

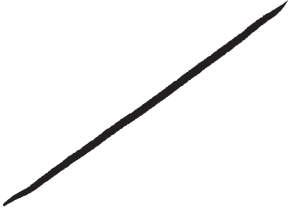


RECENT STAGINGS AT A HUNGARIAN STATE THEATRE IN TRANSYLVANIA

Review of *33 Performances; 33 Pages from the Recent History of The Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj*, by Nona Rapotan

33 de spectacole; 33 de pagini din istoria recentă a
Teatrului Maghiar de Stat Cluj
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Abstract: This volume discusses more than thirty plays performed at the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj-Napoca in distinct reviews previously published online on bookhub.ro between 2019 and 2020. It also comprises an interview, the author's foreword and a preface, all seen through the didactic lenses of Nona Rapotan who is not a theatrologist, but a teacher of social sciences that primarily worked with middle school pupils, yet got involved in adult education as well. The performances analysed, be they of classic or contemporary plays, are authored by Romanian and international playwrights, the reasons for the stagings being accounted for, too. A variety of topics is brought into play, ranging from "a universe of sound", memory, a sick society, the depths of art, solitude characterizing the new generation, evil or children of war.

Keywords: Theatre criticism, Romanian and international performances, Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj, recent history.

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The volume brings together reflections of a social sciences teacher who is also active in the cultural sphere, curious to discover new ideas and visions and debate hot topics with her pupils, according to her confessions in the author's foreword (p. 5). Via bookhub.ro, she tried to account for the cultural events taking place in our country, be they book launches, performances, concerts or art exhibitions; her aim was to inspire the young to immerse in the cultural universe, love art, become theatre goers and passionate readers. Theatre particularly appeals to her as a breath of fresh air, a proof that altruism exists, since a performance is born out of a continuous dialogue between creators (the author's text, director, actors, etc.), not solitude. She is particularly fond of the Hungarian State Theatre of Cluj-Napoca, hence this book (pp. 5-6).

The prefacer, Oana Cristea Grigorescu, praises the author for the lucidity and tenacity required for the overview of thirty years of theatre in Hungarian in Cluj, the selection of the most significant performances and the aesthetic diversity of the productions, older recordings (1991-2000) included. It is a period in which the visionary director Gábor Tompa was manager and the theatre company overcame cultural and ethnic isolation, to gain acknowledgement as one of the most valuable ones in the country, which showed in the hundreds of plays staged, the dozens of actors and directors invited, international co-productions, national and international festivals and the prizes won. Luckily, Hungarian performances started to be subtitled either in Romanian or English, a role model of interculturality that rapidly spread at national level, increasing the theatre's visibility. The *Interferențe/ Interferences* festival initiated in 2007 has mirrored the

latest aesthetics, bringing art and society together and enlarging the horizon of expectations¹ of the public towards experimental-performative practices of other theatrical spaces (pp. 7-8). A documentary book, of interest from a socio-cultural perspective is thus presented to us, providing connections with other arts or semiotic interpretations to stage images, without engaging in an excessively specialised theatrical discourse (p. 10). Landmark performances include *Cântăreața cheală/ The Bald Soprano*, *Cabala bigotilor/ Molière, or The Cabal of Hypocrites*, *Cumnata lui Pantagruel/ Pantagruel's Sister-In-Law*, *Opereta/ Operetta*, *Scaunele/ The Chairs*, *Unchiul Vania/ Uncle Vanya*, *Trei surori/ Three Sisters*, while others such as *Leonida Gem Session*, *O scrisoare pierdută/ A Lost Letter* or *Ilegitim/ Illegitimate* give a polemic commentary on the Romanian socio-political context or the ethical drift of the contemporary world (*Leonce și Lena/ Leonce and Lena*, *Mutter Courage*, *Născut pentru niciodată/ Born for Never*, *Neguțătorul din Veneția/ The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard and III-lea/ Richard the Third*, *Victor sau copiii la putere/ Victor or Children Take Over*). According to the prefacer, the volume also coincides with the professional development and experience of the graduates of the University of Arts, Târgu Mureș who joined the theatre company in the early 1990s (p. 11).

The director Gábor Tompa is interviewed, on the occasion of his thirty-year anniversary in the field, marked by risk which may lead to failure, but which is indispensable in any form of art. He managed The Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj at the proposal of the minister of culture in 1990, our philosopher Andrei Pleșu (p. 15). He followed in his father's footsteps, a theatre director at Târgu-Mureș Theatre, admirer of Stanislavski and his detailed realistic theatre; he joined The Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj in 1981, when asked by the great director György Harag to do so (p. 17). Tompa considers the playwright to be the second conscience of the director, guiding him to stay on the right path. In this sense, he emphasizes the special role András Visky had as a performance playwright, among others, a role that the theatre lacked before 1990, as the playwright was either the author of the play or the one that gave a final touch to dramatic texts (p. 25). Tensions that may occur need to be dealt firmly with understanding; in the case of a theatre company, there are many dangers such as routine, tiredness, lack of energy or motivation, envy, all of which lead to the death of the artist; all actors should permanently reconsider their status and look up to the older generations for guidance (pp. 27-28), especially since the Romanian system is full of drawbacks (few positions available, scarce funding, etc.) (p. 29). Sometimes,

1 It is our belief that one of the seminal terms in reception aesthetic best fits here. For more details, see Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, translated from German by Timothy Bahti, preface by Paul de Man, University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

failure rose from unsuccessful performances despite the hard work of talented actors and visionary directors. Values do not exclude themselves, argues Gábor Tompa, who does not endorse the opposition between documentary theatre versus art theatre (pp. 30-31).

Among the plays directed by G. Tompa, Nona Rapotan discusses *Cântăreața cheală*/ *The Bald Soprano*, whose absurd she finds ‘decomposed’ and ‘atemporal’, underlining the difficulty in staging it (p. 38) without falling to a useless and exaggerated ridicule; she draws on Susan Sontag’s² view, which disrespects the play. The director worked on many plays by Ionesco, *Noul locatar*/ *The New Tenant* at the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest or *Rinocerii*/ *Rhinoceros* at the National Theatre of Timișoara, included. In his view, he was guided by the refusal to see language as a tool of communication, a trance, switching characters; he focused on colour (make-up) and the characters’ costumes which enabled the actors’ fast forward movements (pp. 39-40) on a white scene with few elements in a minimalistic setting (a chair, a chest, a clock, a newspaper, simple doors) (p. 41). Actors hide their feelings behind words that do not come easily to them and gestures that seem out of place in a *commedia dell’arte* stance (p. 42). N. Rapotan finds similarities between Mrs Smith and The Red Queen from *Alice in Wonderland*, comparing Mr Smith to Zorro in her intertextual endeavour (p. 45).

Cabala bigotilor/ *Molière, or The Cabal of Hypocrites* in the vision of G. Tompa, staged during the pandemic, problematizes the delimitation between the public sphere and our personal space (p. 48), Bulgakov’s text challenges the audience, focusing less on the moral and religious conflict between the king and the man as writer, Louis XIV and Molière, and more on the stage proper that is seen from the backstage where rehearsals took place, thus shedding new light on *commedia dell’arte* (p. 49).

Gombrowicz’s *Opereta*/ *Operetta* came naturally to G. Tompa, who loved both music and theatre; whilst the staging could have lacked a musical background in an absurd vision, as N. Rapotan underlines (p. 55), the scene seems to have sprung from a freshly shipwrecked Titanic, which reflects difficult choices in life like keeping one’s faith or falling prey to lust and other earthly delights

2 In the subchapter “Ionesco”, the passage reads as follows: “What is Ionesco’s accomplishment? Judging by the most exacting standards, he has written one really remarkable and beautiful play, *Jack*, or the *Submission* (1950); one brilliant lesser work, *The Bald Soprano*, his first play (written 1948-49); and several effective short plays which are pungent reprises of the same material, *The Lesson* (1950), *The Chairs* (1951), and *The New Tenant* (1953). All these plays—Ionesco is a prolific writer—are “early” Ionesco. The later works are marred by a diffuseness in the dramatic purpose and an increasing, unwieldy self-consciousness. The diffuseness can be clearly seen in *Victims of Duty* (1952), a work with some powerful sections but unhappily overexplicit.” Susan Sontag, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, Picador, 2001, pp. 128-129.

(*ibidem*). Fusion and fashion combine, dictating taste gastronomically and from the perspective of clothing, luxury triggering superficiality, the actors András Csíki playing a perfect dictator and Miklós Bács, the ultimate egotist (pp. 56-57). Lord Blotton's chairs become a mobile for action, participating in group scenes and dancing (p. 60). In *Scaunele/ The Chairs*, the fourth of Ionesco's plays directed by Vlad Mugur, the sitting devices play a similar role, the authenticity consisting of a subtle game of lights and the characters' proximity to the elements of the setting; a historical metaphor is thus suggested, the old couple completing each other and, at times, based on scenic motion, feeling young again and reminding N. Rapotan of Alfred Hitchcock's movies or the *noir* genre (pp. 63-64).

Fruitful collaborations between directors on the stage of the Hungarian State Theatre Cluj during this period include G. Tompa and András Visky's *Discipolii/ Disciples*, who are in fact Jesus's apostles that support Him on His path to redemption in a play in which their faces show doubt, clumsiness, abandonment and understanding or love (p. 85). The costumes and setting subscribe to fertile minimalism, whereas sacred music is successfully played (p. 89).

The Romanian plays directed by G. Tompa that caught our eye are *O scrisoare pierdută/ A Lost Letter* and *Leonida Gem Session*. The reviewer argues that the performances reflect the director's love for classic theatre and Caragiale has always been relevant to the political scene. In the former, inner conflict and the fight for power are marvellously tackled via the original solutions in terms of space organisation, namely the white toilet of the Parliament, and the cast which allowed ambiguity (of political characters and factions) due to the women played by men and vice versa (pp. 91-92). In the latter, the reviewer capitalizes on the importance of the text adapted for the performance, a task that requires both the skills of a playwright and a translator. To make the text appealing to a certain audience, it needs 'translating', i.e. transposing/ adapting to contemporary language by a professional who is able to operate any changes without distorting the message and towards the preservation of effect that the author intended in his time for his readers (p. 136), hence the universality³ of a literary work, in general and of a dramatic text, in particular. In literature, it was consented "that the difficulty lies in the nature of the theatre text, which exists in a dialectical relationship with the performance of that same text and is therefore frequently read as something 'incomplete' or 'partially realized'".⁴ Supported by A. Visky's adaptation for

3 In this respect, we subscribe to the argument of translation universals as defined in Romanian Translation Studies. For more details, see Magda Jeanrenaud, *Universaliile traducerii*, Polirom, 2006, which also analyzes excerpts of Caragiale's texts translated into French.

4 Susan Bassnett, "Translating for the Theatre: The Case Against Performability", *TTR : traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, vol. 4, n° 1, 1991, pp. 99-111, <https://www.erudit.org/en/journals/ttr/1991-v4-n1->

the stage, a writer himself, Tompa succeeded in discarding dissonances and level toughness that might have done wrong to the performance as an artistic act. Therefore, *Securitate* files are brought into play from the communist period without altering Caragiale's views. The *gem session* is used as a musical act and a mix of ideas and pieces of texts from various historical periods to account for post-revolutionary Romania, a period of turmoil when democracy was reinstated (pp. 137-138).

The Shakespearean plays staged at the Hungarian State Theatre in Cluj reviewed by Rapotan are *Richard III* and *The Merchant of Venice*. The former is particularly challenging in its adaptation for modern audiences that should not be over 14; historical knowledge on the War of the Roses and the Plantagenets is required for one to see beyond the bloodbaths of the regent or king. Tompa's contemporary view of 2008 is atypical, focusing on Richard as a central pillar of politics meant to ensure the future of England and its royalty (p. 110-111). The latter portrays a merchant of dead souls in our times who trades in the stock market in a setting that resembles a mall with Beatles' music in which *June* becomes *Jew* and *Lean on Me* ends the play (pp. 176-177).

Other reputed theatre directors praised by N. Rapotan are Silviu Purcărete whose *Cumnata lui Pantagruel/ Pantagruel's Sister-in-Law* is seen as a 'performance-metaphor' in which matter is deconstructed for survival and food cooked ritually, drawing on Rabelais's spirit in which the appetite pertaining to pantagruelism seems to be the most difficult to render (pp. 77-78). Ultimately, it was achieved as a protest, a manifest for knowledge in which decomposition and deconstruction played a key part, backed by a simple, yet mobile setting that included many spoons and doors for tables where food was served (p. 80). *Victor sau copiii la putere/ Victor or Children Take Over* portrays a father so vicious that the spectators feel the urge to go on stage and bring some sense into him. Victor's projections make up the entire play and the 9-year old here is not held responsible for mental insanity or perversity; unfortunately, he is unwell and will be understood too late (pp. 146-147). Purcărete makes no concession in his play, an aggressive meditation on the monsters we created and which feed on our illusions (p. 149).

Mihai Mănuțiu directed *Tragica istorie a doctorului Faust/ The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, whose topic Rapotan found 'complicated' and 'dark', the pact with the devil that tempted Marlowe requiring a reinvention of duality, according to the reviewer (p. 72). Doubt is essential to the play, whose aesthetic is whole

trr1474/037084ar/. Retrieved on March 20, 2026. See also Susan Bassnett, "Ways through the Labyrinth. Strategies and Methods for Translating Theatre Texts". In Theo Hermans (ed.), *The Manipulation of Literature. Studies in Literary Translation*, Routledge, 2014, pp. 87-102.

thanks to the director's audacity of placing the characters in the ward of a mental hospital in which the psychologist gains alchemical powers (pp. 73-74).

Another classic, *Unchiul Vania/ Uncle Vanya*, is staged by Andrei Șerban, Chekhov's successful play leading to 15 years of uninterrupted performances; the reviewer draws our attention to the fact that the raining moments are harder to render than it looks because of the mud that spoils the actors' skin and clothes (p. 97). Exiting the comfort zone, A. Șerban challenges his audience to enlarge their horizons and acquire knowledge in a setting that forces viewing from all angles (p. 98).

Readers are invited to emerge in the universe of The Hungarian State Theatre, Cluj thanks to the performances reviewed by Nona Rapotan in this volume. We recommend it to all theatre goers and art lovers who are interested in the topic, and it is our belief that specialists (be they philologists, teatrologists or other) will use it as reference for further academic studies in the field. Last but not least, actors and other stakeholders in the world of theatre and performance could only learn from their predecessors and their masterful work on/ for the stage.

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II. BOOK REVIEW



Nona Rapotan is a teacher of social sciences and cultural journalist with a sustained activity in literary criticism and cultural dialogue. She coordinates the *bookbub.ro* platform and collaborates with various publications, writing reviews, interviews and analyses. Passionate about literature, classical music and theatre, she constantly explores new perspectives on contemporary culture. She was president of the non-governmental organisation *Salvați Copiii/ Save the Children*, Romania, Galați branch.

Nona Rapotan, photo source: <https://x.com/NRapotan/>
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