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Daniel Stanciu

**TRADITIONAL AND CLASSICAL
PUPPET THEATRE**

**ORIGINS AND INFLUENCES.
A ROMANIAN PERSPECTIVE**

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***Traditional and Classical Puppet Theatre. Origins and Influences.
A Romanian Perspective***
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1. THE EVOLVING ATTITUDES TOWARDS TRADITION

In our country, there once existed a great variety of traditional forms of popular theatre, which made use either of masks or of different types of puppets and marionettes. Some of these have survived to the present day. Others have disappeared for various reasons: the replacement of ancestral beliefs with monotheistic religions, the tendency toward globalization, and the emergence of new forms of entertainment, which led to the transformation or disappearance of traditional forms of theatre.

The Age of Enlightenment accelerated this process. The development of education, as a necessity in a society ultimately aimed at controlling individuals through indoctrination, led to the devaluation of popular or folk art. It was, however, re-evaluated with the rise of Romanticism and the emergence of the bourgeois revolutionary ideals of 1848. German Romantic writers such as the Brothers Grimm, Hoffmann, Tieck, and others re-evaluated popular art. These traditions served the ideal of national independence during the revolutions of 1848. For the Brothers Grimm, fairy tales helped foster national consciousness. For other Romantic writers, puppet theatre and popular fairground theatre were admired for their ingenuous charm. German Romantics such as Hoffmann, Arnim, and Kleist approached puppet theatre with sympathy. However, it was not yet regarded as an art form. At that time, only professionals whose work was appreciated by the educated public, from *high-life*, and the nobility operated within the artistic sphere.

But the romantics, with spirit of defiance, approached the traditional forms in order to oppose the Enlightenment pragmatism with another concept, which would later form the basis for the development of modern art, being the artist who is not integrated into society, who holds personal perspectives of the world, an adversary of rationalism, the rebellious or even accursed artist. Still, most German Romantic writers reworked the material offered by tradition and did not preserve it in its original form but used it as a source of inspiration. Most of the time they realized parodies after popular or folk motives, after the model of Carlo Gozzi and of Giambattista Basile, or Straparola (as did E.T.A. Hoffman in *The Nutcracker*, Ludwig Tieck in the play of *Poos in Boots*, Clemens Bretano in his parodies inspired by the fairytales of Basile). Ludwig Tieck viewed the popular puppet theatre as a keeper of national cultural values, opposed to Classicism imported from abroad. He spoke with admiration about the puppet theatres of old Franconia and recounted a traditional performance featuring *Hans Würost*. Tieck admired the puppeteer's performance, which revealed profound artistic thought and good taste. Thanks to the Romantic writers, we know a series of traditional theatre variants, such as those described by Stendhal about marionette theatre in Italy, or Gérard de Nerval's account in *Journey to the Orient* of a Karagöz performance entitled *Karagöz, Victim of His Own Chastity*.

Also, in the contemporary world, the traditional art knows a new appreciation and is a source of inspiration for artists. It can be observed that in some advanced countries there is a development of tendencies to maintain the traditional cultural legacy. In Japan, for example, the traditional art forms are safeguarded with state programs and powerful foundations, as, for example, The Japan Foundation. The masters of traditional art are declared “living treasures”. The traditional puppet theatre of *bunraku*, the theatre of automatons and mechanical puppets of *karakuri*, the *noh* sacred theatre, the *kabuki* theatre and many other forms of popular traditions are alive and admired by the general public. In Italy, in Naples, where Pulcinella’s tradition had one of its main centers, an institute was established (with the support of the municipality), *La Casa di Pulcinella*, dedicated to the research and revitalization of the Italian puppetry tradition. In Belgium, a group of intellectuals (led by Michel de Ghelderode, who also re-created and wrote many plays for puppet theatre) noticed that, at a certain point, the tradition of rod marionette theatre with *tringle* had disappeared. They founded an association with the purpose of reviving popular puppet theatre traditions. Thanks to this initiative, the *tringle* theatre still exists today.

The forms of traditional puppet and marionette theatre survive to this day in Sicily (*opra dei puppi*, performances of rod marionettes, in which are presented plays inspired by the medieval epic cycles). In China, after the terrible period of the cultural revolution, the authorities realized the fact that the traditions that they have tried so hard to destroy, represent, in fact, a great wealth of the country and, by this, the shadow theatre and the traditional Chinese puppet theatre, with its repertoire inspired by *The Traditional Peking Opera*, have been revived.

In other countries, the traditional arts have survived in ancestral forms, as would be the case, for example, in Indonesia, of *wayang*, in different forms, from shadow theatre, to puppet theatre, in Malaysia, Sumatra (with traditions similar to those of Indonesia, and very well preserved), in India (marionettes, shadows and puppets) etc.

In some cases, the revival of traditions has also an economic reason. Tourism also develops around cultural events and traditions. Any tourist that reaches a foreign country does not want to admire Skyscrapers or other products of the Modern World, they want, in first place, to see something specific for the respective country.

The revival of tradition is necessary in a socio-political context like the one of today. Globalization, standardization, the uniformization of the ways of living and of the system of values make many people reconsider the traditions, and not just in the case of the artistic domain, but also in the one of gastronomy, architecture, fashion design, ways of existence. Most of the countries of the

world safeguard and promote their traditions. And the modern artists found an important source of inspiration in traditional arts.

On the other hand, there is also a tendency to alter the traditional popular arts by creating imitations of folklore, which is fake, a *kitsch*, dominated by bad taste. Even the totalitarian states promoted the folklore in a false form, misrepresented, which to serve the ideology of the Nationalist-Communism or Nazism.

But certain characteristics of traditional art sometimes make it incompatible with modern society at a given moment, which in fact led, in some cases, to its disappearance in the 19th and 20th centuries. Contributing to this were the critical nature of traditional puppet theatre and its crude, sometimes licentious humor. For example, when Romanian Television (TVR) produced a series dedicated to humor (*Anthology of Romanian Humor*, initiated by Valentin Silvestru) and attempted to introduce a puppet theatre segment, it was found that the original texts of *Mărioara* and *Vasilache* could not be presented as they were, because of their crude and violent nature, scandalous at that time for censorship. Puppet theatre was, in fact, banned in Moldavia and Wallachia in the mid-19th century due to its strongly critical character. In several European countries, puppeteers were expelled, censored, or banned.

At present, traditional performances such as *Punch*, *Vasilache*, *Kasperle*, or *Karagöz* have survived in more “inoffensive,” “modernized” forms, with their more “scandalous” characteristics removed.

From the perspective of the new wave of opinion (called “political correctness”), the traditional puppet theatre is heavily threatened and even condemned from a distance. I don’t see what would remain from it if it was for its humor based on the ridicule of foreigners: Turks, Russians, Jews, Bulgars, etc., to be eliminated, in the case of the Romanian traditional puppet theatre, or the French and British – or in the case of the *karagöz* tradition. The central character (*Vasilache*, *Punch*) of the popular puppet there is a hunchback, and the new orientation of “political correctness” forbids the ridicule of physical defects. At the same time, the “violence” of their comical actions, the hitting with the stick that are abundant in traditional puppet plays are condemned from the new point of view of “political correctness”. Humor has been and always will be aggressive, it is based, most of the time, on the ironizing of human flaws, being them physical or moral. If we can no longer laugh at anything or anyone, what remains of humor?

Political satire and criticism of authority, core characteristics of popular theatre, were condemned with the rise of censorship starting in the 19th century. Even today, political satire does not fare much better. A puppet satire show featuring political figures was banned in Russia shortly after its launch. Similarly, the French program *Cocoricoco-boy* collapsed after Georges Marchais sued the

creators, offended by being depicted with a pig's head (and he arguably had reasons to be upset!). In Romania, the show *Votați cu noi (Vote with Us)*, created in the 1990s by a group of young and talented artists (directed by Bozo Țcuș, with puppeteers Gabriel Apostol, Ionuț Brancu, and others), also had an ill-fated end. Despite enjoying wide popularity, it was shut down after only a few episodes, following protests from politicians such as Ion Iliescu and Corneliu Vadim Tudor, who were mocked in every installment. Satirizing priests, a common element in the popular theatre of *Vasilache and Mărioara*, was banned in the 19th century under Puppeteer's Laws in Moldova and Wallachia, and would likely meet the same fate today. Likewise, Vasilache's misogynistic behavior would certainly be condemned by today's fighters of "political correctness."

Also, the sexual humor, unapologetic, has disappeared for a long time from the traditional puppet theatre or the shadow theatre as a result of the modern mentality changes, even though the vulgar humor is used at large in stand-up comedy and the pornographic industry is very successful in our days. The silly beatings of the popular theatre are, also, condemned by the new moralists, even though there are very successful artistic movies in which physical violence is at an extreme, and these are accepted with no problems by the society. Despite this reason, there are a lot of internet posts by some persons outraged by the fact that Punch or Vasilache beat up other characters, in a very comical manner.

We can see, therefore, that it is more and more difficult to safeguard many of the traditions of puppet theatre. But the spirit of popular humor storms out often, despite imposed interdictions from the "hypocrite" authorities (how Molière called the bigots of his time).



2. CONSERVATION OR PROGRESS?



In the article *Reflections relating to the folkloric performance*, Irina Nicolau¹ remarks the fact that the folklore is, anyhow, a live phenomenon and the tentative to conserve it distorts, actually, a natural process of the tradition's evolution: "... There are popular European cultures that left history before they got the chance to be polluted; losing in relation to the impact of the industrialized society, they won the condition of a unpervert museum object. The Romanian popular culture, however, [...], is a living organism that assimilates the terms it needs and dispenses with those that, corresponding with a passed by necessity, are out of use. The latter fall within the field of interest and action of science, as the folklore cannot afford the luxury of dragging along museum pieces; in order to survive, it must remain a solid, lightweight, and flexible construct, based on a finite number of modular units which, through infinite reorganizations, can respond to the needs of contemporary life..." (Nicolau)

The art of theatre, which is strongly dependent on the public, on society, knows this phenomenon. The plays written in other epochs and that are still played today, even if in their stagings respect by heart the letter of the text, know important modifications to the senses of the words. The associations of ideas that the spectators once made are not at all the same with the ones made today. Moreover, old plays are "rediscovered" precisely because some of them are significant for the present times. New translations or productions, even if their authors claim to respect the original, are in fact adapted, more or less consciously, to the contemporary audience.

Folklore (or tradition) changes not only in content over time, but also in terms of its meaning as a cultural phenomenon. Three situations can be distinguished:

- the tradition manifesting inside a community that participates to the realization of the performance;
- the tradition transformed into a performance, which has the effect of renewing the national sentiment;
- the traditional performance presented to foreign spectators, which don't have any link with the respective tradition. There is a kind of sentiment of exoticism, which can manifest even inside a country, when the spectators of an area watch the ones from another ethnological area, speakers of another dialect.

¹ Irina Nicolau (1946–2002) was a Romanian writer and researcher specializing in folklore and ethnology. She served as interim director of the National Museum of the Romanian Peasant between 2000 and 2001. (tr. n.)

In this case, folklore itself becomes the message, as noted by the author of the article mentioned above: "...it is evident that the folklore performance, in the act of communication it achieves, treats popular culture differently as an end and as a means, as a message and as packaging for another message, depending on the intention that preceded the act of communication..." (Nicolau)

The author further advocates for the free transformation of tradition, so as not to hinder the normal evolution of the phenomenon: "...A performance based on faithful reproductions of folklore, beyond the prestige-strengthening function it exerts, is a banal text. To always communicate to popular culture something that is already known, while giving up offering performance variants — the precious folkloric channel for foreign elements — means committing a serious strategic error. Another error arises from the fact that a performance that disseminates faithful reproductions does not actually preserve popular culture, as it intends to, but rather drags it backward, since the reality it reproduces is 50–70 years old..." (Nicolau)

The author of the article states that there are four types of folklore performances in the Romanian culture:

“1. the performance given by Romanian peasants at the feudal court, a performance produced at the initiative of donors or beneficiaries on the occasion of calendar holidays or family celebrations. [...] this performance achieved the temporary reintegration into popular culture of social classes recently familiarized with other cultures, renewing their ties with the traditional culture to which they still belonged, but from which they had acquired the necessary distance to be able to *view* it objectively.” (Nicolau)

2. the version from the last decades of the past century and the first decades of the 20th century, when, in towns, folklore had become a highly appreciated fashion. “By dressing in peasant clothes, singing, and dancing in peasant style, progressive intellectuals and the well-to-do classes expressed their desire to affiliate with the Romanian people and culture.” (Nicolau)

3. and 4. “...One version is represented by the urban folklore performance, whose dominant function is to integrate popular culture into urban culture, the other version being that performed in rural areas, whose dominant functions are to confirm folklore within its own context and to familiarize popular culture with new elements...” (Nicolau)

The author of the article thus distinguishes four functions of the traditional performance:

- The reintegration of a social group into popular culture;
- The affiliation of a social group with popular culture;

- The integration of popular culture into urban culture;
- The confirmation of popular culture and its enrichment with new elements.

The folklore tradition is radically transformed in contemporary society, acquiring the character of an artistic theme, not only of artistic creation.

Sometimes, in many performances inspired by folk literature or its classical adaptations (the fairy tales and stories of Ion Creangă² and Mihai Eminescu³, *Sânziana and Pepelea* by Vasile Alecsandri⁴), as well as in productions claiming to be inspired by the puppeteering tradition, one can observe an unclear attitude regarding the use of tradition. Tradition must be respected not in its letter, but in its spirit. The object of satire must be sought in contemporary reality. The boyars from humorous tales must be replaced with the “new-type upstarts” of our days.

Is it worthwhile to create “museum-like” performances that bring old traditions to the stage? The revival of the Belgian *tringle* tradition and the preservation of the *bunraku* tradition show that cultural heritage can be a significant theme both for those interested in their own heritage and cultural belonging, and for foreign audiences eager to discover other traditions. The experience of staging, in a reconstructive manner, of the play *Vicleimul* by director Bogdan Drăgulescu⁵ (*Țândărică* Theatre, 1994, text reconstructed by Mihai Crișan) proved that the strongest message of the performance was the presentation of the tradition itself and that older spectators who saw the performance in the street were deeply moved to witness the rebirth of old Romanian customs. I experienced the same feeling when I staged a *Mărioara and Vasilache* show at the Gulliver Theatre in Galați, where I sought to convey the original spirit of this puppetry tradition.

The issue of bringing folklore to the stage is also connected to the representation of a style, method, form, technique, or manner, not merely to its simple presentation or superficial imitation, which unfortunately, such superficial

² Ion Creangă (1837–1889) was a Romanian writer, storyteller, and schoolteacher. Much of his work draws inspiration from his childhood experiences and Romanian folklore. He is regarded as one of the most important authors of Romania’s classical literary period. (tr. n.)

³ Mihai Eminescu (1850–1889) was a Romanian late-Romantic poet, novelist, and journalist. He is widely regarded as the most influential poet in Romanian literature. His work reflects influences from German idealism, Romanian folklore, Enlightenment political thought, and spirituality. (tr. n.)

⁴ Vasile Alecsandri (1821–1890) was a Romanian playwright, poet, politician, and folklorist. A founding member of the Romanian Academy, he is regarded as the creator of modern Romanian dramaturgy. (tr. n.)

⁵ Bogdan Drăgulescu (b. 1961) is a Romanian theatre and film director, whose work in puppet theatre is distinguished by the use of visual effects and recorded projections. (tr. n.)

approaches have led to the proliferation of *kitsch*, such as stage sets where “stylization was itself stylized,” with polystyrene carvings imitating wooden ones, etc. However, some set designers, drawing inspiration from traditional folk decorative arts, have succeeded in creating tasteful scenographic works well-suited to the atmosphere of the Romanian fairy tale, as did Eustațiu Gregorian⁶ and Mioara Buescu⁷. Beyond this aspect of the problem, it is important to note that in European puppetry tradition, alongside elements that required strict adherence, there were always parts of the performance that allowed for improvisation and references to contemporary events.

⁶ Eustațiu Gregorian (1930–2019) was a multi-awarded Romanian scenographer and puppet builder, whose work was shaped by his long collaboration with the Colibri Puppet Theatre in Craiova. He developed a personal aesthetic in puppetry that combined modern visual language with Romanian popular puppetry traditions. (tr. n.)

⁷ Mioara Buescu (1926–2006) was a puppet theatre scenographer at Tândărică Theatre between 1952 and 1986, whose work played a defining role in shaping the theatre’s aesthetics. (tr. n.)