

ECHOES OF GORDON CRAIG IN THE ROMANIA OF THE 1930s AND 40s

LILIANA ALEXANDRESCU*

Abstract

Europe between the two world wars was marked by contradictions and intense quests. In the world that emerged from the first global conflagration, Romania found itself at the border zone between the new post-revolutionary Soviet state, with its growing totalitarian character, and the old Western democracies undermined by new totalitarianisms. As much from the territorial point of view as from that of ideologies, Romania is a place of meeting and confrontation between different currents and ideas, and different social and esthetical models, in the exploration of which Romanian intellectuals, artists, and writers become fervently involved. Traveling and reading bring them close to the inciting artistic life of the great cultural capitals of Europe: Rome, Paris, Berlin on the one hand, Moscow or Leningrad on the other. In theatre, to Stanislavski's theories, already known from before the war, is now added the discovery of Meyerhold's, Vakhtangov's or Tairov's experiments, combined with the fascination inspired by the stage accomplishments of Max Reinhardt, Copeau, Bragaglia, Piscator or Karl Heinz Martin. Towering above all, however, at the crossroads of several ways, is the tall, prophetic figure of Craig, "the instigator" of numerous stage creations everywhere in the world. Craig's theories were circulated in various Romanian periodicals in more or less fragmentary form, as examples of innovative theatrical vision, but they also became the object of keen analysis. This paper traces the echoes of Craig's conception among Romanian theatre thinkers and practitioners.

Keywords: theatre theory and esthetics, interbellum Romania, mask and Über-Marionette, Camil Petrescu, Haig Acterian, Dragoș Protopopescu, George Mihail Zamfirescu, Ion Sava.

In 1933, in a novel which was to become a pinnacle of modern Romanian literature, *Patul lui Procust* [Procrustes Bed] by Camil Petrescu, one of the characters writes the following letter to the woman he loves (an actress), inviting her to go with him to a lecture: "Dearest, ... We've decided to make a theatre group, we'll call it 'Proscenium'. A young director, who studied in Berlin with Karl Heinz Martin, will do the mise-en-scène. Before the play we will hold lectures explaining what we want. There are great hopes that we will completely revolutionize outdated Romanian theatre, which still holds onto cheap, vulgar forms. The first play we'll do, will be Tolstoy's *Resurrection*, in a single stage setting, with modernist lighting and props... One of our best-known authorities will speak on Tolstoy and Gordon Craig's directing... The hall will be decorated in gray curtains and the stage transformed".¹ Thus, even in those days, Craig was well enough known to the Romanian public to be included in a fictional text as a point of reference and element of seduction. One should also note the rearrangement of the hall and stage and the role of light, in Craig's spirit.

A novelist, a playwright (he wrote 11 plays, among which *Danton* in 1925), a brilliant essayist, critic and reviewer, at one point director of the National Theatre, **Camil Petrescu** (1891–1957) had a true passion for theatre and for stage acting, being always preoccupied by the theory and practice of theatre (in 1945 he began a course of experimental directing). "Infected by the footlights virus" (as a historiographer said of

* Liliana Alexandrescu is a theatre researcher and stage director settled in Amsterdam, The Netherlands. E-mail address: alexandrescu@planet.nl.

¹ Camil Petrescu, *Patul lui Procust*, București, 1978, p. 146. All quotations from Romanian authors were translated in English by Cornelia Golna.

him), an obsessive “seeker of truth,” Camil Petrescu aspired to “discern in theatre implications tangential to philosophy”.² This need to penetrate into the most hidden substance of a phenomenon, to explore its very essence, predisposed him from the beginning to be sensitive to an approach like that of Craig. In 1937, in his volume, *Modalitatea estetică a teatrului. Principalele concepte despre reprezentarea dramatică și critica lor* [The modality of esthetics of theatre. The principal concepts of dramatic representation and their criticism], Camil Petrescu makes a detailed and passionate analysis of Gordon Craig’s theories, which he considered, in connection with the theatre of the future, as “messianic proposals”.³ This qualifier comes back several times throughout the book (“messianic directing,” on p. 111, “messianic conception,” on p. 108), constantly emphasizing “the importance of this prophetic animator,” which was overwhelming: “all today’s live theatre is under his influence”.⁴ In Chapter IV of the book, called “Libertate și creație” [Freedom and creation], the first sub-section, dominating the entire volume like a keystone, is dedicated to Craig. A truly new concept and consequently a truly new technique in theatre, states Camil Petrescu, “we will find only in Gordon Craig, with whom starts theatre that can truly be called revolutionary,” theatre which would manifest itself “imperiously, with a kind of artistic virulence which is totally unique,” in the years after the war.⁵ Reviewing Craig’s ideas (about the actor, the Über-Marionette, mask, decor, etc.), after he examines the critical aspect of his thinking, “the negative definition of theatre,” attempting nevertheless to give structure to the elements of a future theatre in Craig’s vision, Camil Petrescu finds that “he has at the base the idea of movement, with a kind of striving toward the absolute”.⁶ Finally, after he has eliminated the author, the actor, the painter, and the musician as determining factors of the stage, Gordon Craig recognizes the action of the *director* as the essential function: a decisive idea for the future destiny of theatre. One can say, concludes Camil, that “stage direction exists as an art conscious of its significance since Gordon Craig”.⁷

In this entire presentation, Camil Petrescu followed his hero step by step, carefully walking in his tracks, alternating his own commentary with frequent quotes from *On the Art of the Theatre* (Camil used the French edition of Craig: *De l’art du théâtre*, Paris, Editions de la N.R.F., 1920, translated by Geneviève Seligmann and with an introduction by Jacques Rouché). The style of the book itself, he thought, was more the “breath of a prophetic striving, whose thirst for renewal is greater than the capacity to define theoretical form. Gordon Craig seems a distant disciple of Plato’s”, the core of his book consisting of more than 100 pages of Socratic dialog. And the great prose writer, Camil Petrescu, cannot refrain from paying homage to the poetic ardor, to Gordon Craig’s “intensely temperamental” style, explaining in a footnote: “We felt obliged to let him speak for himself as much as possible, for perhaps the mystery of the great influence exercised by this reformer resides too in the magic, often ‘transcending’ logic, of his style, a product of the symbolist school”.⁸

The period between the two world wars, in all of Europe, is a period of contradictions and more or less extreme pursuits. In this world that has emerged from the first global conflagration, Romania finds itself at the border zone between the new post-revolutionary Soviet state to the East, with its growing totalitarian character, and the older democracies to the West, undermined by new totalitarianisms. As much from the territorial point of view as from the problematical one, Romania is a meeting place, a place of confrontation between the different currents and ideas and the different social and esthetical models, in the exploration of which Romanian intellectuals, artists, writers become fervently involved. Some of them had fought in the war and – in a sort of *Farewell to Arms* – they first settle scores with the past – as does Camil Petrescu, for example, in his novel *Ultima noapte de dragoste, întâia noapte de război* [Last night of love, first night of war] (1930). Others identify themselves, from the beginning of the 1920s, with the most radical forms of modernism: Dadaism, Futurism, Cubism, Surrealism. But whether from afar, through publications, or up close, through traveling, the inciting image of the great cultural capitals of Europe: Rome, Paris, Berlin on

² Mihai Dimiu, *Camil Petrescu și modalitatea estetică a teatrului*, in *Istoria teatrului în România* (editor: Simion Alterescu), Vol. III, București, Editura Academiei R.S.R., 1973, p. 475.

³ Camil Petrescu, *Modalitatea estetică a teatrului. Principalele concepte despre reprezentarea dramatică și critica lor*, Fundația pentru Literatură și Artă “Regele Carol II”, București, 1937, p. 140.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 95 (footnote).

the one hand, Moscow or Leningrad on the other, affects them all. In theatre, to the knowledge of Stanislavski's theories, already familiar from before the war, is now added the discovery of the experiments of Meyerhold, Vahtangov or Tairov, combined with the fascination inspired by the accomplishments on stage of a Max Reinhardt, Copeau, Bragaglia, Piscator or Karl Heinz Martin. In Bucharest (but also in other big cities in Romania), "between the two wars, life and the stage are closer than ever before: every writer, whether a poet, a prose-writer or a critic, feels tempted to write plays, theatre criticism, to be a theatre director, president of the Society of Playwrights, a member of its administrative council or of its reading committee. Writers are friends of directors and actors..."⁹

Standing at the crossroads, however, dominating the horizon, is the tall, prophetic figure of Craig, "the instigator" (to use Camil's expression) of multiple and complex stage creations everywhere in the world. Even before becoming the object of such a deep and complete analysis as that of Camil Petrescu, Craig's theories had been circulated in more or less fragmentary form, as examples of innovative theatrical thinking, in various periodical publications. In the magazine *Viața Românească* [Romanian life], issues 8–9 of 1922 (p. 182–194), **Dragoș Protopopescu** (1892–1946) – a poet, prose-writer, essayist, and also a translator of Shakespeare – published the study: "Teatrul englez de ultima oră" [The latest in English theatre], in which he spoke of Craig in connection with the British theatre of the 1920s, thus becoming one of the first commentators of his work in Romania. Likewise, in the newspaper *Vremea* [Time], there appeared a series of writings by or about the English director. In the issue of January 11, 1931, on a page dealing with problems of stage decor, Craig was quoted: "The tendency to imitate nature has nothing to do with art." On March 29, the newspaper published a text by Craig: "Despre actor" [About the Actor] (without the name of the translator), and in the following issue, of April 1931, an article of Craig's about Shakespeare's plays which, according to him, are meant "to be read, not to be staged..."

In 1938, the playwright, critic and stage director **George Mihail Zamfirescu** (1898-1939) publishes *Mărturii în contemporaneitate* [Testimonies in contemporary time], a volume comprising a collection of articles and reviews which had appeared in the press in previous years. The author, who had been a strong advocate of a new orientation in Romanian theatre, takes Craig, "this great thinker of the art of the stage, convinced that God can be known through beauty",¹⁰ as an absolute source. He finds the fact that he realized in time to allow himself to be influenced by Gordon Craig one of the merits of Max Reinhardt, who was too attracted by display on stage. Craig, G.M. Zamfirescu goes on, imposed a *style* on the art of decor: there is a shifting from color to *line*. He knows how to functionally use "the curtain in heavy folds." His decor is not a simple graphic aspect, but a material illustration of the feelings a human tragedy inspires in us: "With a single formula: *Hamlet is a spirit placed in a cold and infinite space*, Gordon Craig defined both the atmosphere of Shakespeare's work and the position which the character of the title must occupy in the ensemble of the other main characters".¹¹

In his book, G.M. Zamfirescu refers to **Haig Acterian** (1904–1943) as an authority on Craig. Indeed, we have now come to the Romanian theatre specialist who was closest to the person and activities of Gordon Craig in the mid 1930s, who knew him and became his friend, and who maintained with Craig a regular correspondence for a period of several years (between 1934 and 1937). Haig Acterian was an actor, director, essayist and theatre critic, and regularly collaborated with various newspapers and magazines (he edited the theatre page in *Vremea*). In his short life (he died on the Russian front at the age of 39) he wrote several works, among which *Pretexte pentru o dramaturgie românească* [Pretexts for a Romanian dramaturgy], with a preface by Edward Gordon Craig (1936), a book on *Shakespeare* (1938), another on *Molière* (1939–1942). In the preface to the republication of *Shakespeare* (1995), revisiting this text from more than half a century ago, Marian Popescu notes that Acterian's approach produced for the first time in Romanian culture "an *analytical vision* on the Shakespearean play, structured not so much as a literary commentary but as a *directorial* one." In answer to the question: what owes Acterian to Gordon Craig with regard to Shakespeare?, he thinks that the Romanian director and theoretician accepted Craig's "provocation" in order to offer the public, beyond a traditional reading, "a point of view on Shakespearean tragedy".¹² The friendly

⁹ Ioana Pârvulescu, *Întoarcere în Bucureștiul interbelic* [Return to the interbellum Bucharest], București, 2003, p. 121.

¹⁰ G.M. Zamfirescu, *Mărturii în contemporaneitate*, București, 1983, p. 94.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 94–95.

¹² Marian Popescu, *Înainte de cădere: Haig Acterian*. [Before the fall: Haig Acterian], in Haig Acterian, *Shakespeare*, București, 1995, p. 15.

relationship between Craig and Acterian, with its nuance of initiation from the master to the disciple, however, made itself felt differently, in a more direct and fresh manner, in the vital exchange of various letters: those of Acterian to his wife, the actress and director Marietta Sadova, those of Craig to Acterian, from Genoa and Paris. And, last but not least, in the pamphlet *Gordon Craig și ideea în teatru* [Gordon Craig and the idea in theatre] (1936), a text conceived under the Italian sky, profound and delightful in its recreation of an atmosphere and in its “portrait in motion” of Craig.

Having gone on a study trip to Vienna and Berlin (1928–1930), Acterian then travels to Italy in 1934, with the intention of becoming initiated too in the art of film directing, and takes part in the prestigious international Volta Congress in Rome, held under the auspices of the Royal Academy. Thus he has the opportunity to come into direct contact with well-known personalities such as Pirandello, Marinetti, Yeats, D’Amico, Maeterlinck, Copeau, Gerhard Hauptmann, Gropius, Tairov, and Craig. The last two are his favorites: “I have the friendship of Gordon Craig and Tairov, the greatest of the congress attendants” (Letter of October 13, 1934).¹³ References to Craig become more and more frequent in Acterian’s correspondence:

October 9, 1934. *The two of us took a walk together last evening, he with a glass in his hand, through the halls of the Farnesina and he showed me some beautiful corners of Peruzzi’s fresco.*¹⁴

October 12, 1934. *Gordon Craig is a unique example of humor and idealism; he burst out several times yesterday and today with a colossal force of British wit and intelligence.*¹⁵

October 13, 1934. *The entire congress found him entertaining; and yet, his was the noblest spirit present. He is art from head to foot.*¹⁶

November 7, 1934. *Craig has written me again. It is a tragic letter with many painful inflections.*¹⁷

November 1934. *The Craig question (I can’t give you the details, there are many) is a ball of intrigues on the part of those around the great one [Mussolini] ... Craig is a man and an artist of the kind that is born only once in a millennium...*¹⁸

January 20, 1935. *Craig has written me again, inviting me to Genoa.*¹⁹

February 1935. *Day before yesterday, I received Craig’s ‘Foreword’ for ‘Pretexts’. It is an answer of European value for universal theatre, of a unique liveliness and humor.*²⁰

1935. *I’m leaving for Genoa on February 18.*²¹

[Genoa], February 27, 1935. ... *The grass along the path is like that around an abandoned house, ankle-high. You have to climb up a mountain road past several gardens... From above, inside the workroom, you can see the sea. The three upstairs rooms are full of books – six thousand – all about theatre. Each book is bound, covered, annotated, bundled up like a baby. Hundreds of incunabula, books of an unimaginable rarity, of which there may still be two or three in the world... I will never forget this afternoon. Like a child, he showed me all of them. Last evening I got home giddy from so many parchments, drawings, memories... He wants to pick out a thousand books for himself and sell the rest. With a brilliant simplicity and modesty, he told me that he wants to have a suit made for himself and leave Italy... He is so excited by masks (he has a few incredible Japanese ones) and Siamese puppets, drawings, etc. He told me: “It would be good to have ‘On the Art of the Theatre’ translated into Romanian too, but hurry up, it had better happen soon, before I die and have to miss out on this pleasure.” He says everything so simply, and he is so calm at the thought of death... At five o’clock exactly, tea.*²²

On October 9, 1934, Haig writes to Marietta about Craig that “within one phrase he uses a French word, an Italian one, a German one, and two English. It’s as if he were Werner Krauss in *Pygmalion*. He

¹³ Haig Acterian, *Dragoste și viață în lumea teatrului* [Love and life in the theatre world], editing, foreword and notes by Arșavir Acterian, București, 1994, p. 119. The entire epistolary material is to be found at the Romanian Academy Library, at the Museum of Literature and at the Bucharest City Archives.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 129.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 150.

²¹ *Loc. cit.*

²² *Ibid.*, p. 153.

climbs on chairs, he's absent-minded... He jumps up like a youngster and yet he is an old man of more than sixty. In his fine English silhouette, I see him as an Apollo in Isadora's arms."²³ The same (one could say) histrionic tendency is found again in Craig's letters: written in English, they are amusingly speckled with phrases, expressions or words in German, French and Italian.²⁴ The forms of address themselves vary from "Dear Monsieur Acterian" or "Dear Signor Acterian", to "Dear", "Caro", or "Liebe Acterian". "Merci" is, of course, followed by "grazie", "sehr gut" by "très bien" – graceful clowning, verbal pirouettes which illustrate the colloquial, rapid, relaxed tone of these letters. In their playful alternating, miming various linguistic worlds, however, they carry within them the mark of the continental destiny of this insular artist who went into self-imposed exile and, since 1904, lived in Germany, Italy and France. On January 15, 1935, he writes to Haig Acterian: "I DON'T believe in Spanish theatre or Russian theatre – or in Romanian, Italian, or Greek theatre. BUT I believe strongly in a theatre beyond the borders."²⁵

At one point, Acterian characterizes Craig as "a superb bohemian, angry with England because it did not build him a theatre."²⁶ The search for a stable theatre location where he could try out new visions and new theatrical techniques is the reason for Craig's restless travels to Berlin or Moscow, in Holland, France or Italy: "theory in quest of practice," in the words of Irène Eynat-Confino, in her book on Craig.²⁷ In March 1934, finding himself in Rome, counting on the promises of Italian officials, he appeals to Acterian, who had just visited London: "I hope that you will know English to perfection, because if I come to work here, I hope to have you at my side."²⁸ On December 10, 1934, Haig, fascinated, writes down Craig's plans. The building: Le Corbusier. Housing: Gordon Craig. A troupe of young people. They begin in one village, move to another and, after a year of wanderings, in Rome. Repertory: Commedia dell'Arte. Craig again discusses this possible collaboration with him in January 1935: "Craig has written me again proposing that I assist him in the hard work which will be offered him in the Italian theatre. I answered him right away with enthusiasm and agreeing to do the work."²⁹ But the project fails. (In the preface to Haig Acterian's *Scrieri despre teatru* [Writings on theatre],³⁰ the critic Claudia Dimiu wonders "to what extent would Acterian's fate have been different if Edward Gordon Craig had been able to found and direct a theatre in Rome; we cannot know if, had Acterian become Craig's assistant, their relationship would have been perfect [...] It is not at all impossible that in the course of their collaboration, they would have had some serious disagreements...")

Craig, however, has an alternative in mind. He had already written to Acterian about it on February 2nd: "I would very much like for us to discuss the possibility of visiting Romania, something you mentioned sometime back; or is my visit not possible now? I would be able to come around March-April, I think... if things could be arranged."³¹ On May 13, finding himself in Vienna, he brings up the subject again, more insistently: "What more suggestions have you got in connection with Romania... did you gather the necessary information? I hope so! If you have, does this mean that you can make a serious proposal? Please, don't hesitate, tell me – whatever it might be, but as clearly as possible..."³² This project fails too. The leitmotif of a trip to Romania will persist for a time, however: "*Genoa, February 28, 1936*. The day too will come when I visit your capital... I hope you will have abundant snow on the ground and on the roofs – snow and folklore go together brilliantly – Wunderbar!!! nicht?"³³ The image of a Romania covered in snow, "under a white blanket", as in a Christmas tale, will be evoked by Craig again in January 1937. In the last letter of this epistolary cycle, sent from St. Germain-en-Laye, in the fall of 1937, Craig tells Acterian of his visit to the Romanian pavilion (probably at the International Exhibition in Paris) and declares himself

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

²⁴ Craig's letters were translated into Romanian by Mihai Mîndra and Andrei Brezianu and published for the first time in the journal *Secolul 20*, nr. 6–7/1983, p. 95–138, under the title *Gordon Craig și România. 47 scrisori inedite (1934–1937) către Haig Acterian* [Gordon Craig and Romania. 47 unpublished letters (1934–1937) to Haig Acterian]. The fragments quoted above come from this text. Original letters may be found in the Manuscript Collection of the Romanian Academy Library in Bucharest.

²⁵ *Gordon Craig și România...*, p. 112 (see note 24 above).

²⁶ Haig Acterian, *Dragoste și viață...*, p. 117.

²⁷ Irène Eynat-Confino, *Beyond the Mask. Gordon Craig, Movement and the Actor*, Carbondale and Edwardsville, Southern Illinois University Press, 1987, p. 145.

²⁸ *Gordon Craig și România...*, p. 119.

²⁹ Haig Acterian, *Dragoste și viață...*, p. 140.

³⁰ Haig Acterian, *Scrieri despre teatru*, editing, foreword and notes by Claudia Dimiu, București, 1998, p. 26.

³¹ *Gordon Craig și România...*, p. 114.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

³³ *Loc. cit.*

“enchanted” by the style and content, and by the “theatre models,” which he found good – “one very good.” And he ends with a gesture and a salute: “I raise a glass for the Little Entente and for Romania, and next to them, for Haig Acterian.”³⁴

In 1936, a year after Haig’s trip to Genoa, a small volume of 30 pages, *Gordon Craig și ideea în teatru* [Gordon Craig and the idea in theatre], “with twelve reproductions,” appeared at the Vremea Publishing House. It was divided into 4 chapters: 1. a small biographical introduction of Craig, which starts with the evocation of the maternal figure – Ellen Terry; 2. the construction of Craig’s portrait, which begins with the tutelary figure of Henry Irving and continues with the narration of Acterian’s visit to Genoa; 3. the telling of earlier episodes: the Volta Congress in Rome and the meeting with Craig; 4. a tentative conclusion which outlines Craig’s theories: “the truths, paradoxes, images, movement (*movement*, which he repeats incessantly)” and ends with the Über-Marionette (an actor “who has discovered his soul,” according to Acterian). There follows a list of Craig’s publications, and finally, 12 illustrations: 3 photographs of Gordon Craig (one of him as a young man, one with Ellen Terry, and another with him aged, in profile) and 9 reproductions of various decor sketches. One could note – and it was noted – that in this micro-monograph, the important section on Craig’s ideas in theatre remains rather summary and is reduced mainly to suggestions. The author himself felt this lack, but he justified it by pointing out the limited space allowed him by the publisher; he expresses the hope, however, that “the presentation in the present pamphlet will be a useful incentive for actors and directors to read the complete works.”³⁵ Although it does not possess the coherence and rigor, the philosophical stance of the chapter devoted to Craig a year later by Camil Petrescu in *Modalitatea estetică a teatrului* [The modality of esthetics of theatre], Haig Acterian’s text, written partially in Craig’s presence, under the direct influence of this charismatic personality, has the value of a unique human document. It is living testimony, the reliving of an experience, the transmission of a moment: tramping through Rome next to Craig, the mugs of beer drunk at midnight in a beer garden near the Piazza Colonna, endless nocturnal digressions, then the hours, the days spent in the Genoan villa on the Costa Serretto, above the sea, in Craig’s company, among old manuscripts, rare editions, masks, puppets, engraving tools... “they all appear to me as an unending journey in an unforgettable country.”³⁶ Stranded on Prospero’s island, the young disciple is seduced, enchanted by the spells of the master, whose “negativity and skepticism” are “just as constructive as his idealism”³⁷ and who can say to him, for example, unexpectedly: “I’ve believed and believe that God can be known through beauty.”³⁸ Now, more than half a century since their publication, Acterian’s stirring pages bring Craig’s complete presence back for us: “Tall, slender, with white hair, a complex of youth and maturity fixed in unshakeable idealism, intransigent in art to the complete negation of himself, Craig lights his cigar and drops into his chair... He smokes. Sips tea. Eats sweets...”³⁹ Standing, he leafs through a volume of Shakespeare, first edition. He talks about Montaigne, about Shakespearean comedy, about Hamlet, who can pretend to be melancholic and at the same time “explode with joy”.

Getting ready to go to Genoa, Haig wrote to Marietta: “I’m going to ignore all the beauty of the places around me just so I can stay with him. I won’t go anywhere, I’ll go to this library and talk with this man.”⁴⁰ He sends the book to Craig, and the latter thanks him (on September 15, 1936): “for the honor your writing it brings me and for the pleasure of knowing that a number of wonderful *Romanians* will read it”. And in the postscript he adds, with a touch of melancholy: “Write me now and then – so that I know *how you’re doing*, write me *at least* once a month; otherwise you’ll forget me.”⁴¹

After 1937, their dialogue stops. The noise of history covers their voices. At the beginning of the 1940s, on the map of Europe, one of them finds himself in the occupied France, the other in Russia, on the Eastern front. But even in Georgia, in the midst of war, Acterian’s interior demon doesn’t give him peace. In one of his last letters, he describes how, with a group of his soldiers, he organized a collective show near the

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 131.

³⁵ Haig Acterian, *Gordon Craig și ideea în teatru*, Vremea, MCMXXXVI, București [1936], p. 28, Note 13.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 15–16.

⁴⁰ Haig Acterian, *Dragoste și viață...*, p. 152.

⁴¹ *Gordon Craig și România...*, p. 128–129.

sea, in a natural amphitheater “with which old Aeschylus would have been pleased”. He falls in battle on August 8, 1943, in Cuban, 8 kilometers west of Krimskaiia.

On the evening of February 27, 1946, in Bucharest, the première took place of one of the most discussed, admired, and contested performances in the history of Romanian theatre: *Macbeth* with masks, under the direction of **Ion Sava** (1900–1947). Though performed by actors of the National Theatre, the play had been put on in the hall of the “St. Sava” high-school. Two years earlier, on August 24, 1944, the building of the National Theatre, located in the center of the city, near the Royal Palace and next to the Telephone Palace, had been destroyed by German air strike. Here, too, History had left its mark.

Originally meant for school festivities, the “St. Sava” hall had to be rearranged to meet the minimal needs of a professional theatre: the shape of the stage was modified to make it deeper, the technical apparatus enriched (several projectors had to be pulled out and recuperated from beneath the rubble of the theatre). In these conditions, the director opted for a functional scenography, of suggestion, with simple lines, starting from a primary spatial idea which could be adapted to all situations in the tragedy: a base frame in the shape of a pyramid – an obvious metaphor for Macbeth’s ascendance toward the pinnacle, toward Power. Outsized, the actors walked in buskins and wore masks that, like medieval helmets, covered their heads completely. The masks had been made by a sculptor, following Sava’s sketches and moldings. Conceived as large faces coming from a nightmarish world, they placed on each character a grotesque, distorted, malevolent stamp (not coincidentally, among the director’s favorite painters were Brueghel, Goya, James Ensor...). In explaining his choice to stage Shakespeare’s tragedy this way, Ion Sava used several arguments: first the director’s *inspiration*, the generative idea of *style* in the performance; second, the legendary character of the events evoked; then, “the richness of the world of sorcery”, the practice of black magic, spectral apparitions which give the play “a fantastic, strange, supernatural dimension”; finally, the characters in *Macbeth* are not people, they are personifications of instincts, “pulled by magic strings in a bizarre game of destiny, with previously determined, fixed, personalities, therefore *puppets*.”⁴² In his various comments on this staging – which appeared in the press either before the first night, beginning in the fall of 1945, in order to “prepare” the audience, or afterward, in 1947, in order to clarify certain misunderstandings – Sava referred several times to Craig (making use of the French version of 1920: *L’art du théâtre*, Paris, N.R.F., also quoted by Camil Petrescu, probably the only version circulating in those years among Romanian intellectuals and artists). In his book, Craig had stated as a principle: “The mask is the only right medium of portraying the expressions of the soul as shown through the expressions of the face.”⁴³ In his own text, as a practitioner of the stage and of work with actors, Sava takes up and develops this idea in total adherence to Craig: “The masks with which *Macbeth* will be staged, created by me, are no more than the dynamic expression, to the maximum degree of tension, of the respective character. They are more alive for the character than the human face of the actor because, moved, they do not evolve except around the fundamental expression. The human face, not evoking the type, and subject to infinite muscular spasms, would be unable to isolate the basic idea, would be unable – if it could isolate it – to focus constantly on it, and would be unable to eliminate from around it foreign, parasitical expressions.”⁴⁴

In the tumult caused by Sava’s “*Macbeth* with masks”, the name of Craig was invoked repeatedly by one critic or another, both for and against, in order to combat Sava or to support him. Thus, if we read in one of the negative reviews: “*Macbeth* with masks is not, in any case, an original idea of Mr. Sava’s. The first to think it was Gordon Craig...”⁴⁵, in another it is stated approvingly that the director adopted “an approach, we think, in Craig style”, starting from “Gordon Craig’s ideal of the actor as Über-Marionette.”⁴⁶

⁴² Ion Sava, *Regizorul despre spectacolul său* [The director about his production], in Virgil Petrovici: *Macbeth cu măști. Caietul unui spectacol de Ion Sava* [*Macbeth* with masks. Notebook to a production directed by Ion Sava], București, 1997, p. 173.

⁴³ Gordon Craig, *On the Art of the Theatre*, Heinemann, London, 1968, p. 13.

⁴⁴ *Regizorul despre spectacolul său*, in Virgil Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 167. It is interesting to compare this text with Irène Eynat-Confino’s commentary in the volume *Beyond the mask. Gordon Craig, Movement and the Actor*, cited above at Note 27: “The mask is, however, a deceptive vehicle: it enhances illusion while it destroys it, and by doing so it enforces the symbolic aspect of the performance; in other words, the mask is both the cover and the sign of empirical reality. It is part of the aesthetic game, while it is also a constant aside to the audience, an essential factor of distancing. For the actor, the mask is the sign of the identity of the Other...” (p. 80).

⁴⁵ *Spectacolul văzut de...* [The performance seen by...], in Virgil Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 203.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

In the spring of 1947, in reply to both his admirers and adversaries, Sava bluntly claimed again responsibility for the concept and the performance, sometimes with a prophetic tone, aiming at future developments: “The masks will cover the actors’ faces, dynamic masks, created with the aid of modern technical advancements; these masks will thus become works of art and will mark a new step toward Gordon Craig’s *Über-Marionette*.”⁴⁷ Although appreciated by many as an exceptional performance, marking a crossroads in Romanian theatre, received with enthusiasm and fervor by a great part of the intelligentsia, *Macbeth* with masks – staged despite so many material obstacles, with such spiritual devotion from the director, the actors, and the stage craftsmen – was only performed 21 times. The theatre audience in Bucharest, in the years after the war, was not very familiar with experiments and desired above all to be entertained; traditional, light theatre was preferred over stage innovations. After Sava’s premature death, *Macbeth*’s traces disappeared into various archives, which in turn were themselves scattered by natural disasters (earthquake) or historical disturbances (Romania joining the ranks of satellite states of the Soviet Union).

The posthumous fame of the performance more than compensated for its pseudo-failure at the time. Numerous researchers and specialists in theatre later examined his fugitive stage masterpiece. From among Sava’s other projects or productions, I cite: *The Merchant of Venice*, 1934; *Hamlet*, 1937; Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, 1938; *The Tidings brought to Mary* by Claudel, 1939; Cocteau’s *The Human Voice*, 1940; *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder, 1940, etc. There have been discussions of Sava’s “space of theatrical poetry”, haunted, according to his own definition, “by a caricatural and tragic vision of existence,”⁴⁸ a vision which marked alike his work as a plastic artist, as a playwright, and as a theatre director. *Macbeth* with masks has its source too in this tendency toward the tragic grotesque. “Of course, Craig’s theoretical recommendations are visible here with regard to the staging of this play and, in general, with regard to the importance of using masks in the personification of the instincts of tragedy. But here for the first time these suggestions are put into practice, through Sava’s staging, and not only because this director is aware of the multiple possibilities of artistic expression inherent in such a vision, but, more importantly, because this kind of theatre has grafted itself onto a receptive psychological structure, onto a personal philosophy of existence and art.”⁴⁹ In fact here our attention is drawn to the application, the living of a theory at a far greater depth, the infiltration of Craig’s ideas beyond the level of speech, into the creative structures themselves inside the director, into the hidden layers where future images of drama germinate.

Among the objections made against Sava’s masks was the (apparent) lack of stylistic unity. They bring to mind, variously, El Greco and Dürer, Goya and Modigliani, and even Walt Disney! – said the commentators. But one of them, the critic and art historian Petru Comarnescu, claimed a local model too: wake masks used by peasants in Nereju, a village in the Vrancea Mountains (southern Carpathians). There, in keeping with ancient funerary rituals, a group of masked individuals gather at a wake around the dead man laid out on the bier, improvising short scenes and farces before family and friends; thus, they spend with the deceased his last night on earth. Identifying a Romanian archetype in Sava’s masks, Comarnescu went even further, stating: “Ion Sava did in part what Brancusi did in sculpture: drawing upon our primitive, telluric, instinctive base, which is still very much alive in our villages.”⁵⁰ Sava’s masks in *Macbeth* therefore appear to invoke a possible ancestral dimension. Regardless of their stylistic variety, they derive, according to Ion Cazaban, from a consequent directorial idea, from a desire for “integration,” for the suppression of the distance between characters, between the dead and the living, between human beings, supernatural beings and ghosts, thus achieving, by means of masks, “a unity of stage method.”⁵¹

This peasant substratum interested Craig too, as a component of the Shakespearean universe, a zone of lyric and comic interference. This is what he said to Acterian in that unforgettable dialog in Genoa: “... I’d like a fresh country like yours, with little churches, great forests, and peasants. The countries in the West have no peasants. In England so many customs have been lost [...] English peasants who speak little, think much, who, quiet and grave, love the sun, grass, and English paths, they are the ones who move in Shakespeare’s comedy [...] Humor is born from the grave appearance of people, from the seriousness with

⁴⁷ *Regizorul despre spectacolul său*, in Virgil Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 169.

⁴⁸ *Apud* Letiția Gîță, *Ion Sava*, in *Istoria teatrului în România*, Vol. III..., p. 299.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 300.

⁵⁰ *Spectacolul văzut de: Petru Comarnescu*, in Virgil Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 208. Later Comarnescu wrote a book about the famous theatre director (*Ion Sava*, Foreword by Tudor Arghezi, București, 1966).

⁵¹ *Spectacolul văzut de: Ion Cazaban*, in Virgil Petrovici, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

which they take part in a drinking party, an adventure, a practical joke [...] Shakespearean tragedy can be interpreted in dozens of ways; I know, for example, ten ways of presenting the first scene, the witches' scene, in *Macbeth*. Shakespeare is a discontinuous tragic poet, there are parts in his tragedies that are antinomic, and nevertheless, the whole has precise coordinates. Comedy, however, belongs to the English peasant, it unfolds simply, like a song, even when it borrows from Greek mythology."⁵² Perhaps this page helps us to understand more subtly what Craig was looking for, what he hoped to find in that imaginary Romania which he had glimpsed from a distance: not only another place, but another time too, a time more primitive, closer to nature, more "naive", a mythical time in which Shakespeare's characters could still wander through the forest of Arden, and the army that had set out to punish Macbeth could hide, as it advanced, behind the branches of the Birnam wood.

(English translation from Romanian by Cornelia Golna)

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the following persons who helped me most efficiently and with good will to gather the necessary materials for this article: the theatre specialists Ion Cazaban, Claudia Dimiu and Daniela Gheorghe.

⁵² Haig Acterian, *Gordon Craig și ideea în teatru...*, p. 17–18.