

The Theatre of Cruelty and the Drama of the 1950s*

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Abstract:

The stage of the '50s brings a new aesthetic attitude, initially perceived as a threat to the theatre itself. Many voices talked about the *death of representation*, about *final aesthetics*, but time has proved that it was merely an effort to adapt the art of performance to the demands of contemporary society. The idea of cruelty in the theatre, stated by Antonin Artaud and transformed into aesthetics by the playwrights of the 1950s, means not only the necessity of the shock effect of the new theatre in order to make a real connection with the audience, as it often appears in literary criticism, but also understanding theatre as the theatre of life, as an essential form of knowledge.

Keywords: drama, aesthetics, experimental theatre, Artaud, performance, absurd

At the beginning of the 1950s, the Parisian scene – taken as a landmark of dramatic modernism – presents some fundamental directions: alongside the entertainment plays in this period, *philosophical plays* (Sartre, Camus), *literary plays* developed in line with symbolism (C Claudel, Anouilh, Giraudoux), *ideological plays*, politically committed (Brecht), *avant-garde* or *experimental plays* (Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov, Genet) are being staged. E. Jacquart suggests „two rival innovative trends” (1998: 22) in the theatre of the 50s: on the one hand, the drama of Brechtian inspiration, characterized by the socio-political commitment, and on the other, the theatre of derision, focusing on the human condition – represented by Ionesco and Beckett¹.

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¹ Among the fundamental features of the two directions, Jacquart highlights, on the one hand, the techniques used in the drama of Brechtian inspiration, broadly considered as socio-politically oriented parables, namely: distance, discontinuity, street scenes and construction based on an implicit demonstration, and on the other hand, the tragic-comical profoundness of the human condition, the ontological absurdity, the transhistorical character, the archetype, the timeless and universal, specific to the theatre of derision (1998: 23).

We may organise the picture of the main dramaturgical directions in the early 1950s through a pyramidal structure, starting from its base with the most accessible form, and thus the most frequented in terms of number of spectators, to the top of the pyramid, where, we believe, one may find the least accessible, sometimes simply shocking, damaging the comfort and dignity of the audience²:

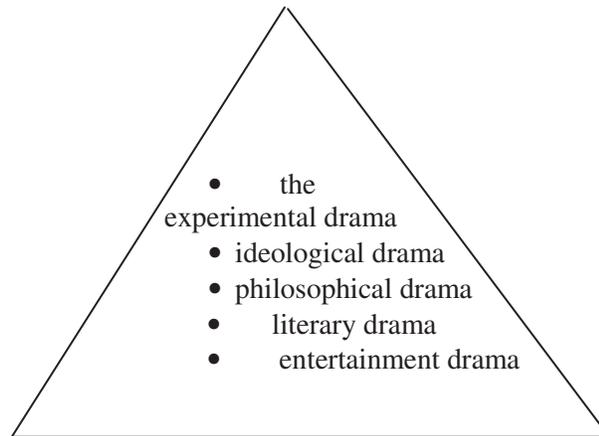


Fig 1. Dramaturgic directions in the early 1950s

Of course, by altering all the dramatic categories known, the experimental theatre – which encompasses in our opinion the dramaturgy of derision or absurd – was perceived as a threat to the theatre itself. Many voices have rushed to talk about the death of representation, but time has proven that it the new playwrights were merely trying to harmonise the art of representation with the requirements of the contemporary society because, as R. Abirached points out, the ambition of the new theatre

[...] does not proceed from the perverse or innocent desire to assassinate the theatre: on the contrary, it is an almost desperate attempt – the last of this kind we know – to restore the mimesis in an acceptable manner for modern industrial society (1994: 389).

Three dramaturgical theories

The new theatre is closely related to some revolutionary theoretical works in the field of performing arts. Even though authors such as V.

² We chose here the label of *experimental theatre*, a term that L.C. Pronko coined in order to identify the dramatic avant-garde of the 1950s, which would encompass the theatre of the absurd, but without being limited to it.

Meyerhold, A. Appia, F. Dürrenmatt, or K. Stanislavski³ – whose influence in modern theatre is undisputed – are rarely mentioned when it comes to the 1950s drama, three names obsessively reoccur in the literary criticism⁴ interested in dramatic avant-garde, namely Gordon Craig, Bertoldt Brecht and Antonin Artaud respectively.

G. Craig is probably the most radical of the theorists of the new theatre, but also the one whose ideas reverberated less – compared to Artaud or Brecht – on a stage that was not prepared for the instantiation ambitions of the author of *The Actor and the Uber-Marionette*. According to him, the actor is stripped of the coat of interpretation, evolving into what Craig calls the Uber-Marionette, an abstraction that goes beyond the boundaries of the human element on the stage. The human body is incapable of serving artistic interests, and the actor must become a puppet for the director, the latter being “the only one able to guide his movement” (Crisan: 40–42). Obsessed with the animated-unanimated dichotomy as a key issue of the future of the performance, Craig basically flinches in favour of the latter because unanimated matter is capable of “living under the action of a force beyond the human, of a power beyond the world of men” (Borie: 2007: 357).

According to S. Crişan, Craig’s contributions to the art of performance are much more numerous:

[...] he moved the emphasis on “shapes” and volumes; he modelled the image of the stage through light and movement, but this time, focusing on the forms in an original manner; has removed the painted props; not least, the directorial design occupied a central position in the performance (2004: 41).

The radicalization of the critical discourse on the theatre overshadowed the influence of the English theorist, maybe because the world of drama was not ready for his ideas. Indeed, his conception of “an invariable, immutable game, a sacred game, immense in terms of duration (one week, a month, a year), which might even lack text, even words” (Borie, 2007: 254) exceeded the receptive abilities of the

³ If we were to mention here only one of these names, director and designer Adolph Appia is among the first to notice the need for verbal language to become subordinated to visual signs. Sorin Crişan mentions the *living space* that Appia wanted to materialize on stage, taking into account some revolutionary concepts that the Swiss author formulates, such as the importance of involving the audience, accelerating the performance through music and gestures, the study of the geometry of the décor, because the “theatre is not a synthesis of arts, but the *meeting point* [...] of those elements – acting, music, props, language – which, through their ability to symbolize, satisfy the needs of a moving and living art” (2004: 37).

⁴ We mention, among others, pe G. Serreau (1966), M. Esslin (1970), R. Abirached (1994), E. Jacquart (1998), N. Balotă (2000), D. Comloşan (2001).

audience and the critique alike, as well as the technical possibilities of the art of representation at the beginning of the 20th century.

B. Brecht is the first theorist to speak of a non-Aristotelian theatre, thus marking the break with the traditional drama. However, as compared to the other authors mentioned in this study, the German author remains the closest to the realistic dramatic doctrine, it is true, a realism stemming from the convergence of social realities and the reality mediated by the author's consciousness.

Brecht's influence among his contemporaries, though more obvious on the leftist intellectuals, remains a landmark in modern theatre. Unlike Jarry and afterwards Artaud or Ionesco⁵, Brecht is a supporter of the participation of the audience by isolating the spectator from the performance in the sense of objectivity, of the lucidity that he must preserve in order to decode the message represented on stage.

Convinced of the necessity to "treat contemporary themes in a contemporary form", Brecht notes that it is "vital for the theatre to experiment in this direction"⁶. Brecht's style, as Max Schroeder notices, also includes words, music and images, trying – by what he himself calls epic theatre or didactic plays – to "engender a new encounter with the audience"⁷, in other words to achieve a new sensibility that could reverberate with the expectations of the modern spectator.

A. Artaud calls for a return to origins, a search for those fundamental aesthetic principles that would allow a reorganization of the *dramatic organism*, that is, the return to an "ancient, effective and effective practice of signs" (2004: 5) that Monique Borie mentions in her study on Artaudian work. In Artaud's opinion, the theatre is haunted by its double, that is, by an indescribable force triggered at the moment of representation.

The French theorist and theatre man expresses his preference for an exacerbated experience, for *feeling*, perceived not necessarily in opposition to the Cartesian *cogito*, but as a form of profound knowledge of a continually transforming world that cannot always be ordered according to exact logical principles: "We want to make the theatre a reality in which we can believe and which could present, for heart and senses, the concrete bite that every true sensation implies" (Artaud: 131).

Under the influence of psychoanalysis, Artaud calls for the use of oneirism and subconsciousness in the "subjectivization process" that

⁵ For the authors quoted, the participation of the audience is *affectively* translated, through the exacerbation of feelings, as a genuine and unmediated form of knowledge.

⁶ From Ernst Schumacher's notes, a close friend and commentator of Brecht's work, in *He will remain*, published in Hubert Witt (ed.), *Brecht As They Knew Him*, p. 223.

⁷ Max Schroeder, *Brecht's Stage Style*, quoted in Hubert Witt, *Brecht As They Knew Him*, p. 116.

creation implies, because “the world of the theatre originates in the author’s self, not so much in the consciousness, but in the subconscious” (Comloşan: 45).

The idea of cruelty in the theatre, transformed into aesthetics by the new generations of playwrights, means not only the necessity of the shock effect of the new theatre in order to make a real connection with the audience, as it is often stated in literary criticism, but rather the understanding of theatre as “theatre of life”⁸, as an essential form of knowledge, that is, the theatre “[...] is the revelation, the progress, the outward flow of a latent supply of cruelty by which all the perverse possibilities of the spirit are placed on an individual or group” (Artaud: 44).

Therefore, the theatre will have to abandon the old ambition of representing a literary text, aspiring towards an independent existence of the performance, that convergence between *l’en-soi* (self) and *pour-soi* (for oneself) that Sartre mentions and which implies nothing more or less than establishing an equivalence between theatre and life.

The dramatic language undergoes significant mutations in Artaud’s vision, which by trying to take away theatre from the “all-powerful primordial logos” (Derrida: 281), changes the centre of gravity of drama from text to performance, to the theatricality understood as the sum of “various languages present on stage”. (Comloşan: 61).

The theatre of cruelty claimed by Artaud does not mean representation, as Jacques Derrida notices, but “life itself in what life has unrepresentable” (1967: 343), that is, a definitive distance from the imitative conception of art.

Debut, reactions, consecration

Although the “adventure” of the new theatre seems to begin in 1950, when Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* shares the headlining at Noctambules with Adamov’s *Invasion*, Brecht’s *The Exception and the Rule* or Boris Vian’s *L’Équarrissage pour tous* (*Slaughter for Everyone*), a few years before, the Parisian stage began to be shaken by the attempts, considered marginal and purely experimental – what a mistake!⁹ – of the young generation of playwrights. Audiberti had been played since 1946, Jean

⁸ Artaud himself establishes the semantic boundaries of the term used: “I use the word *cruelty* in the sense of lust for life, of cosmic rigor and of implacable necessity, in the gnostic sense of life-waving, devouring the darkness” (Artaud: 156).

⁹ It would suffice to recall in this respect one of the polemics against E. Ionesco, published by R. Kemp in *Le Monde* on October 18, 1955: “Mr. Ionesco is a guy like Alfred Jarry. Mr. Ionesco, is in the eyes of a small, very small group, a kind of *libertador*, a sort of Bolivar of the theatre ... He should keep this flattering illusion to himself. He’s just a small “curiosity” of today’s theatre.” (E. Jacquart: 36).

Tardieu had been writing since 1947, and Brecht sets up *Mutter Courage*, which he presents in Paris in 1949.

The literary or philosophical theatre, innovating at different levels but still true to the traditional mimetic model, dominates the proscenium of the early 50s: Giraudoux, Sartre, Camus, Arthur Miller, Anouilh, Ugo Betti, Tennessee Williams or Montherlant are in a blaze of glory.

Despite the controversy surrounding his plays, Beckett keeps silent; he will only think he owes some explanations many years later. The author of *No*, on the other hand, cannot repress his *taste for contradiction*. The dialogue published on the pages of the *Observer* weekly between Ionesco and Kenneth Tynan remains famous, a controversy in which Philip Toynbee and Orson Welles were drawn as well, and of which we only reproduce here the end of Kenneth Tynan's article of 22 June 1958: "Mr. Ionesco's theatre is spicy, exciting; but he remains a marginal entertainment. He's not on the highway and we're not doing any service to him or the theatre, if we pretend he is" (Ionesco, 2002: 132).

The new writers' defiant attitude soon brought them a negative reputation. What some have called "nihilism" or "attempt to assassinate the theatre" was, in fact, a legitimate desire to align the theatre with the imperatives of the modern times that, not by eliminating mimesis, but by finding a new type of mimesis or, as M. Esslin rightly states, the absurd theatre "does not reflect despair, nor return to the obscure forces of the irrational, but expresses man's efforts to adapt to the world in which he lives" (1969: 67).

Certainly, the new playwrights have also enjoyed support from well-known theatre people such as Vilar, up-and-coming names such as Roger Blin or Jean-Marie Serreau, or influential writers such as André Gide, Georges Bataille, Anouilh or André Breton (Jacquart: 24).

In the years to come, the opponents of the new theatre will have to recognize themselves defeated, but not without a fight: *The Chairs* is staged in 1952, and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* clearly show in 1953 that this is no longer a "literary fashion, but a new dramatic aesthetics, which may not satisfy the taste of the majority, but which can no longer be ignored. As E. Jacquart notes, the resistance to the new type of theatre is natural: "This theatre disturbed the acquired habits, ignored the recognized values, questioned our culture. Controversies followed, people talked of folly, mystification, and decadence" (1998: 23).

The reception, first of all, of the Ionesquian work in our country, from the moment of its appearance until the end of the ninth decade, is placed under the sign of the "Marxist criticism" (Mocuta: 19), as it could easily be expected. The hatred of the playwright for ideologies of

any kind did not obviously bring him much popularity among the representatives of the communist regime¹⁰.

If, in Beckett's case, the Romanian criticism does not exhibit major divergences, of course, apart from the aesthetic judgments, Ionesco's situation is much more complex because of the positions assumed by each critic, depending on the observance of one of the three hypostases of reception: Ionesco – a Romanian writer, a French writer, or an intermediary of the Romanian culture and French culture. (Mocuța: 19). Thus, issues such as the author's literary period in Romanian, influences from the Romanian literature on the playwright's work (especially Caragiale and Urmuz) become interesting, as well as Ionesco's bilingualism or the ideological reception of his work (Mocuta: 20-21). Let us not forget that Ionesco was challenged at home by important names in Romanian literary criticism. G. Călinescu, who in 1941, in the *History of Romanian Literature*, characterized E. Ionesco as a young "polemist talent, with an alert phrase" (1941: 831) who seemed to promise, almost destroyed him in an article published in *Contimporanul* (*The Contemporary*) in 1958. Here, the critic denounces "Eugen Ionescu's buffoonery", the *Bald Soprano* is pure "dementia," in *The Lesson*, the playwright cannot "translate ideas into concrete forms of life," and *Jack or the Submission* is "inaccessible to a normal mind"¹¹. In the past two decades, the interest of literary criticism for E. Ionesco and implicitly for the dramaturgy of the absurd experienced a real explosion, as if to recover the lost time and to return to Romanian literature a memorable page of its history of dramaturgy that censorship had unjustly minimized.

¹⁰ Professor Cornel Ungureanu summarises the playwright's reception during the communist period: At the beginning of the sixties, when the bans on Eugen Ionesco began to disappear in Romania, the criticism mostly made of well-chosen people was based on the fact that the playwright was a consistent anti-Nazi fighter. The great playwright, said officials who legitimized translations, writes plays belonging to the fighting arsenal of European democracy. Ionescu is a citizen climbing on the barricades they were climbing themselves, the beautiful men of the post-Stalinist left.

The playwright has declined the honour, the East weakened the ovations, and later put him once more under the ban. Not everywhere, though. In Romania of the eighties, any word that reminded him was well guarded by the censorship aces. Rather than an anti-communist, anti-Ceausescu Ionescu, better none at all. C. Ungureanu (1995). *West of Eden. An introduction to exile literature*. Timișoara, Ed. Amarcord, quoted in Mocuța: 21–22.

¹¹ The mistake of the great critic is repeated, among others, by Radu Lupan and G. Ibraileanu, who recognize the value of the playwright but accuse the capitalist ideology of his work (Mocuța: 31–4).

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