

Aesthetic Perspectives in Romanian Theatre at the End of the First World War

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Abstract: The years 1919-1921 were years of nostalgia and imperative claims for the Romanian stage, years of useful comparisons with the achievements of the theatrical movements from other countries, of explorations in search for the best solutions, of enthusiastic impetuses and efforts to reach lucidity. This paper looks at the main issues and aesthetic ideas that were manifest during the controversies provoked by the premieres of several important theatrical productions within the above mentioned length of time. It also looks at the initiatives of certain cultural associations and at the discussions concerning the modern expressiveness of theatre and the creative role of the theatre director. Special consideration is given to the program and achievements of the National Theatre from Bucharest during the short period when it was led by the writer Victor Eftimiu.²

Key words: Romanian theatre, interwar, Bucharest, Victor Eftimiu, aesthetic ideas

Before the expressionistic enactments of Karl Heinz Martin, the experiments attempted by Marioara Voiculescu at Sidoli Circus, Armand Pascal and B. Fundoianu at "Insula," Ion Marin Sadoveanu and the "Poesis" group at the Athenaeum or Șt. I. Nenițescu at the "Teatrul Liber," before Sandu Eliad's avant-garde demonstrations for "new art," were the years 1919-1921... These scenic events – which were the turning point of our theatrical life – cannot find their complete significance in the absence of this prelude: a summary of both the values of tradition and the innovative aspirations suppressed or delayed by the war. Since nothing is ever borne

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² Translated in English by Diana Melnic

out of nothing, 1919-1921 are years of nostalgias and imperative demands, of useful comparisons and pursuits of necessary solutions, of enthusiastic impetuses and struggles for lucidity. They are years when, in the turmoil of its ambitions, the theatre lives with intensity its artistic and ideological contradictions. It experiences sharply its practical shortcomings, and yet it manifests in multiple preparatory explorations.



Fig. 1: Front page of the Journal *Teatrul de Mâine*, Year 1, no 14, 1 March 1919

At the time, much was written about the theatre “of tomorrow,” which could not be accomplished immediately, for it could no longer be a mere replay of what was before, but rather a continuation of it. As such, it had to be thought-out in relation to the social realities imposed after the global conflict, as well as to our cultural necessities and creative possibilities. A magazine actually titled *Teatrul de mâine*³ (1918-1920) appeared, as its editors declared,

³ “Teatrul de mâine” [“The Theatre of Tomorrow”], *Teatrul de mâine* I, no. 12, (January 15, 1919).

with its “eyes” looking up to the theatre “of tomorrow,” in the hope of at least creating an auspicious environment for the latter, if not witnessing its very becoming. But the theatre “of tomorrow” was nothing more than one generated by the present, by atrocious times, and by the exasperated sensibility and the violent tendencies of a humanity that had seen decisive, tragic experiences⁴. Although the magazine would discredit itself – through its superficial journalistic style, rushed and precarious research, the intrusion of personal interests upon the artistic ideal, and its declared ethical principles – it would assert itself, at the time, through the conversation it initiated regarding what the theatre of tomorrow ought to have been. A “sentimentalist” performance with its “old themes” could no longer impress anyone, except perhaps some “backward” viewer. Following the bloody clash of the war, the theatre of tomorrow would be that of social problems, and would aspire to a simpler, more direct expression, without much artifice. The text – rhetorical and imperious – was almost a manifesto, probably the first in our theatrical movement at the time⁵. Faced with humanity tried with deep pain, but determined to cover the traces of the war, the theatre had to shake off any glittering embellishment or artifice, which oftentimes seemed hollow and which would have then come across as indifferent frivolity. Ion Minulescu also spoke in favour of a familiar, accessible theatre, wherein quotidian life could be recognized without any intellectual effort. Although he began from several incorrect or, at the very least, confusingly formulated, considerations, and though he amalgamated and rejected, in block, pathological cases, social issues, moral conflicts, “in futurum” pleas, university lectures and a grave, pretentious “quod erat demonstratum” from among the preoccupations characteristic for theatre, Minulescu chose as a fundamental criterion the emotional complexity of everyday life, from which theatre should never depart⁶. Having spread to other periodicals as well, the discussion commonly emphasized this criterion of livelihood: seizing any modifications, as well as the new imperatives of the post-war period, which were not yet properly understood and for which art – in general – was not only a reflection, but also a possibility for manifestation and further study. As such, Victor Eftimiu wondered whether they should settle things as they were before or confer upon them a new foundation. For him, the changing preferences of the

⁴ From the anonymous introduction to *Teatrul de Mâine*, no. 1, (March 15, 1918).

⁵ Alexandru Bălăceanu, “Teatrul de mâine,” *Teatrul de mâine*, no. 1, (March 15, 1918).

⁶ See “Patetism și dramatism” [“Pathos and Dramatism”] and “Evoluția tehnicei dramatice” [“Evolution of the Dramatic Technique”], *Revista critică*, no. 16, (January 25, 1919), and no. 17, (February 1, 1919).

audience were conclusive, while the first to crash in their wake were the theatre “technicians,” the connoisseurs of recipes for success, which were the first to go out of fashion. Above former abilities and performance – of which Victor Eftimiu mentions the masterful exposition, the main scene, conventional situations, gradation, and the unforeseeable end of an act – was placed the “tenderness of inspiration,” the unmediated contact of artistic talent and life, unbound by rules (be they even Aristotelic) and not falsified by verified procedures. To conclude, exigencies were maximal, as usual, though not without specifications of personal taste, as Eftimiu argued that the author of tomorrow should display humanity, sincerity, simplicity, picturesque, but especially the ability to keep their audience from dozing off during a performance. However, the advice he outlined immediately following this, that the author should be varied, capricious, and mix laughter with weeping, as Shakespeare had done, somewhat limited the importance of the issue⁷. In a collection of notes on dramatic psychology, Al. Al. Busuioceanu considered theatre to be both life (through the profoundly experienced identification of the viewer, as a real human being, and the character on stage) and imitation of life (in that life itself was seen as nothing more than a performance exterior to each person’s soul), in an acknowledged and accepted contradiction⁸. With an inclination for a dialectic view of life, wherein the evolution of forms is the evolution of the soul, from which everything derived and through which everything could be understood, he viewed the changes that took place in theatre as a transition from pathos to drama, from subjectivism to objectivism, or as an increasingly exact contiguity with the material reality of life, wherein the impersonal manner of natural determinism reigned. He nevertheless underlined the necessity to emphasize the essential and the merit of suggestion in order to avoid a naturalist interpretation⁹.

From various points of view and with various purposes, the rapport between theatre and life was always taken into consideration. Thus, Eugen Lovinescu explained the noteworthy changes before a new staging of *Înșir-te mărgărite* – at a time when the modern and ironic spirit of the fairy tale was of interest – as results of a natural metamorphosis. As times were changing, so were the people compelled to change, and since evolution implied the negation of the past, the re-negation of the people became a sign of maturity.

⁷ Eugen Lovinescu, “Victor Eftimiu”, in *Critiques*, 1st edition, vol. VII (Bucharest: Editura Ancora, Alcalay și Calafateanu, 1922), 121-122.

⁸ Eugen Lovinescu, “Teatrul și natura” [Theatre and Nature], in *Critiques*, 3rd edition, vol. III (Bucharest: Ancora S. Benvenisti, 1928), 192.

⁹ Tudor Vianu, “Ibsen contra Ibsen,” in *Revista critică*, no. 21, (March 1, 1919).

The eternal change was joined by an interior motive, namely, the necessity of the soul to emulate the universal¹⁰.



Fig. 2: Front cover of *Înșir-te Mărgărite* by Victor Eftimiu and *Bătrânul* by Hortensia Papadat Bengescu

The perspective was not limited, but dynamic, as the critic maintained the miniature quality and the derisory of the theatre (as nature designed in view of a purpose) by comparison to the larger, more complicated nature, which was itself a performance¹¹.

If Ibsen, Strindberg, Kaiser or the plays of Reinhardt, Fuchs, Erler, and Meyerhold had been written about both before and during the war, new perspectives now intervened in the manner in which a drama or the ideas of foreign playwrights were commented. The issues they suggested were discussed with a different degree of attention and a different poignancy when

¹⁰ Tudor Vianu, "Fatalitatea la Ibsen" ["Fate and Ibsen"], in *Rampa*, no. 418, (February 16, 1919).

¹¹ Alice Voinescu, "Henrik Ibsen," in *Ideea europeană*, no. 26, (December 14, 1919).

the theatre of tomorrow came into view. To stage Ibsen became a necessity, while the premiere of the drama *John Gabriel Borkmann* (At the National Theatre in Bucharest, in spring 1919) initiated numerous commentaries, which brought forward new perspectives not only on the play itself, but also on Theatre. The premiere would be the scenic event that would disintegrate the balanced attitude supported by the group of *Revista critică* [*The Critic Journal*]: the apparent unity of opinion would break in contact with the new theatre. While Busuioceanu desired to initiate a polemic, but giped aimlessly, Tudor Vianu opted to write an excellent study, *Ibsen contra Ibsen* [*Ibsen against Ibsen*], wherein he would argue against old views regarding the didacticism and egocentrism of the Nordic writer (whose interior was marked by the clash of the social and the individual), demonstrate his profound humanity (by drawing attention to the brotherhood of human beings found within), and seize the interior dialectic of his dramas (between the enthusiasm of a lonely and implacable power and human sociability, which pit Ibsen against Ibsen)¹². Without stating it explicitly, Vianu was driving at a situation and a human attitude which defined, for him, the significance of Ibsen during that historic moment. For Busuioceanu, Ibsen was an example of the transition towards objective drama, while B. Fundoianu found an occasion to reject the critical, logical and clear representation of a world where one is not free, but smothered by the subconscious, thereby opposing Maeterlinck's shapeless heroes or automatons to the heroes in Ibsen's plays, who believed in free will, and were therefore slightly ridiculous¹³. In a study that was published after the premieres of *John Gabriel Borkmann* and *The Wild Duck*, Alice Voinescu supported the relation between the hero's necessary will and the aesthetic means of the drama, action. Thus, theatre achieved the impossible – the human being in all its humanity. Voinescu defended his faith in a theatre that commented upon the morality of a society through aesthetics and idealism, while viewing naturalism as a dissolvent of humanity, because it allegedly created not an image of humanity, but rather a photographic copy of unessential, transient moments of human beastliness¹⁴. With the staging of Ibsen, theoretical challenges received important arguments and reference points at the time, in our scenic practices; perspectives and objectives derived from and were differentiated by the concrete artistic act.

¹² Tudor Vianu, "Ibsen contra Ibsen," *Revista Critică*, no. 21, (March 1, 1919).

¹³ B. Fundoianu, "Fatalitatea la Ibsen," *Rampa*, no. 418, (February 16, 1919). It is noteworthy to mention that in Petre Sturdza's interpretation of *Borkmann*, T. Vianu had the revelation of "humour," thereby claiming that Sturdza's performance was not properly understood.

¹⁴ Alice Voinescu, "Henrik Ibsen," *Ideea Europeană*, no. 26, (December 14, 1919).

For those who continued the political, aesthetic ideals of the *Contemporan* during the post-war years – for someone like Barbu Lăzăreanu or Iosif Nădejde – theatre could not be more than creativity engaged in the struggle for a socialist future, a type of art for which social tend and the call to action were most important. At the time, some supported, in a deliberately exclusivist and exaggerated manner, that socialism had at its disposal, for the agitation and cultivation of the masses, more effective means than theatre, such as syndicates, the press, the right to vote or the possibility of a strike. The theatre was characterized as a capitalist endeavour marked by the thirst for financial gain, economically and ideologically controlled by the dominant class. If performances with an undeniable aesthetic value were sometimes staged, the steep price of tickets made it impossible for poor people to attend¹⁵. Following the example of the Soviet and German theatre, or assimilating the ideas of French actor Firmin Gemier, the theatre “of tomorrow” would be a theatre of the masses. Alongside the articles of journalists and critics who discussed the problems and the meaning of a militant theatre in firm, ideological and practical terms, other publications tackled only administrative issues of the theatre “of the people,” featuring a repertoire of attractive comedies and tragedies for the gradual familiarization of the wide public.

These prospects, as well as the new exigencies that intervened in our theatre were fuelled and supported by information regarding the performances of great foreign directors and the aesthetic toils of French, German, and Soviet theatre, information which was received with particular curiosity.

The desire to be up to date with the issues and accomplishments of European theatres, as well as to reduce the existing distance and the need for knowledge and assimilation, are common preoccupations, debated in the press at the time.

Director T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu considered that there was no time for laments, regardless of how great the distance was between the art of our performances and the theatrical wonders easily accomplished by the Russians, the French and the Germans. At last, the time of rectification and of operative solutions was at hand, following that, through a grand reorganization, the values of modern theatre obtained in an isolated and discontinuous manner, would become permanent. A first step would be the acknowledgement of not only the coordinative role, but also the creative and performative role of the director, who was a multivalent author of the show and of whom originality, taste and competence were expected.

¹⁵ Ilie Păușescu, “Muncitorimea și teatrul,” *Viața socialistă*, no. 1, (November, 1920).



Fig. 3: Postal card with The National Theatre in Bucharest at the end of the 19th century

What had been accomplished elsewhere was due to the conferring of an artistic status to the director, without which it would be impossible to create real theatre in the future¹⁶. The shortcomings of our situation were frequently pointed out, while negligent, outdated performances were mercilessly rejected, in a polemic tone¹⁷. In “Scrisorile către actorul X” (in *Rampa*, 1919) A. Davilă spoke about the perfection of the ensemble and the unity of aesthetic ideas, which he had noticed in the performances of Irving, Antoine, and Reinhardt. Much was written of Gémier, Copeau, Craig, Lugné Poe, Fuchs, Appia, Karl Heinz Martin, G. Pitoeff, and Reinhardt especially.

¹⁶ “Teatrul nostru,” *Revista critică*, no. 2, (October 12, 1918).

¹⁷ We read in Alex Călin’s review of *Polyeuct* (The National Theatre in Bucharest) that outdated and banal settings were used, along with old furs and columns. (*Rampa*, no. 387, January 10, 1919); Of *Oedip* (at the same theatre) we read that a setting from Offenbach’s *La Belle Hélène* was used – a sacred forest grove where the trees were randomly arranged; a gorgeous palace of Oedip contrasting with carton shields; a juvenile temple of Apollo; and a scandalous performance with actors dressed in costumes from all eras, from *The Fountain of Blanduzia* and *The Judge of Zalamea* (*Rampa*, no. 607, (September 27, 1919).

Publications included viewers' testimonies (usually translated), interviews, expository texts and programs of the above mentioned actors¹⁸.

What seemed clear – aside from various preferences for different theatre movements – was the necessity for an atmosphere of emulation and creative efforts. Only under these circumstances, the actor-director was possible, bringing forward their own representative artistic universe in an agitated spiritual environment. The cultural circles established in these years had in mind the fertilization of art – not only theatre – and the stimulation of ambitions and initiatives with the power of prestigious examples. During its short existence (September-December 1920), "Studio" – with its plastic, theatrical, musical and choreographic preoccupations – aspired to contribute to the artistic education of the public through lectures, special courses and performances. Within the theatre department (including P. Sturdza, V.D. Bumbesti, Lily Popovici), Copeau's uncompromised repertoire, perseverant work and professional ethics at Vieux Colombier were admired. Numerous difficulties of all kinds prevented "Studio" from forming a theatre company and presenting a valuable repertoire (Strindberg, Shaw, Wedekind, Hauptmann, Maeterlinck, of which they had settled on *Intruder*). Its activity – under the leadership of I.D. Ștefănescu – would be limited to a series of conferences: *Arta și spiritual revoluției contimporane*¹⁹ (Dem Theodorescu), *Maurice Maeterlinck* (T. Vianu), *François de Curel* (I. M. Sadoveanu), *Teatrul Nou*²⁰ (Scarlat Froda), *H. Ibsen* (A. Dominic), *Paul Claudel* (Cora Irineu)... During the following year (October 1921) the more long-lasting group "Poesis" was formed with the purpose of bringing new authors to the fore in our country. However, the group's founder, I.M. Sadoveanu, dedicated the first conference to *Mișcarea de la Vieux Colombier*²¹ (afterwards, he would be drawn to Reinhardt and Gémier, as was obvious in the group's only performance, *Sister Beatrice* by Maeterlinck, in 1923). The activity of the

¹⁸ Among others, we mention the articles of B. Fundoianu on Copeau ("Cuvinte despre teatru" and "Un program de teatru," in *Rampa*, no. 698, (January 15, 1920) and no. 713, (February 5, 1920) of Victor D. Bumbesti on Gémier and G. Pitoeff, E.G. Craig's articles from the series "Arta punerii în scenă: Regizorul ideal," as well as the series "Ideile lui Georg Fuchs," and "Ideile lui Adolf Appia." (*Rampa*, 1921) Eman. Cerbu became a well-known commentator and supporter of German expressionist theatre, and he also published interviews with its representatives (Karl Heinz Martin, etc.).

¹⁹ *The Art and Spirit of the Contemporary Revolution.*

²⁰ *The New Theatre.*

²¹ *The Vieux Colombier Movement.*

"Poesis" group was aimed at vulgarization: conferences were held on *Shaw* (T. Vianu), *Wedekind* (Eugen Filotti), *Strindberg* (A. Dominic), *G. Hauptmann*, *Expresionismul în dramă*²² (Ion Sîngiorgiu), *Drama socială contemporană*²³ (Aureliu Weiss), with examples interpreted by Lily Popovici, Dida Solomon, Marietta Sadova, and G. Ciprian. Following the lecture on Copeau, the words of I.M. Sadoveanu were reinterpreted and he was accused of ironic concessions, to which he replied that the group was not a branch of another institution, but nevertheless took it upon themselves to record and explain the main aesthetic formulas created by the great interpreters of theatre²⁴. The latter could be both directors and playwrights, who – with the help of actors and scenographers – created a unique, inextricable scenic universe. Such a scenic universe could reveal national grounds in the authenticity of ideas and the directors' vision, because it involved the moulding of foreign theatre onto our own national spirit²⁵, not through mimesis, but by acknowledging the accomplishments of European theatre, knowing itself better and recognizing its own necessities and possibilities.

Appointed director of the National Theatre in Bucharest at the end of the war, C. Rădulescu-Motru viewed dramatic art as an expression of emotions in space, which he had stated during a press conference where T. Vianu also participated. He praised theatre by means of its scenic purpose, and the performance of the actors for their spatial expressive means²⁶. As creation in a space with specific rules and exigencies of expressivity, staging was understood more and more as the process by means of which a dramatic idea was visibly rendered for the viewer²⁷. T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu stated as much by adding new lines to an article he had written before the war, lines which were significant for the aesthetic mutations taking place at the time. Although various derivatives of the word vision increasingly infiltrated specialized discourse, this was not, of course, due to a sudden discovery of the eye – the awareness of theatre being performed in space had always existed with its well-determined aesthetics and practical difficulties –, but rather it was due to the issue being discussed in different theoretical and aesthetic terms, particularly owing to symbolism and, later, to expressionism.

²² *Expressionism in theatre*.

²³ *Contemporary social theatre*.

²⁴ I.M. Sadoveanu, "Răstălmăcire," *Revista vremii*, no. 4, (December 11, 1921).

²⁵ T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu, "Repertoriul," *Revista critică*, no. 9, (November 30, 1918).

²⁶ See the footnote signed by T.V., *Literatorul*, no. 16, (October 5, 1918).

²⁷ T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu, "Stilizarea scenei," *Revista critică*, no. 14, (January 4, 1919).

A new importance was being conferred to the visual, which had a new purpose, and which was viewed from a new aesthetic perspective, to the mediated relations of the visual with the word and with the auditory elements of the play. A distinction was made between “literary theatre,” which focused on creating dramatic characters through words, and “theatre proper,” (or, as it was initially referred to, theatrical theatre) which took as its main objective the creation of a sensation of art by visually satisfying the viewer. Storytelling and plot, the attitude, gestures, movements, and the dance of the actors were used for this purpose. Not only in the latter case, but also in literary theatre, the visual had to exist in the text in a latent form, and was thereby a primordial condition for theatre²⁸.

If before the war one of the critiques against performances was that, in the abundance of their scenic décor, they offered more to the eye than to the soul, which was actually a defence of literary theatre, as well as a reaction against the excess of naturalist décor and costumes, emphasis was now placed on the possible correspondences between the plastic, sensorial concrete, and feelings or ideas, but also on the control of the trajectory between the viewer’s visual perception and their emotion.



Fig. 4: Claudia Millian and her husband, the poet Ion Minulescu

²⁸ T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu, “Teatrul propriuzis,” *Revista critică*, no.6, November 9, 1918.

As before the war – when T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu directed only briefly and without consequences – the latter remained an adept of stylization, a means of expression which overcame naturalism, could outline a significant detail and enhance the suggestive nature of the performance. Stylization – seen as synthesis and suggestion – was initially applied within the sphere of verisimilitude and was used in mimetic productions. It was achieved through purification, through the conjoining and distancing of elements strictly necessary in order to indicate the time and the place, to transmit a feeling or idea. In modern theatre, drama would be defined by Busuioceanu not only through the desire to achieve objectivity, but also through the seizing of expressive possibilities specific to theatre: such as the motion of a gesture, the suddenness of an image or the suggestion of a word spoken in a particular décor and with a certain attitude²⁹.

Compared to T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu's understanding of scenic expressivity as an ensemble of characteristic, suggestive elements put forward by the various arts that are joined in a complex performance, Claudia Millian (who also signed as Dim. Șerban) problematized the criteria of a theatrical synthesis and transfiguration. As such, what T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu saw as synecdoche and metonymy, Claudia Millian saw as metaphor and symbol. The descriptions she often used in her articles were designed to communicate a scenic vision, which she dearly appreciated, as in the staging of Maeterlinck's play *Monna Vanna*: "a tent in yellow and black stripes supported by poles covered in cuirasses and war masks, a bed with wild furs, a candleholder with four yellow candlesticks and a table with Prinzivalle's helmet, behold the tent which dawned over the blue visage of the Pisa river... Grand and simple, this is the desired synthesis." (my translation)³⁰ The criteria seem to be intrinsic to the performance, derived from the necessities of the vision and of the composition, as she argued that what theatrical décor needed was a synthesis emerging from within one's mind³¹. Although the criteria proposed by Claudia Millian obviously echoed theories and aesthetic aims of artists like Craig or Appia, of French symbolist theatre, of Russian scenographers (Bakst) or Dalcroze's rhythm studies, they deserve to be taken into consideration for this moment in the evolution of our theatre. Thus, harmony was the correspondence

²⁹ Al. Al. Busuioceanu, "Patetism și dramatism," *Revista critică*, no. 16, (January 25, 1919).

³⁰ Claudia Millian, "Săptămîna teatrală," *Viitorul*, no. 3580, (January 21, 1920).

³¹ Claudia Millian, "Săptămîna teatrală," *Viitorul*, no. 3746, (September 14, 1920).

between the various visually represented elements of a play³², among which the human being (the actor), with their plastic and dynamic qualities, played a chief role as the generator and coordinator of all others, since it was from the movement of their costume and its proportions that one could arrive at the musical harmony which ought to have been suggested by the production³³. Rhythm existed as a harmonic pulse on a stage whose expressivity could only be dynamic, as movement impressed on character and spirit. The scenic vitality was an elaborate one, as a consequence of pondered proportions and emphases, of movement and of the interference between elements determined by schemes established both by sensibility and intelligence. The visual of the performance was always monitored and defended in Claudia Millian's articles, as well as imaginatively affirmed (by the poetess), with refined suggestions³⁴.



Fig. 5: Al. Davila and I.L. Caragiale, famous writers and directors of the National Theatre in Bucharest (1910)

³² Claudia Millian, "Săptămîna teatrală," *Viitorul*, no. 3586, (January 28, 1920).

³³ Claudia Millian, "Săptămîna teatrală," *Viitorul*, no. 3746, (September 14, 1920).

³⁴ Such as when she describes the costume: "Clothing is evocative and may still be eloquent (...). I see drama played in velvet: velvet has the gloss of a stone after a rain, seemingly carrying tears in folds. Comedy breaks out in muslin, light as a breeze that pushes the leaves to aside in order to glimpse the buds. Lyricism covers itself in rustling silk, like rumours of love. Here, colours are feint like pastel, in comedy, live as watercolour, in drama, pasty as oil painting, in tragedy, sinister as drawing with charcoal." (my translation; "Săptămîna teatrală," *Viitorul*, no. 3758, (September 28, 1920); republished with modifications with the title "Ritmul și armonia în teatru," *Rampa*, no. 1215, (November 14, 1921).

The writer Victor Eftimiu led the National Theatre in Bucharest from August 1920 to December 1921. During the usual inaugural press conference, as well as during interviews recorded on different occasions, V. Eftimiu expressed his determination to introduce new, original plays in the theatre's repertoire (by Ion Minulescu or Ștefan Petică), alongside those of the great world playwrights (from Shakespeare – who was thought to be the pedestal of the company –, Molière, Beaumarchais, Schiller, Goethe, and Gogol to Ibsen, Strindberg, and Gorki). He was also resolved to transform the existent manner of interpretation, then characterized by the slow tempo of the actors' speech, long pauses between lines, lagging action, and interminable intermissions³⁵.



Fig. 6: The National Theatre in Bucharest before its destruction in 1944

Some expressed their reluctance regarding the possibility to accomplish such a gigantic programme (B. Fundoianu), while others saluted him with optimism (Alex. Kirișescu³⁶). When it came to deeds, the new director would look to put into practice his ideas about the theatre “of tomorrow: he preferred to present for the first time the plays *Bătrînul* by H. Papadat-Bengescu and *Sonata umbrelor* by A. Dominic, he brought Camil Petrescu's *Suflete tari* to the attention of the theatre committee (staged after his departure), and he was

³⁵ Victor Eftimiu, “D. V. Eftimiu de vrobă cu cronicarii dramatici,” *Rampa*, no. 859, (September 5, 1920).

³⁶ Alex. Kirișescu, “Victor Eftimiu deschide întâia sa stagiune,” *Rampa*, no. 858, (September 4, 1920).

tempted by the poetic essence of certain texts like Hofmannsthal's *Electra*, Morselli's *Glauco*, and I. Minulescu's *Pleacă berzele*. Overall, considering the short duration of his directorship, V. Eftimiu kept his promises: the theatre's advertisements announce – in addition to the above-mentioned plays – plays by V. Alecsandri, Caragiale, Delavrancea, Hasdeu, A. Davila, but also Ibsen, Strindberg, and Björson... The “pedestal” of the company is, indeed, Shakespeare, with plays such as *Hamlet*, *King Lear* or *As You Like It*, as well as preparations for *Macbeth*... As he had declared, Eftimiu did not neglect issues of staging, and showed initiative in the support of young directors and scenographers like Victor D. Bumbęști and Traian Cornescu, in collaborations with the Russian scenographer G. Pojedaëff and in an invitation for the German expressionist director Karl Heinz Martin to work in our country. The experience of foreign theatres was studied first-hand. Director V. Enescu was sent to Berlin, where he was preoccupied especially with stage technologies (the Schwab illumination system – above the Fortuny cupola -, the gliding stage for rapid changes in décor)³⁷. There were many, including Liviu Rebreanu, who objected to Victor Eftimiu's preoccupations with staging, which were obvious in the pages of the journal *Revista Teatrului Național*, published in September 1921. Notes signed *e.*, possibly by Eftimiu, appeared in the latter in order to expound on the development of the director's art, thanks to Antoine, Gémier, Copeau, Craig, Stanislavski, and Reinhardt, without omitting the contribution of our own theatre experts: A. Davila, Nottara, Paul Gusty, and T. Simionescu Rîmniceanu.

The very manner in which Eftimiu attempted to respond to the issues that tormented Romanian theatre at the time was criticized. His was a directorship agitated by initiatives and events, featuring many premieres that were eagerly expected, and that often constituted motives for controversy and heated disputes. The premiere of the play *Bătrînul* by H. Papadat-Bengescu

³⁷ Accomplishing the aesthetic requirements of a performance is understood as dependent on the stage architecture and technologies. A Davila described a stage with depth, formed of three floors that would replace one another through electric power, which he had projected approximately 12 years ago, in order to replace the deficient fixed stage [“A douăsprezecea scrisoare către actorul X,” *Rampa*, no. 439, (March 13, 1919)]. The transformations in stage technology pursued by V. Eftimiu would spread: the theatre company Bulandra would also announce the extension in depth of the stage; more specifically, they would build a fixed, arched cupola, which extended itself about halfway down the sides and height of the stage; they would also forfeit the circular sky due to creases in the canvas which were unable to provide a complete illusion; part of the backstage and upper booths were destroyed as well [*Rampa*, no. 1106, (July 7, 1921)].

(March 1921) caused one such dispute, which would involve all theatre critics, the most diverse competences, as well as the most amusing incompetence. It constituted an occasion to discuss the very nature of theatre: was *Bătrînul* a play? For Minulescu, it was not: it was a nuvella with beautiful dialogue, but insufficiently theatrical, and deficient in technique³⁸.

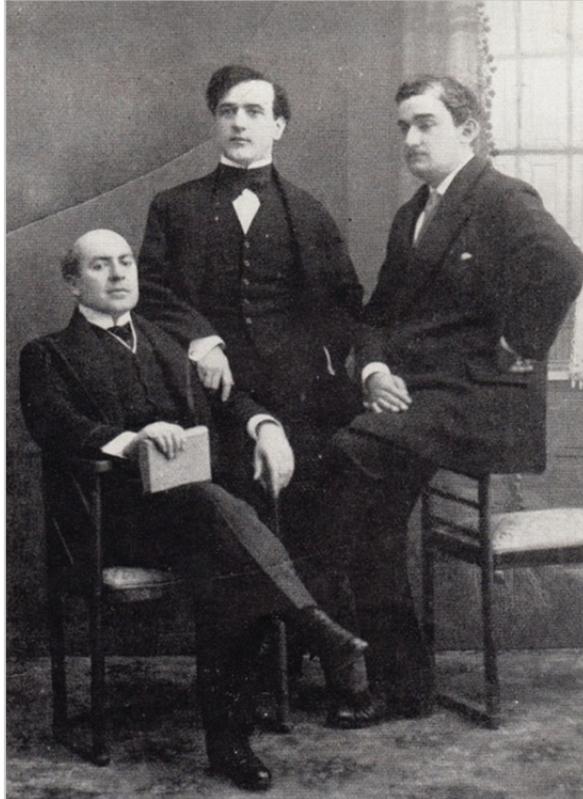


Fig. 7: Cincinat Pavelescu, Victor Eftimiu and Eugen Lovinescu, photo by Foto-Splendid, N. Buzdugan, Bucharest, Horia Petra Petrescu collection

But for Eugen Lovinescu, it was a distinguished accomplishment, which ought to have been appreciated for what it was, without being subjected to rules and models. Alex. Cătălin accused it of falsity and claimed

³⁸ Ion Minulescu, "Cronica dramatică," *Romania noua*, no. 51, (March 7, 1921).

that it lacked psychological motive, but the same Eugen Lovinescu, its most ardent defender, considered it to be a creation with a deep interior life. Eman. Cerbu saw it as a work that affirmed the “rights of fantasy,” but not entirely so, because it did not reach, as he would have liked, a complete renunciation of space and time³⁹. Lovinescu, on the other hand, appreciated (not far from Busuioceanu’s objective drama) that *Bătrînul* defeated the incantation of subjective inspiration⁴⁰, so that even in the absence of a dramatic solution, there existed the solution of life, which itself was broken, twisted and repeated indefinitely⁴¹. Beyond the rightfulness of one opinion or another, what succeeded in the debate was a sensibility more receptive towards the phenomenon of the theatre. Neither Hafmannsthal’s *Electra* (April 1921), nor Morselli’s *Glauco* (December 1921) were plays conceived by technicians, but rather texts written by poets, which was confusing for some – the sources of certain poetic performances (directed by V. D. Bumbesti) that insist upon the rhythm and plastics of interpretation in a surprising, unusual scenography (by Pojedaeff, in the first case; by Traian Cornescu, in the second). The uncertainty and mixture of styles, the imperfections and the dissonances were those inherent to a lack of experience and a struggle for aesthetic renewal. But uncertainty also came from certain critics who, confronted with these plays, inadequately used criteria of naturalist or traditionally psychological theatre, were misinformed or, worse, misinformed regarding the trends and movements of modern art.

Through its purpose and what it brought to the stage, the directorship of Victor Eftimiu meant an addition of creative experience, which resulted in a necessary impetus for criticism: “The obligation of intellectuals – as many as there may be in our country – is not to mock trends towards the new and innovative. On the contrary, it is to support them. They are the only missionaries of culture and they have this imperious obligation... to cultivate themselves more carefully in the spirit of the times.”⁴² In the following years of the avant-garde, with the help of B. Fundoianu and I. M. Sadoveanu, who would evoke and underline the significance of the suggestive, moving plastics of its accomplished poetic performances, the short directorship described above would become a memorable, significant moment.

³⁹ Eman. Cerbu, “Drepturile fanteziei,” *Rampa*, no. 1016, (March 16, 1921).

⁴⁰ Eugen Lovinescu, “Bătrînul,” II, *Sburătorul* year 1, no. 51, (May 1, 1920).

⁴¹ Eugen Lovinescu, “Bătrînul,” II, *Sburătorul* year 2, no. 46, (March 26, 1921).

⁴² Eman. Cerbu, “Teatrul viitorului,” *Rampa*, no. 1265, (January 14, 1922).

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