

*Zaharia Bârsan
and The Establishment of the National Theatre in Cluj*

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Abstract: The article tackles the circumstances in which the National Theatre in Cluj came into being and its relevance to the Romanian cultural scene. It was inaugurated on the 1st of December 1919 after the Unification of Transylvania and Romania on the 1st of December 1918. To have professional theatre performed in the mother tongue of the majority was the embodiment of an age-old yearning of the Romanians living in this region, and was supported by the entirety of the theatre movement. In this respect, the most important aspects are mentioned. Before the Unification, Transylvania was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Romanians, despite forming the largest segment of the population, were completely stripped of rights. Therefore, the new-born National Theatre in Cluj was invested with a plurality of missions, the main one being to stand as an expression and a stimulus of Romanian creativity in all Transylvania, which was materialized through tours and series of performances in the region.

The paper also attempts to capture the complexity of Zaharia Bârsan's personality, a reputable theatrical animator, actor, director, teacher, dramatist, poet, prose writer, who was the first to be invested as director and founder of the institution. The difficulties he had to overcome, which revolved around founding a troupe of talented actors, finding a repertoire and bestowing the theatre with an aura of prestige are analysed. Initially, the repertoire included classical pieces, which were thought to carry a clearer, more accessible message, but he introduced modern and Romanian pieces as well. Zaharia Bârsan managed to produce extraordinary performances right from the first theatrical seasons: **Vlaicu Vodă** by Al. Davila, **Oedipus Rex** by Sophocles, Shakespeare's **Hamlet** and **Macbeth**.

Keywords: National Theatre in Cluj, 1919, Zaharia Bârsan, Transylvanian theatre

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In Western Europe, most national theatres were founded in the age of the formation of nations, as a core of their spirituality and unity, anchored primarily in their language.

The establishment of the National Theatre in Cluj followed the formation of the Romanian national state, through the 1918 Great Union, which liberated Transylvania from the centuries-long Austro-Hungarian servitude. The act of establishment was signed by the Presidency of the Romanian Directory Council that temporarily governed upon Transylvania, until the full union with the Old Romanian Kingdom, through No. 3910 Decree from 18 September 1919. The same act certified the establishment of the Romanian Opera of Cluj and the Conservatory of Music and Dramatic Art. It was the age when great Romanian cultural institutions were being created in a city which, until then, appeared to be led by Hungarian elites. Head of the new national theatre was appointed Zaharia Bârsan, one of the leading figures of Transylvanian culture, also assigned with organizing the theatre. Therefore, Zaharia Bârsan stands as a founder, so the more as he drafted the structure of the institution.

The National Theatre in Cluj opened its gates on 1 December 1919, in a festival celebrating one year from the Great Union. The plays *Poemul Unirii* (*The Poem of the Union*) and *Se face ziuă* (*The Dawn is Here*), both written by Zaharia Bârsan, were performed on the occasion. The first theatre season started on 2 December 1919, with the premiere of *Ovidiu* by Vasile Alecsandri, where Zaharia Bârsan had the leading role. The first Romanian words uttered on the main stage in Cluj, by the great actress Olimpia Bârsan, Zaharia Bârsan's wife, were: „The storm hath ended!” (from *The Poem of the Union*). The statement had a symbolic value. It signified the hope for better times, but also the long and rough journey the Romanian people of Transylvania had to undertake in order to get a professional theatre in their own language. One might say the entire Romanian theatre movement in Transylvania shared this goal. It expressed and professed national conscience, the ethnic unity, the unity of origin and language for Romanian people everywhere.

It was not coincidental that long before the Union, the first Romanian performances took place in Transylvania. In 1755, the “Comedia ambulatória aulumnorum” of the students from the city of Blaj was established. On Christmas Day, they played a religious performance, accompanied by an orchestra, wearing Vienna-ordered costumes. They also went touring in neighbouring locations. Everywhere, they attracted a large crowd that watched admiringly „the miracle”. In the following decades, the love for theatre would also spread in other Romanian schools, like those from Arad, Braşov, Beiuş, Oradea, Năsăud, Oraviţa.



Fig. 1: The building of the new Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, postal card from 1915

Reprezentatia No. 1.

Teatrul National

LUNI 1 DECEMBRIE 1919
FESTIVAL

Un act de adunarea de la Alba Iulia.

Se va reprezenta:

SE FACE ZIUA

Drama intr'un act de Zaharia Bârsan

DISTRIBUTIA

Popa Costea	D-nul N. Nemesiu-Orosi	Banatul	D-nul Radu Ciocera
Mina, sora lui	D-ni Otilia Bârsan	Calina	D-ra Sofia
Judele, fratele ei	D-nul A. Altanovsca	Mircea, tata ei	D-ra Dumbrava
Christa, sora lui Popa Costea	Zaharia Bârsan		

Actiunea se petrece la sfârșitul secolului XIX în satul „Jude Costea” din județul Sibiu.

POEMUL UNIREI

de Zaharia Bârsan

DISTRIBUTIA

Romania	D-na Otilia Bârsan	Transilvania	D-ra H. Fatima
Bucuresti	D-ra M. Simion	Moldavia	M. Popa
Bucovina	Tita Hoda	Macedonia	M. Dumbrava
Dobrogea	D-nul A. Altanovsca		

Intreprindeti la ora 7 seara precise. Odata cu inceperea spectacolului toate salile se inchid pana la sfârșitul actului.

Prețurile locurilor pentru reprezentatie extraordinară: Loja avântoasa III Cor. 150; Loja rangul I Cor. 130; Loja rangul II Cor. 120; Orchestra Cor. 40; Focșani Cor. 30; Sălaj I Cor. 20; Sălaj II Cor. 10; Balcon rangul I Cor. 10; Balcon rangul 2-4 Cor. 12; Balcon rangul 5-7 Cor. 10; Galeri numerotate Cor. 10; Loc în picioare în parter Cor. 4; Loc în picioare la galerie Cor. 2

DOAMNELE CU PALARI NU SUNT ADMISE IN STALII

Actiunea se petrece la sfârșitul secolului XIX în satul „Jude Costea” din județul Sibiu.

Actiunea se petrece la sfârșitul secolului XIX în satul „Jude Costea” din județul Sibiu.

Actiunea se petrece la sfârșitul secolului XIX în satul „Jude Costea” din județul Sibiu.

Reprezentatia No. 2.

Teatrul National

MARTI 2 DECEMBRIE 1919
deschiderea stagiunii

se va reprezenta:

OVIDIU

Drama in 5 acte si versuri de V. Alexandru

DISTRIBUTIA

August Octavian Cezar	D-nul A. Bârsan	Octavia	D-ra H. Fatima
Octavia	D-nul A. Altanovsca	Octavian	D-ra Sofia
Octavian	D-nul A. Altanovsca	Octavian	D-ra Dumbrava
Octavian	D-nul A. Altanovsca	Octavian	

Intreprindeti la ora 7 seara precise. Odata cu inceperea spectacolului toate salile se inchid pana la sfârșitul actului.

PREȚURILE LOCURILOR PENTRU PREMIERA: Loja avântoasa III Cor. 80; Loja rangul I Cor. 75; Loja rangul II Cor. 70; Orchestra Cor. 30; Focșani Cor. 20; Sălaj I Cor. 15; Sălaj II Cor. 10; Balcon rangul I Cor. 10; Balcon rangul 2-4 Cor. 12; Balcon rangul 5-7 Cor. 10; Galeri numerotate Cor. 10; Loc în picioare în parter Cor. 4; Loc în picioare la galerie Cor. 2

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Fig. 2: Posters of the first two performances of the first Romanian theatrical season at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, 1919

The first Romanian dramatic text was published in Transylvania as well, in 1780, under the title of *Occisio Gregorii în Moldavia Vodae tragedice expressa* (*The Killing of Gregory, the King of Moldavia, depicted in a tragic register*), by an anonymous author, a text that was apparently performed by the same students from Blaj. It depicts the fight of Romanian kingdoms for freedom and national independence. The play is structured as a modern tragicomedy, with aspects of parody, nonverbal parts of circus or pantomime, scenes inspired by the popular theatre from Romanian folklore. The interest and love for theatre nurtured by the Romanian people of Transylvania is also illustrated by the 1800 publication of the first translation of *Hamlet*, signed by Ion Barac, with the title *Amlet, Prințul de Dania*.



Fig. 3: Photograph of one of the encounters of The Society for Romanian Theatre Fund of Transylvania, in Săliște.

In 1870 was established, on Iosif Vulcan's initiative, "The Society for Romanian Theatre Fund of Transylvania." The programmatic article written by Vulcan, titled *Let's establish a national theatre*, asserted the very necessity to

create a professional stage for the Romanian people from this province. Hungarian authorities had approved the society regulations, with one single amendment: Romanian people had the right to collect money for a theatre of their own, but were not allowed to actually establish the theatre. Even so, *The Society's* activity was remarkable. It published the first theatre journal, with the exact same name, "The Theatre Journal". It edited "The Theatre Library", meant to encourage original Romanian dramaturgy, as well as translations, which resulted in 400 volumes. In 1886, a 300-florin award was established for every new Romanian play. A legitimate dramaturgy appeared, mainly consisting of historical-national-themed dramas and comedies, Iosif Vulcan being the most representative and prolific author.

The **Society** funded apprenticeships for young people of talent, to go and study theatre but also opera in the West, in an attempt to train specialists for the future professional artistic institutions. Zaharia Bârsan was one of the first to benefit from such stipends, studying in Vienna and Rome. In the field of canto, we should mention Lya Pop, also known as „Transylvania's nightingale". In order to collect funds, the **Society** organized yearly meetings, in different cities, which contributed to enhancing the national feeling. Performances or parades of popular costumes took place, accompanied by songs, and an exchange of opinions. People made donations, which amounted to a considerable sum until the beginning of the first World War.

Tours made by great actors from Bucharest to Transylvania were effective in keeping the ethnic bond between the Romanian people set apart by historical hardships; they revealed and galvanized the feeling of national unity, the sense of belonging to the same nation. Some of the most important tours were made, from 1863, by Fanny Tardini, whose company's prompter was Mihai Eminescu, then by Mihail Pascaly, in 1868, and 1871, by Matei Millo, in 1870, I. D. Ionescu, in 1873, and 1875. In addition to those, many other smaller yearly companies toured the entire province, triggering in all cities genuine celebrations of the Romanian nationality. The repertory consisted of historical-patriotic plays and comedies.

The only actor allowed to perform in Cluj, which, as pointed out before, was a dominantly Hungarian city, was Matei Millo. His performances from the hall of the Hungarian Theatre were attended by Hungarian and Romanian spectators likewise. In 1871, Matei Millo leaves the city. Two actors, husband and wife, George and Margareta Alexandrescu, exit his

company, opting to stay in Cluj. They join The Theatre Society which had been running in Cluj since 1868, founded by Ion Baciú, who came from the strong theatre tradition of Năsăud. Members of the society were Romanian students of the Catholic college. The society can be justly considered the direct predecessor of the National Theatre in Cluj. Wallachian actors took charge of the group, further encouraging its development.



Fig. 4: Mihail Pascaly (1830-1882), famous actor, company director, pedagogue



Fig. 5: Matei Millo (1814-1896), famous actor, stage director and playwright

Considering the requirements of the time and the public, the repertory was formed of historical plays and comedies written by great Romanian writers such as V. Alecsandri, B. P. Hașdeu, C. Negruzzi, but also by Al. Lapedatu (*Tribunul* (*The Tribune*), about Avram Iancu).

Performances were given „one almost every month”, in the building of the Greek-Catholic parish, where Ion Baciuc had built „an estrade under a barn”. Many „high society” spectators used to come there. In 1875, the students graduate college, and the society disintegrates. Still, Ion Baciuc doesn't abandon theatre, but once he gets back in his village of Șoimuș, county of Bistrița-Năsăud, he builds a theatre and starts editing a field-specific magazine.

In what concerns the mission or the strategy of the new National Theatre in Cluj, it resembled the general orientation of other European national theatres, with certain particularities, however. The first one reflected the need to express the Romanian spirituality, to encourage the artistic and cultural creativity of the nation. In the initial conception, this institution was supposed to belong not only to Cluj, but to all Transylvania, a goal meant to be reached through tours and micro-seasons in other locations. The theatre was aimed at achieving the so-called at the time „soul unity” of all the Romanian people who had been set apart arbitrarily in the course of time. The famous French historian Jules Michelet once wrote that the nation should resemble an individual, that it should similarly have a soul. Likewise, the Cluj stage was meant to provide the model of a clean, unitary Romanian language, purified of all the foreign influences brought by the known historical conditions.

The new director, Zaharia Bârsan, had to face numerous and pressing necessities in order to ensure the functioning of the National Theatre in Cluj. Enhanced by the vicissitudes that followed the end of First World War, the administrative union with Romania was pending. First of all, a company of actors and a repertory, the body and soul of any theatre, as Mihai Eminescu used to say, had to be set. Time was of the essence, meanwhile in the country theatre seasons had already begun, performers were rather scarce then. However, thanks to Zaharia Bârsan's prestige, and to his personal relations, several esteemed actors from the National Theatres of Iași, Craiova and Bucharest gave up their good contracts and positions, choosing instead to enliven the Cluj stage. Zaharia Bârsan would emphasize on every occasion the fact that what these generous artists had made should always be remembered. Here are some of the names from the core of the company in those years: I. Stănescu-Papa, Nicolae Neamțu-Ottonel, Dem. Mihăilescu Brăila, Aurel Athanasescu, Sonia Cluceru, Al. Ghibericon and, last but not least, Olimpia Bârsan, Zaharia Bârsan's wife, first-class associate at the National Theatre of Bucharest. They were joined, in the position of technical

director, by Sică Alexandrescu, the future renowned stage director, who made his debut in this quality here, in Cluj. Other actors would also settle in this Transylvanian city on the Someș River, in later seasons, shaping a typologically and expressively diverse company.



Fig.6: Zaharia Bârsan (1878-1948) in *King Lear*



Fig. 7: Zaharia Bârsan in *Hamlet*

Repertory-wise, Zaharia Bârsan favoured primarily the classical type, which he considered clearer and more approachable by the public. But a then-modern play was also presented from the very first years. Romanian dramaturgy provided a reliable source, especially through historical plays, whose patriotic message was understandably successful in the case of Transylvania. In general, the National Theatre in Cluj tried to present almost every valuable new product in the domain. The institution was able to balance drama, comedy, melodrama. The most often staged playwrights, in

the first seasons, but also afterwards, were W. Shakespeare and I. L. Caragiale. They were joined by Molière, with quite many texts, Carlo Goldoni (*Hangița* [*The Mistress of the Inn*]), V. Alecsandri, B. P. Hașdeu (*Răzvan și Vidra* [*Răzvan and Vidra*]), Al. Davila (*Vlaicu Vodă* [*King Vlaicu*]), later also by N. Gogol (*Revizorul* [*The Government Inspector*]), M. Gorky (*Azilul de noapte* [*The Night Asylum*]), A. P. Chekhov (*Pescărușul* [*The Seagull*], with the title *Pescărelul*, in national premiere), H. Ibsen (*Strigoii* [*Ghosts*]), V. I. Popa (*Ciuta* [*The Deer*]), M. Sorbul (*Patima roșie* [*The Red Passion*]). Contemporary Romanian dramaturgy was encouraged then, resulting in prestigious debuts and absolute premieres, like Lucian Blaga's *Avram Iancu*.



Fig. 8: Olimpia Bârsan (1885-1935), one of the most admired actresses at the beginning of the XXth century

One imperative goal of the National Theatre in Cluj was to build prestige and come into prominence in the cultural landscape of the country. This could be attained through great performances from the great repertory. Director Zaharia Bârsan is quick to introduce such texts from the very first season, but is only able to present them to the public, as distinct performances, in the second and the following seasons. These texts are *O scrisoare pierdută* (*The Lost Letter*) by I. L. Caragiale, from the very first year, *Vlaicu Vodă* by Al. Davila, *Hamlet* by W. Shakespeare, *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles, milestones of any theatre.

Another problem was the audience. The Romanian population of Cluj was not very large at the time, Hungarian people clearly prevailing. Therefore, the same spectators had to be encouraged to attend more often theatre performances. With this in view, several premieres had to be prepared. To Zaharia Bârsan's estimates, they needed one every two weeks. In the very first season, 13 premieres were staged, while in the second season their number increased to 18. This called for tremendous efforts made by the actors. On the other hand, spectators had to be educated, drawn towards theatre, their own taste taken into account. This explains the repertory option for melodramas and small comedies, more accessible and better fitted to the popular taste. Students supported the director's views, remaining to this day the most faithful spectators. They led the actors in triumph to their homes, they went on stage as extras whenever the case, like in the production of *Vlaicu Vodă*.

As for the tours, Zaharia Bârsan hoped that a first one would already be made in the inaugural season, but the ministry did not grant the necessary subvention. The first tour headed to Oradea, on 9 November 1921; further on, the National Theatre in Cluj continued to travel weekly to this city, which led to 12 performances, a micro-season in its own, consisting of historical plays and comedies, which was welcomed with „extreme enthusiasm”. Things happened likewise in towns such as Dej and Turda. Zaharia Bârsan aimed at forming an itinerant company dedicated to touring, called “The Western Theatre”, which was supposed to be backed by the National Theatre and the Astra Society. The head of the latter, Vasile Goldiș, agreed verbally, but would never provide any money for the project.

Zaharia Bârsan also introduced, from the first season, the so-called „popular performances”, meant to create a constant public, formed of military men and school students, and taking place on Sundays from 2.30 p.m., at half the normal price.

As pointed out before, Zaharia Bârsan was a true leading figure of Transylvanian culture, embodied in several creative avatars. He was theatre promoter, actor, stage director, professor, playwright, poet, prose writer. We already mentioned his contributions as the first director and founder of the National Theatre in Cluj. Bârsan's first directorate, between 15 Oct. 1919-31 July 1927, was followed by two other, between 1 Dec. 1931-31 June 1933 and between 16 Apr. 1934- 31 March 1936, respectively.

Prior to these, between 1903-1913, Zaharia Bârsan organized yearly tours in Transylvania's main localities, from south to north, from east to west. Like the entire theatre movement, these tours were meant to cultivate the national conscience of the Romanian people, their sense of ethnic and linguistic unity, but also to provide a pure Romanian language. Zaharia Bârsan only chose performances of great aesthetic quality, played by professional actors. Considering this objective and the times, the repertory included historical plays, written especially by V. Alecsandri, but also by C. Negruzzi, as well as readings from G. Coşbuc. In addition to these, Z. Bârsan introduced in the Transylvanian repertory I. L. Caragiale's *Năpasta* [*Injustice*], Carlo Goldoni's *Slugă la doi stăpâni* [*Servant of Two Masters*], A.P. Chekhov's *Cerere în căsătorie* [*Marriage Proposal*], Ursul [*The Bear*]. Comedies were also on the list. Part of the company were first-rate artists of the National Theatre of Bucharest: Marioara Voiculescu, Aristizza Romanescu, Petre Liciu, V. Toneanu, C. Calmuschi and, of course, his wife, Olimpia Bârsan, always beside him. The mishaps and sometimes difficult conditions in which performances took place, the obstacles imposed by Hungarian authorities were chronicled by Z. Bârsan in *Impresii de teatru din Ardeal* [*Impressions from Transylvanian Theatre*], the first memorial of theatre travel in Romanian literature. After 1913, the director was denied by the Hungarian government the permission to enter Transylvania.

Zaharia Bârsan came from the village of Sân-Petru, next to Braşov (he was born on 11/23 January 1878, and died on 13 December 1948, in Cluj). Once completing the sixth high-school grade, he fled to Bucharest. There, he attended the classes of the Conservatory of Dramatic Art, which he graduated at C. I. Nottara's class, with a maximum grade and the first prize in tragedy. He was then hired at the National Theatre of Bucharest, where he became a first-class associate.



Fig. 9: The National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca after World War I and the Great Union

Similar to his master C. I. Nottara, his acting style belongs to Romanticism, emphasizing feelings, and fostering the musical values of words. Zaharia Bârsan adds a classicist, more restrained dimension, assumed from the theatre of Vienna, where he studied, and a natural tendency, borrowed from Italian *verismo*. The first feature, enhanced by the Enlightenment, makes the actor seem to officiate with certain solemnity, like a lay priest that reveals existential truths, while the stage turns into a secular altar. This taxonomy will long persist in the tradition of the Cluj stage. He preferred the drama, the Shakespearean and the Romantic repertory. Among his great achievements, we mention the main parts from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *King Lear*, all plays by W. Shakespeare, from *Ruy Blas* by Victor Hugo, *Răzvan și Vidra* by B. P. Hașdeu, *Vlaicu Vodă* by Al. Davila, other parts like Carl from *Hoții (The Robbers)* by Fr. Schiller, Luca Arbore from *Viforul (The Blizzard)* by B. P. Hașdeu.

The most lasting chapter of Zaharia Bârsan's literary creation remains his dramaturgy. The landmarks of his career are the dramatic poems *Trandafirii roșii* (*Red Roses*), *Domnul de rouă* (*The Morning Dew Gentleman*), which are in fact extravaganzas, a genre cultivated by Romanticism. Also noteworthy is the historical play *Se face ziuă*, a dense, rough evocation of the figure of Crișan, one of the heroes of the 1784 Revolution, along with Horia and Cloșca.

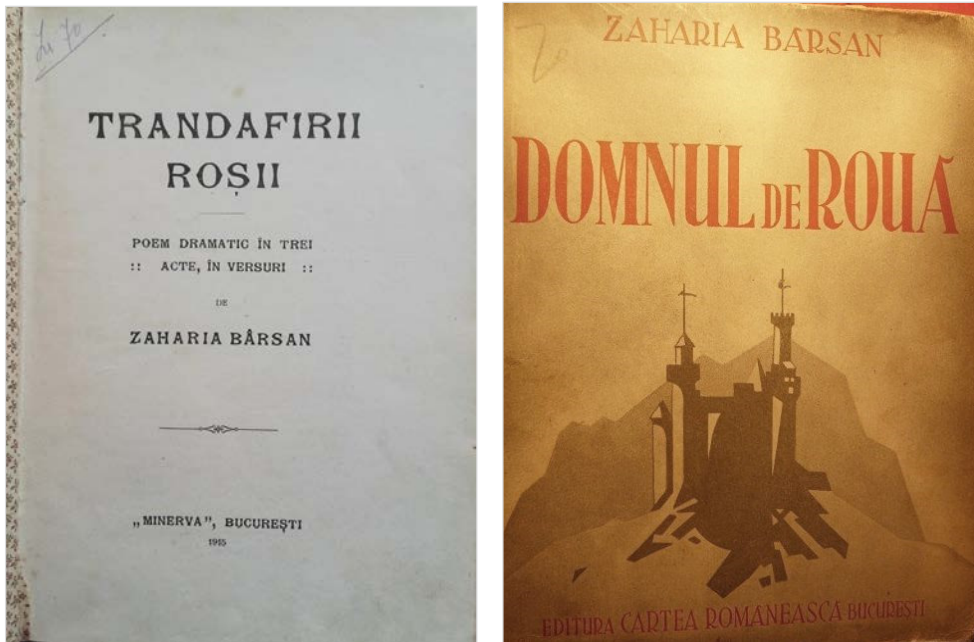


Fig.10: Front page of *The Red Roses* (first edition) and cover of the *The Morning Dew Gentleman*

Trandafirii roșii premiered on the stage of the National Theatre of Bucharest on 12 October 1915, was warmly welcomed. In those days, after the 1989 Revolution, it was presented at the Bulandra Theatre, during Victor Rebenciuc's directorate. The play reenacts the Romantic scenario of sacrifice. One needs self-sacrifice in order to defeat a given *fatum*, or to fulfil a destiny. This idea is embodied here through the theme of the artist, who

accomplishes his mission at the price of his own life. This intertwines with the motive of total, absolute love, also drawn from Romanticism. The artist achieves, in exchange, immortality. *Trandafirii roșii* are the metaphor of a new, non-existent before beauty, born out of the artist's sacrifice and blood, but also of his love. The text is built on the lyrical-dramatic and poetic tension of characters and verses.

The hero, Zefir, is a dreaming poet, a similarly Romantic typology. Liana was cursed to die, unless somebody would bring her every day a red rose, considering only white roses existed at the time. Zefir loves the girl endlessly and is able to overcome this fatum. During the night, he colours with his own blood a white rose, which he gifts Liana in the morning. He saves her this way, at the cost of his own life. As a consequence of that, all white roses from the garden will turn red, a phenomenon viewed as a miracle on stage. The dramatic poem is composed of harmonious, musical verses, which remind of neo-Romanticism.

Domnul de rouă is less valuable than *Trandafirii roșii*. Although inspired by local mythology, the legend of the sun and the moon, it is more elaborate, more polished. Certain Symbolist traits can still be perceived here. The other plays written by Zaharia Bârsan, *Mărul (The Apple)* from 1908 and *Sirena (The Mermaid)*, are composed in a realist-psychological register. However, they don't display some special kind of analysis, but fall back on moralising didacticism. Zaharia Bârsan's poetry, the volumes *Visuri de noroc (Luck Dreams)*, from 1903, and *Poezii (Poems)*, from 1924, is subjected to usual clichés of Romanticism. His prose, gathered in the volumes *Ramuri (Tree Branches)*, in 1906, *Nuvele (Short Stories)*, in 1909, *Nuvele*, 1910, *Ca mâini va bate ceasul (Tomorrow will be the Day)*, 1915, reveal the talent of a storyteller who is able to draw convincing portraits. Written in the realist-naturalist manner, this prose often tends to linger in a moral schematism, with accents of rural idealisation.

In 1945, Zaharia Bârsan was vested by academician Mihail Ralea, the then-Minister of the Arts, as a honorary lifelong director of the National Theatre in Cluj. He remains, to this day, the only one to hold this position in the history of the institution.

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