in concern for the theatrical education of children: industrial centers benefited from “Puppet Theatres”, the Soviet repertoire was (partially) replaced by repertoire inspired by universal and national literature (preeminently moralizing fairy tales), performances included new techniques— everything created the illusion of freedom; in the world of metaphoric metamorphoses, everything seemed possible. A form of resistance through culture or a means of quieting the conscience.

Answers are personal and can only be intuited. Placing in context and reading between the lines offer possible avenues of understanding; moreover, Margareta Niculescu in the *Preface* of the aforementioned volume provocatively invites us to rejoice in what they achieved then:

In front of the person of our days, who moves frantically in a gigantic world populated by creations subjected to his intelligence, the puppet remains eternally a reflex of his need for charm and poetry. Obviously transformed, it is reborn each time with the person who renews his way of feeling and thinking.⁶ (UNIMA, 1966, p. 5)

The message remains valid; it is important to pay attention to the reference points/characters and to the attitudinal models offered by those who served, unknown, the art of puppet theatre.

Perspectives will always be multiple, different and (possibly) contradictory; thus, among the lines we identify problems of censorship of economic, financial nature—much invoked today; merging puppet theatres with dramatic theatres under a single directorate leads us to investigate previous situations. The history of Moldavian theatre helps us—again. In fact, revisiting the History of Jewish

jocul păpușilor. Mai târziu s-a oprit iarăși acest joc, tot sub aceleași motive, și atunci, în iarna anului 1897, după stăruința mea, li s-a învoit jocul lor, după cum s-a pomenit din timpurile vechi.”

5 <https://www.teatrultandarica.ro/despre-noi/accessed>, accessed on the November 9th, 2025

6 In the author’s translation. In original: „În fața omului zilelor noastre, care se mișcă febril într-o lume gigantică, populată de creații supuse inteligenței sale, păpușa rămâne veșnic un reflex al nevoii lui de farmec și de poezie. Evident transformată, ea renaște de fiecare dată cu omul care-și înnoiește felul de a simți și gândi.”

Theatre in Iași, which benefits from a permanent Exhibition organized within the National Museum of Literature Iași—in the House of Museums⁷, in eleven halls that allow visitors a journey in time among actors and characters from the late 19th century to 1963. Documents indicate the existence within this institution of a section dedicated to puppet theatre. The formula represented, certainly, a means of survival, of preserving ethnic identity, in a world full of the wounds of a war that had torn apart the idea of coexistence, subsumed today under the concept of multiculturalism.

Archives and the museum still keep documents attesting to this aspect; the existence of a program edited by the Jewish Theatre “The Green Tree”, with the mention “Puppet Theatre”, from 1950, having the portrait of Eliezer Șteinberg⁸ printed on the first page, indicates the care not to upset “the authorities”; the following pages presented not only the characters of the two-act play “Foxes, Dogs and Cats” and the cast, but also set out conforming intentions, denouncing the “bourgeoisie”. In 1951 they also staged “The Brave Little Rabbit” by Hodkovic. Another poster preserved from 1952 invites children to meet “The Piper and the Little Pitcher” or “The Little Rooster with the Golden Comb”—for only “1 leu and 25 bani”; this time, however, the mention “Puppet Section” appears. Already from 28 February 1950 there existed the “Puppet Theatre”, established by “Decision 118” (Cîntec, 2010, p.162). A 1953 repertory piece drew our attention—a premiere on February 1, entitled surprisingly for a Jewish theatre: “Moș Gerilă”—a metaphor that froze not only elements of Jewish culture but also those of Christian culture; only the text can save us from speculation, but the temptation to interpret exists. The list of examples can continue; confiscation of ideas, values and identities represented a mechanism that offered only apparent chances of reconciliation. The story of Avrum Goldfaden⁹ is also used; the absent cannot offer counterarguments, they cannot defend themselves. We do not know what nuances slipped between the lines, but in 1962 the poster was already a common one, indicating a list of performances under the aegis of the State Jewish Theatre “Avram Goldfaden” Iași; “The Disobedient Little Rooster”, a two-act play by I. Lucian, was staged in Romanian... Coexistence of dance troupes, dramatic actors and puppeteers carried the story forward until 1963, but it can represent an important case study.

History, however, offers examples that crossed into the 21st century. The “Luceafărul” Theatre in Iași marked, over time, numerous premieres

7 <https://www.muzeulliteraturiiiiasi.ro/> accessed, accessed on the November 9th, 2025

8 Eliezer Steinberg, fabulist: 1880-1932

9 Avrum Goldfaden: 1840-1908

that have been eluded, overshadowed by belonging to the provincial theatres area. Could we speak of geography-based censorship? Possibly, but if we have the lucidity to remember those who made possible the appearance of the first Theatre for Children and Youth on July 5, 1973, we extract a new stage born from a vision marked by the relationship with the audience (following good tradition), but also by concern for training a professional troupe with a clearly formulated identity.

The seeds had been planted by Manole Foca (former actor, Diction professor at the Conservatory, assistant to Mihail Codreanu), who took over leadership in 1951; he was replaced in 1963—the year seems to carry the shadow of insufficiently clarified decisions. However, he had created the vibration of an energy, a certain understanding regarding how a theatre can develop. The trust given to the puppeteer Constantin Brehnescu and his encouragement toward directing puppet shows triggered an impulse necessary to transcend the fog. Thus, he became a director who produced over 160 shows throughout his life at the Iași Puppet Theatre and beyond. Many of these took Luceafărul Theatre on numerous tours abroad (France, Austria, Germany, Italy, Hungary, Croatia, India, Pakistan, Jordan, Iran, Syria, USA, Turkey, Czech Republic, etc.); they enjoyed great success. In 1975 he helped found a puppet theatre in Damascus, Syria, in collaboration with Dorina Tănăsescu.



Manole Foca—actor, director, theatre manager, professor, writer and translator.
Image source: <https://muzeu.arteiasi.ro/expo/foca-manole/?portfolioCats=4>

Mentor Manole Foca also formed a “literary secretary”, whose will and passion he intuited—Natalia Dănăilă¹⁰. Her meeting with director Constantin Brehnescu and the passionate core of puppeteers generated what was called the dream theatre. In fact, this is the title of the memoir volume (Brehnescu, 2012) that helps us understand the history of one of the most modern theatre buildings inaugurated in 1987, and the decade-long struggle so that no one would thwart or steal their dream. Mechanisms of official censorship were doubled by the panting breath of those who climbed into positions and applied it zealously; they knew this well.

Luluşa¹¹ recalled with horror those years, the '50s, years that passed like a rollercoaster toward the end of the decade and through her life. The years in which Bolshevism took hold of everything that meant thought, word and gesture in our space of existence. (Brehnescu, 2012, p. 131)

There was only one way to move forward: to follow their vision. In May 1977, Manole Foca understood that he had fulfilled his mission, through inspired choices; he sent, from Agapia Monastery, a postcard with a simple and clarifying text:

Dear Madam Director, Before leaving these places, I sought you at the theatre to congratulate you on the completion of five years since you took over the leadership, in which you demonstrated much enthusiasm and skill. I embrace you and wish you continued success. Manole Foca. (Brehnescu, 2012, p. 132)

They were in the early moments when they remained without headquarters; after 10 years, together with architects Victor Tăușanu, Dan Vișan, Dan Andrei and the construction team, the hexagon was opened to the public.

But Natalia Dănăilă's vision was much deeper—she knew that performance implies preparation. The testimonies of the man who stood beside her cannot be disputed: Theatres in so many localities in the country were waiting for allocations from the “center”, or worked with amateur artists, in the best cases.

¹⁰ Natalia Dănăilă, literary secretary (1962-1966), director and manager of the Luceafărul Theatre in Iași (1972-1990, 1991-1992) and university professor until 2000.

¹¹ Nickname used by Natalia Dănăilă's friends.



Natalia Dănăilă and Constantin Brehnescu
 Image source: Știri Botoșani (<https://stiri.botosani.ro/stiri/cultura/>)
 and Ziarul de Iași (<https://www.ziasi.ro/avem-nevoie-de-papusa-mai-mult-decat-oricand/>)

What courage! Around 1988 Lulușa made the first attempt to re-establish the theatre school in Iași. She was obsessed with the idea of creating, alongside a faculty of acting and a puppeteer section, artists who could be useful both in puppet theatres and in theatres for children, given the specificity of the genre. The theatre faculty was to exist under the patronage of the “Academy of Arts,” the Rector then being the master and professor Dan Hatmanu. That initiative had no success; from the capital came, belatedly, a negative response. The walls carry the imprint of their dreams. The “Luceafărul” troupe formed under their influence. And yet... in 1990, the hydra extended its tentacles with moralizing and renewing pretensions, of course. The century had changed, but the essence of the transient in power had preserved a constant appetite for pettiness and mediocrity. The context obliges us to argue through documented testimonies:

Obviously, they easily found a few petty characters in the troupe, whom with brutality and perfidious persuasion they incited against the others. And those retreated into their shell and fell silent. Probably out of fear, indifference or cowardice. And on this background, the would-be outsiders appeared, from outside. (Brehnescu, 2012, p. 138)

The “dreamed theatre” had to be completed; in 1990, together with Emil Coșeru and Sergiu Tudose, they re-established the “Theatre Department” within

the George Enescu Academy of Arts. In 2007, one of the architects who outlined the hexagon was close to her again in shaping the Studio Theatre hall of the University of Arts. Then I had the chance to understand that beyond calculations and forms, the project included a lot of emotion. I understood the dimension of this much later. This time, censorship no longer mattered... The Iași artistic and university community received the chance to defend its freedom.

Conclusions

Censorship has always taken on other—more refined—forms over time and has expanded in space. Revisiting or discovering testimonies about the history of puppet theatre in Romania remains an open research theme, from which we have extracted only the reading between the lines of the three books under attention. Apparently, there are few common points between them, but all three contain, between the lines, powerful stories about those who, unknown, behind the puppets, carried forward the joy and mystery of the animated object. Museums still hold documents that await being brought to public attention. Research requires time, financial resources and constant energy. Censorship can be defeated only through involvement; abuses were and are possible only through lack of awareness of the multiple effect of each community member's responsibility. Abuses are possible only if supported by fear, indifference, cowardice. Reading between the lines we discover new challenges: to have or not to have vision? To be or not to be... involved? The present exposition is only a fragment of a search; work in progress!

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