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Theatre Science – Performing Arts

Explorations of the Fantastic in Contemporary Romanian Drama

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Preface  
- drama and the fantastic

## 1. ARGUMENT

The fantastic, weakness and chastisement of free-thinkers...  
Fortunate weakness and voluptuous punishment  
Roger Caillois

The author of the present paper is not a professional theorist, but a professional of the stage, namely a stage director and however hard one tries to maintain that a stage director is, by definition, a theorizer and a researcher, thanks to the nature of their work as an art explorer, the truth is different. The difference lies, perhaps, in the manner of exploring one and the same universe. A researcher's time is spent studying and observing, the end being the study and the observation in themselves and their recording, for documentation. The director, on the other hand, acts with a clearly defined purpose, which is the performance and observations are not a goal in itself, but the result of inevitable happenings during their work. At the end, if they so wish, stage directors may also draw a theoretical conclusion on what they have already put into practice. Quite often though, this proves a futile exercise.

In the wake of the above-mentioned principles, it would be a hypocrisy to claim that we have chosen a research topic – in the present case, the fantastic and its categories, and we have subsequently embarked upon studying and applying our findings in actual performances. And that is all the more true since the works we have consulted, theorizing on this subject, written by theorists and essayists such as Tzvetan Todorov, Roger Caillois, Albert Beguin, Marcel Brion, Karl Rozenkratz and others, tend to deal with the analysis of the fantastic in literature or the arts, but not theatre performance, except maybe at the level of playwriting. Hence, what we did was to stage theatre performances, for almost two decades, with more or less inspiration, more or less successfully, but always with the same dedication. And then, at one time, looking back, it dawned on us that very often, the atmosphere of these shows had slipped into a zone of the dreamlike, miraculous ineffable, in one word, of the fantastic in its many facets. And we realized that we had never, since the beginning of our career, turned that into a deliberate theme for exploration. Rather, simply by trying to express our feelings as convincingly as

possible, this is where we ended up, the performance itself had pulled us, together with the actors and characters, into the elusive world of illusions and make-believe, in the deserts populated by dream Fata Morganas. And it is this self-discovery and from what has turned out to represent us best, derived, unawares, from our own inner self, that has caused us great wonder. And it is this wonder that gave birth to...

## 2. ...THE FIRST QUESTION

What causes man's need for the miraculous? Where does one derive one's innate penchant to the fantastic, one's drive towards finding reasons for the fundamental unknowns of existence – love, birth, death, catastrophes, unexpected luck – in the interference of supranatural forces – a god or a fairy, an ogre or a spirit, a spell or a curse?

... **assign magical powers** to certain actions or words, to believe in “signs” sent by destiny or in life beyond physical death, for the computer era person just like for the one of the Stone Age, it can mean either the inability of the third millennium human being to reach the maturity that science and technology have, or an instinct for the miraculous, including that for immortality, which the lifestyle of the latest decades, especially in the countries of Eastern Europe, victims of forcefully imposed atheism, has severely shrunk. The huge success which, in time, stories, plays, novels, paintings, theatre performances or films inspired from the universe of the fantastic have enjoyed has multiple justifications. On the one hand there is, of course, people's need to identify with characters in books or on the stage or screen, and thus live a parallel life of powerful feelings, extreme situations, alongside their own tragedies or achievements. This explanation however applies to the success of any art genre, be it tragedy, drama, melodrama or comedy. In the case of fantasies, this need is doubled by an acute and only natural human desire for the “unusual”, for the “ineffable”.

Of all art forms, drama is the one where this feeling of the ineffable is, paradoxically, at once the easiest and the hardest to get. The easiest because the first attempts at reaching the forces of that realm, the rituals – with their whole array of music, dances and invocations – coincide with the first forms of the drama performance; the unusual is thus experienced through handy, familiar means therefore. The hardest, because, while literature and reader are separated by the limits of the imagination of the latter, the contact between film characters and viewers is mediated by technical conditions, which allows cinema that unique inaccessibility that is capable to mythify, things happen differently in the theatre. The key to success lies in the ability of the explorer-creator to make the spectator pass beyond sense perception and generate a faith which refrains from “searching”, born of the same roots as the religious one.

## 3. TOWARDS ANOTHER REALITY

The fantasy world is a universe of gods, angels and demons, elves and fairies, spirits, elements, nymphs and satyrs, dangerous beings, mysterious animals, dwarfs, dragons, unicorns, flying horses, talking birds, hydras, giants, syrens, ogres and trolls, wizards and wise men, necromancers, amulets, spells, magic, surrealist gates and flying carpets,

lycanthropes, vampires, mummies, ghosts, werewolves and evil spirits, ghost-ships, enchanted castles, fabulous animals, premonitory dreams, magic potions, crystal balls in which you can read the future, hats or robes that make one invisible, catastrophic disasters and unlimited powers.

At first sight, this enumeration can appear as an inventory of the usual arsenal of fairy-tales. However, the fantastic is not an exclusive attribute of fairy-tales. It was born before them and does not belong to them only. This is easily proven when we consider that the previous list can be enriched with everything related to personality disorders, the different illusions of the visible and the invisible, the alternation of time and space, the pact with the devil, the tormented soul, which requires the accomplishment of a task in order to be delivered, the ghost sentenced to eternal wandering, death personified, that oppressive “something” always present, the statue (the dummy, the armor, the automaton) which comes alive, the curse which produces its effects, the sudden and supranatural illness, the ghost-woman, the interference of dream and reality, the room or the house moved to a different space, time which stands still or repeats itself, elements characteristic not so much to fairy-tales as to the romantic novel, surrealism or science-fiction.

*For the sake of a different reality.* This is the essence of the multitude of rites and cults, myths, legends and epics, rituals and performances which, centred around supranatural heroes, embody man’s effort to come into contact with these characters he believes in, even though irrationally. From among all games, those whose purpose is to unleash the imagination and the belief in the invisible and the unreal have played, we have to admit, the most crucial role in man’s culture, civilization and becoming, as a superior, rational being. Strangely, the irrational of beliefs, religions and dreams has had and continues to have a decisive contribution to the development of the most rational of known beings.

*A substitute prefiguration* could be the brief definition of drama, in its traditional forms. Especially since, starting from the very first major enactments of drama, in ancient performances, the participants-spectators must have had the same feeling as the participants in a ritual: women were excluded, characters, whose destinies were governed by the supranatural power of gods, lived their tragedy – always a tragedy (because the sacred nature of the performance, as well as that of the ritual, did not encourage comedy, although they did not ban laughter) – in an artistic event which often inscribed in its own formula consecrated rituals and ceremonials.

#### 4. BUT WHAT IS THE FANTASTIC?

While Roger Caillois writes about the fantastic with the emotional involvement of the essayist, Tzvetan Todorov approaches the same subject with scientific rigour.

Nevertheless, the very topic of his paper, “*An introduction to fantastic literature*” brings him to a realm of the elusive, the dream-like, so that the study often takes the form of an essay and includes quite a few references to Roger Caillois and other thinkers, like Louis Vax, Vladimir Soloviov or Castex. Further on, however, Tzvetan Todorov clarifies his vision, explaining that the fantastic lives only as long as this hesitation and in the end, both the character and the beholder – reader, onlooker, spectator – has to make a decision. Tzvetan Todorov draws most clearly the directions of analysis of the **fantastic**;

as we will show, each work that belongs to one of the genres of the **fantastic** can be ascribed to one or the other of the two large categories - the **strange** and the **miraculous**.

## 5. ASPECTS OF THE FANTASTIC

The road to the universe of fantasy can start with certain games, in which imagination plays a prominent part, then it can continue with the fairy-tale or myth, then with different ritual forms, before it finally gets to the **cultivated fantastic**, the one to be found in the corresponding literature or painting and which aims to generate awe or amazement, fear or epiphany, a deliberate fantastic, more precisely. One does not only find this in paintings by Bosch or Ensor, Magritte or Dali, but also in medieval or Renaissance iconography, in paintings depicting major religious themes, such as the Judgement Day, or in the romantic novel, surrealist prose, as well as a number of contemporary films, of different quality and levels. Before analysing this deliberate fantastic though, well-planned and with anticipated effects, we will examine the **instinctive fantastic**, the one we started our work with.

**Madness.** A continuous state of reverie. The scarier it is, the more tempting it becomes. A separate paper could be dedicated to the presence of the madman in literature and the arts in general. The madman is allowed to speak his mind, because he does not possess the normal person's ability to hide the truth, the madman can be the messenger of the ultimate truth, because he has been chosen by the gods to accomplish important missions; the madman can be possessed by demons, needing punishment, a sick man worthy of compassion or a clairvoyant, able to see what others cannot. The madman does not shy away from exposing what can be called his **inner show** to the world. In all its forms, dangerous or pitiful, **madness** is related to the **fantastic**, it is an indicator of the presence of the latter, because of its similarity to the **dream**. The madman is a dreamer who will not be awakened, therefore he is an inhabitant of the fantastic realm.

The romantics are the ones who, we can say, have most often and most readily succumbed to the fascination **madness** has exerted on them and their art, aiming for introspection and extreme experiences. They are also the most prominent explorers of the **dream**, creators of a **dream-like fantastic**, which will later inspire *surrealism*. They have been, without doubt, the top dreamers of universal culture, and **dream** is closely related to **madness**. All these comments on the common basis of dream and madness offer new explanations to the **strange** or **unreal** feeling caused, both in life and art, by the presence of the madman.

As much as we may try to separate **dream** from **madness**, madness from **religious feeling**, religion from **myth**, myth from **fairy-tale** and fairy-tale from the **fantastic**, this is almost impossible to do. No matter how much we try to say that not everything belonging to the **imaginary** belongs to the fantastic, we cannot deny, on the other hand, that there is no **fantastic** in the absence of **imagination**.

## 6. DREAM AND DEATH

The whole array of beliefs, myths, rituals and legends man has made up before he discovered his mainly rational condition show him as a being capable of imagination, composition, creation. Let's be realistic though: before he turned imagination into a

vehicle for creation, he used it as a shield against the inexplicable, the inevitable, the unknown. It is hard to believe that, at the beginning of his existence, man was able to control his imagination; most probably, it had a life of its own and created strange stories and found fantastic explanations to phenomena, in a way which is most probably rooted in the instincts. It is equally possible that, in the course of his first awakening, man was unable to tell dream from reality, to tell what was actually happening to him from what he was only imagining. Let it be clearly understood: we are talking about the primary awakening, the genesis of human reason and we believe that reason and fantasy were born concomitantly, as two facets of the process of thinking, and they have evolved together, complementary to each other.

From the oldest of time, across ages most prone to mysticism or those most reluctant to accept whatever was not visible, palpable, material, **dream** has always been considered the most common passage to that reality to which man has always aspired. Despite Freud's psychoanalytical revelations, which have turned dream into study material and even made some think that psychoanalysis has replaced the **fantastic**, to most people **dream** continues to represent the road on which they are led, unknowingly and without their previous consent, to a different universe, similar to the real and familiar one, but fundamentally different, a universe where they can remain only as long as they are allowed and from which they are excluded just the same, without being consulted, once they are awakened. And however much they might regret that, or might try to prolong that state of reverie beyond sleep, as much as they may be happy they have evaded a nightmare world, contemporary man, like his predecessors, knows dream is a collateral of sleep, sleep is its main prerequisite and sleep has always been regarded as a sort of waiting room for death and the void. No wonder then that dream has often been considered a step to the kingdom of death, from where people who are already gone send important messages, or unknown beings put us in touch with the future, using highly encrypted codes.

The richness of rituals, traditions and customs – starting with the simple burning of candles and ending with the greatness of Egyptian pyramids – which have accompanied the cult of the dead across history makes us believe that the revelation of himself as a mortal being was one that man has lived the most intensely and which he fought most ardently. To the evidence of death, man has opposed the strong belief in the continuation of life in a different realm, another dimension and this puts forward essential questions about our earthly life. Whether they have believed in a space of justice, where the good get rewarded and the bad get punished, or they have reached the conclusion that life flows in similar ways there as on earth, or they have believed in the Heaven and Hell of Christianity, in the mountains of boiled rice of Islam, in the lotus flower of Buddhist rebirth or the Viking Walhalla, people who have never known one another, civilisations which have never converged, radically different communities, from remote geographical spaces, have reacted the same way to **death**: they refused to accept it. This reality breeds crucial questions. Is man, wherever he may live, and in any epoch, unable to accept his total and final disappearance and hence he makes up imaginary worlds, ideal heavens or frightening infernos, so that he may survive the trauma caused by the death of the dear ones and the perspective of his own? Or, feeling by instinct that he is immortal on a metaphysical level, man fills in with the help of his own imagination the empty spaces of a situation he intuitively perceives but cannot control and thus gives birth to religious

belief, as well as to an abundance of cultures born of the cult of the dead itself. This is where we should dwell on the common root of the words “*culture*” (meaning “a series of distinctive features of a society or social group, in spiritual, material or emotional terms” – Wikipedia definition) and *cult* (“a tribute to divinity through religious acts; the expression of religious feeling through prayer and ritual acts” – DEX definition). One thing is for certain: the ancestral cult of the dead has generated a huge part of what is known at present as the culture of humanity as a whole, and this testifies either for a tearing desire for immortality, or an equally strong nostalgia for it. Irrespective of our choice, it is clear that, just as he cannot normally control his own **death**, man finds it just as hard to control his **dreams** and he falls victim to them. And if sleep is a waiting room for death, it is not inappropriate for **death** to be called “the eternal sleep”, “the great sleep”, if sleep and death are always comparable, except that sleep is a temporary death, from which one awakens, and death is a deeper sleep, from which the awakening takes place in a different realm, unknown to mortal man.

Although the fantastic universe is populated by a crowd of heroes and characterised by a great diversity of situations, we believe its most powerful impact and hence the most widespread forms of the **fantastic** are those derived from two main topics: **dream** and **death**. Other realms also offer themselves for examination, such as **interplanetary space** or **parallel universes**, but these are later additions to the world of the cultivated fantastic and therefore have a much shorter history.

#### a) The theatre of the DREAM

Under this name, the **theatre of the dream**, somehow reductive in meaning, we have, in fact, reunited all of those ways of the theatre performance which make visible and unfold the **inner show** of the human being, rather than the exterior one, easy to recognise, accessible and therefore much more ordinary.

We call **inner show** that flow of feelings and reactions which every person experiences, in an unpredictable and almost uncontrollable sequence, sometimes indecent or revolting, often unspeakable, just like in the case of **dreams**.

We have called the performance we are going to refer to “**the theatre of the dream**”, because we consider that **dream** is the shortest, most direct and widespread access road to the **fantastic universe**, for each and every one of us.

A few definitions of our viewpoints are worth elaborating upon, to support our demonstration. We call **outer show** the whole array of actions, reactions, replies and counterreactions that we live “in sight”, namely our visible and identifiable life, daily human behaviour, which anyone can identify, understand and analyse. Similarly, the spectator will be able to understand the artistic rendering of such behaviour in the space of the drama. One knows that, behind all these visible attitudes and reactions, there is the vast diversity of motives which can be intuitively felt or assumed. Certainly, this ambiguity, this uncertainty of the motivations behind deeds and words has its charm, in life as in plays, but often the same deeds and words, brought to stage, lead to a theatre performance, if not poor, at least incomplete, because it cannot express more than life itself expresses in its daily flow.

#### b) the theatre of DEATH

The opinion according to which everything that is ghostly causes fear seems to be contradicted by the success enjoyed by the so-called “haunted houses” in England and in other places, all invaded by curious tourists, as well as by the wide appeal of literary and artistic works of all kinds and of all times which deal with returns from the underworld, ghost storied, restless ghosts or vampires. Before we rush to illustrate this with the handiest example, our compatriot Dracula, made famous by Bram Stoker and by the countless films made on the basis of the novel, let us remember that the character which returns from the dead, as a ghost or vampire, has existed for centuries in the culture of humanity and that, after long belonging to the collective imaginary of numerous people, they have taken their places in the gallery of the **cultivated fantastic**.

Starting with Darius’s ghost in Aeschilus’s *The Persians*, continuing with the countless appearances in medieval stories or burg theatre, ending with the Shakespearean occurrence of the ghost of *Hamlet*’s father, or of Banquo in *Macbeth*, **the ghost**, as a character in the **fantastic universe**, has pursued its glorious road, we may say, passing through romantic literature and up to *The Spectres’ Sonata* by Strindberg and, lately, more and more cinema productions, some highly successful, like Jerry Zucker’s *Ghost* or M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Sixth Sense*.

In the **theatre of death**, meant to cause fear, the **ghostly** is often combined with the **diabolic** and with **madness**. If we speak about *Macbeth*, we find the **diabolic** and **madness** – in the case of lady Macbeth – all in the same play, when the witches appear. We need to emphasise that witches, who can be benign presences in fairy-tales, capable of good deeds and lucky spells – in which case they are called fairies – or to open the gates of a world unknown to mortals, in order to teach them valuable secrets (as is the case of maguses), are spirits of evil in *Macbeth* and practise black magic, of diabolic origin.

Presented as terrifying or miraculous, the **ghostly** is quite widespread in all cultures, including in drama. Its representation though has never been simple, precisely because ghosts and the belief in their existence are so popular.

While the **ghost**, as a presence, can trigger mixed feelings, of fear and compassion, **the vampire**, the living dead, something between a ghost and a living person, always causes terror. Although often a victim himself, he generates fear and rejection. The reason is that, on the one hand, he can be dangerous – unlike a ghost, generally powerless, completely deprived of the abilities it had while alive – because he is only dead during daytime, only to be reborn at night, with renewed strength. On the other hand, the fear of the vampire also has a religious origin, because the vampire is considered either an apprentice or a victim of the devil, at any rate in the devil’s power or service. The presence of the vampire therefore is equivalent to the presence of the devil or more precisely of the **diabolic**, seen as the sum of elements which are opposed to God, the representation of allmighty and absolute good.

**The diabolic** can be absolute evil and its forms of expression can take the form of madness in this case too. The possessed is a victim of malignant forces, his/her convulsions testify for the unseen presence of maleficent entities, with superhuman powers. But, to stay in the frame of psychopathology, we will also frequently come across the double or multiple personality, where one (which the other may not even know about) is subject to diabolic forces and acts accordingly, doing monstrous deeds. The

most famous case of all is the Dr. Jekyll-Mr. Hyde duo, whose story has known various renditions, interpretations, stagings and reconsiderations.

In other cases, the diabolic can figure as a harmless presence, a goblin rather than a demon, funny and astute, rather than cruel and merciless, but this is most often the case of fairy-tales or satirical comedies. Lessage's Crippled Devil has nothing scary, instead he plays the part of the master in an initiation voyage. Characters of folk drama have also evolved out of this light diabolic, so to call it, the overwhelming Arlecchino playing the lead role.

Maybe the explanation of the fascination **death** has enjoyed for millenia, as an artistic theme, lies precisely in its implacability, in its ineluctability. The impossibility of dealing it a terminal blow, together with its omnipresence, have given it an aura of heroic enemy, of familiar mystery, of revolting and inevitable end.

The success of books, films and plays built around this theme is not surprising; the wish for immortality is as old as humanity and, as art has shown across history, man not only has always wanted to have it, but he also never accepted, deep down, his mortal condition.

### c) Drama and MAGIC

With her pointed hat, her crooked nose full of warts, hunchbacked, toothless, smelling of sulphur – specific to her devilish origin – riding her flying broom and wearing a used robe, this is what the typical **witch** looks like in fairy-tales or in those of the Brothers Grimm. An easily recognisable image by everyone, old or young, a comical rather than frightening presence for kids nowadays. But who may have been, in reality, this character with miraculous powers who gave birth to the parodic archetype?

From *The Golden Ass*, the novel of the ancient Apuleius, to John Updike's *The Witches of Eastwick*, casting curses and spells in *Macbeth*, walking the roads full of traps of *A Thousand and One Nights*, killing without mercy her own children in *Medeea*, or dying, punished, in Arthur Miller's *The Witches of Salem*, boiling their bowls full of herbs, preparing magic potions, reading in crystal balls or saying magic phrases, witches have inhabited the culture of humanity, collective imagination, as well as real life, for millenia, ever since Aristophanes, in *Tesmoforii and Lisistrata*.

Because of her maleficent powers, the witch is considered a human being in the service of the Devil, master of Hell, where all the souls of the sinners end up, so we can say the **witch** belongs to the **diabolic** and the realm of **death**. She can ask evil spirits for help and can conjure up malignant forces. We will also note that this series of features is most often ascribed to females, as the "evil" in the collective imagination, ever since the time of disobedient Eve, has taken a woman's form. That does not exclude the frequent appearance of **wizards**, often overpowering his female counterparts, smarter and more absurd. Often though, the male character endowed with magic powers is the author of benign miracles. Then he is called a **magus**.

While the magus is more often present in cultivated art, sometimes at its upper level, the witch and the fairy are, in their archetypal forms, together with the flying horse, the dragon and the goblin, a symbol of the fairy-tale. And here we are, back where we started!

#### d) Theatre and FAIRY-TALES

With its princes turned into frogs, grateful ants, magnificent birds, elves with supernatural powers, sleeping beauties or princesses kidnapped by ogres, with its vegetation of gold fruit-bearing trees, silver woods, where magic grass grows, with its blessed or cursed fountains, the **fairy-tale** is the most famous and the richest territory of the **miraculous fantastic**.

This feeling of fear mixed with curiosity, which always accompanies the **fantastic**, cannot appear in a world where the laws of reality are suspended from the very beginning and anything can happen.

Beyond any theoretical dispute, the **fairy-tale** remains the richest and the most charming outpour of imagination, which bursts into our life, from early childhood.

The **fairy-tale** can hide, in a luxurious setting, unsuspected cruelty, unthinkable atrocities, wickedness, hatred and revenge. The fairy-tale world swarms with intolerant fathers, who chase their kids from home, stepmothers who persecute mercilessly, beautiful orphan daughters, dragons who kidnap princesses or demand annually, as an offering, pure young girls, children changed into beasts as punishment, young wives who open secret passages, treacherous brothers, unfaithful husbands, bloody battles, false friends or cruel monsters. Few artistic genres contain so many dirty deeds and misfortunes as fairy-tales. How to explain then the feeling of enchantement, serenity which they and the drama performances they inspire bestow on the onlooker?

The fairy-tale as a performance owes much of its success to the magic derived from the visualisation of happenings and characters. To playwrights, writing or staging fairytales is a temptation derived from the potential of dramatism they contain. And from the aura of the dream...

Once back to the theme of the dream, let us mention that neither the wisemen of Arab stories, nor the romantics have a monopoly on the universe of the dream. Other dreamers, who have left their mark on world literature join them, with the same enthuse for the liberty of emotions and imagination, maybe more daring in their rebellion.

#### e) The dreamers of another century: SURREALISTS

In the year 1924, when Andre Breton was launching his first *Manifest of Surrealism*, few probably expected the huge influence this trend was going to have on the arts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, its forms of expression unexhausted until our days. The explanation for this success may be its drive against tradition and academy, resolutions of non-conformist creators of all times, its laying down of new themes, such as the exploration of the unconscious and its claim to unrestricted freedom of artistic expression, an attribute of unleashed creativity, just like the **dream**.

Although the concept is born after the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the medieval imagery, of religious origin, of engravings or of the works of Hieronimus Bosch, Grunewald and James Ensor, just like romantic literature, were announcing it long before. Surrealism exalts and asserts **dream** like no one before, but man has always dreamt, and so sometimes, strong artists, who have defied cannon, did not wait for a trend to allow them a voice.

The role of dream in art was decisive, as we have seen, long before the start of surrealism, but the latter has made of the substance of the ineffable the main object of its creation and research. Unlike the romantics, only poets of the onirical, the surrealists had been in Freud's, Jung's and Adler's labs and their approach to the subject was at the same time artistic and scientific. In *The Manifest of Surrealism*, Andre Breton welcomes Sigmund Freud's concern with the universe of the dream as an expression of the subconscious and draws attention to man's continuing psychological activity during sleep; Andre Breton also notes that the importance of the dream lies, additionally, in that the value of events lived in dreams, taking into account only the actual dream, during sleep, not the reverie while being awake, equals that of real events. Besides, once awake, man often keeps the nostalgia of the dream and his memory tries to recompose its circumstances.

The way in which surrealists reconsider the **dream** as a defining expression of real personality and artistic illustration of the **inner show**, although not unprecedented, is unequalled.

f) What about the ABSURD?

One may rightfully ask: what is the connection between the **fantastic** and the **absurd**? They often meet and they are often similar. This is only natural since many times the same situations create the sensation of **absurdity** and of **fantasy** concomitently. More precisely, many elements which belong to the universe of the fantastic can be assimilated to the **absurd**.

As for the forms of expression, the fantastic and the absurd can, from the perspective of the dramatic formula, take similar aspects, given the generous performing offer in one as well as the other, especially if the fantastic is of a surrealist kind. There is nothing surprising in that a play of the theatre of the absurd receives fantastic accents and viceversa. The border between the two is hard to draw. And a play like the *Rhinoceroses*, by Eugen Ionescu, is only one of the many possible examples.

The **fantastic** is an inexhaustible subject. It is enough to think that it can encompass the dreams of all people, not to mention the literature, the painting and the drama they inspire. If the existence of strange phenomena is generally accepted and sometimes their enigmas are deciphered, for what we call the **miraculous**, the very usage of the word is witness to the inexistence of concrete evidence. And if we have previously stated that the **fantastic** does not really exist outside the **miraculous**, we will have to wrap up by saying that, admitting the lack of all proof of existence of this immaterial world, the **fantastic**, that hesitation between the unacceptable and the inexplicable, is, after all, the name of a feeling.

## EXPLORATIONS OF THE FANTASTIC IN CONTEMPORARY ROMANIAN DRAMA

### 1. THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT: WE CAN ONLY IMAGINE...

Going back to the origins of man, using body language, which seems to have preceded speech both in human evolution and in that of the theatre, using images of a special visual

quality, often pictorial and the recourse to dramatic works which, by the subjects they approach or the liberty of writing make possible the evasion from the visible and palpable universe, opening the gate to the world full of mysteries of the human soul are, we think, characteristic procedures for most of the performances staged by those who were daring enough to push the unanimously accepted limits of reality. A few of those who were successful in this pursuit are Max Reinhardt, V. Meyerhold, A. Tairov, Giorgio Strehler, Peter Brooke and in Romania, Ion Sahighian or the famous father of regained dramaticism, Ion Sava.

To speak about things one has not personally witnessed is always risky and frustrating. Therefore the opinion we have formed of the work of these authors is the result of consultations and confrontation of opinions of famed theorists, such as George Banu, Odette Aslan, Heinrich Braulich, Monique Borie, Denis Bablet, Jean-Pierre Sarrazac and others. To their works we can add those of the creators, certain books, such as *The Empty Space*, by Peter Brooke, *Un theatre pour la vie*, by Giorgio Strehler, or *The Dramaticism of Drama*, by Ion Sava, bringing valuable witness to the artistic universe and explorations of these directors. From our standpoint, and from a distance in time and space, which age and location have imposed, we can put forward only suppositions. We can only imagine...

## 2. PRECURSORS OF THE FANTASTIC IN ROMANIAN THEATRE IN THE FIRST HALF OF THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

The past, with little history of the dramatic performance, centuries of inexistence of the drama and the thought that on this territory of the aristocracy of spirit we are only recently ennobled knights did not stop us – let us say it without modesty – from filling all the gaps in our experience in only one-two centuries of theatre, swimming in all theatre waters, unabashed and this is almost a miraculous thing.

By the testimonies of the time, it seems that Romanian theatre was plunged into an enthusiasm of structuring and deep understanding, on a truly professional basis, of the dramatic act. In other words, it had been contaminated by the European creative drive, from which it was “stealing” in search of its own path. It is clear that theatre was going through a time when it understood that its professionalisation had to include the audience too and therefore the latter needed education itself. The dramatic movement in Romania was taking itself very seriously and that could help it become more prominent in the eyes of the audience, the politicians, of Europe. It was a time when Europe included Romania. And those who were dreaming at that time could not imagine that their wish for international success, for equality with the greatest creators in Europe would soon become nothing more than a dream.

## 3. OUR FANTASTIC CONTEMPORARIES

### a) After the “fall...”

This title has nothing to do, in the present case, with Arthur Miller’s play. It only paraphrases the successive “falls” to which Romania fell prey after 1944: the demise of a regime and its replacement with a new one, restrictive and authoritarian, the fall of the

Iron Curtain and of the cultural isolation to which it was confined for decades, the fall out of grace of artistic trends, of personalities, of a lifestyle, of freedom of expression and of thought.

We will not attempt to retell well-known things and we will refrain from making comments which say nothing new. To have an idea of those times and write their history – by default subjective and again imaginary – we took our information from publications, reviews and books, the collection of the “Theatre” Magazine being one of the most relevant.

Considering all the achievements which, in most cases, have been beneficial both to theatre and its audience, it would be hard, perhaps, to explain to a contemporary reader why, in any analysis, the respective period seems to be enveloped in darkness and why the survivors of those times prefer to forget them. It is the time of “socialist triumph” in Romanian drama.

b) ‘We are such stuff as dreams are made of...

... and our short life is rounded with a sleep’. We have chosen this line from Prospero’s part because it could serve as a motto to the new orientation of theatrical movement in the following decade.

The following decade, analysed now at the level of “spiritual openness” or “ideological shortsightedness”, offers the paradoxical and bizarre image of a zipper which zips up one side while unzipping the other. On the one hand, one can notice that the new ideology, solidly rooted and stable, continues the building of “in line” playwriting. On the other hand, the received certainty determines a relaxation of principles. It is the decade of memorable artistic victories, circumscribed to our theme, such as *As You Like It*, *Troilus and Cressida*, *The Shadow*, *The Cherry Tree Orchard* or *Rameau’s Nephew*.

c) From our standpoint

Elisabeth I by Paul Foster, directed by Liviu Ciulei. We cannot forget, however, the feeling of **unusual** we had on the occasion of that first visit in the space of the Elisabethan stage at L.S. Bulandra theatre. We did not know, at the time, that in that kind of a space, that we were not familiar with, the performance had no curtain and, very often, not even sets. The suspense of the waiting, the desire to unveil the mystery of what was always behind the curtain was now being replaced by the amazed curiosity in front of the... nothing!

How was it possible for this performance without sets, with costumes that not especially spectacular and attractive for the child-spectator, used to the chromatic exuberance of fairy-tales, to leave a **feeling of the miraculous**, more poignant than many other performances, with a subject which belonged to the same field? In retrospect, we believe we owed this to the “lesson” of drama reception which one of the characters, which played the part of an actor and was played by Florian Pittis, delivered to the audience in the prologue.

The fantastic – from text to performance

Despite forced atheism, banned heresy and stubborn promotion of the *new man*, the recent history of Romanian theatre, more precisely the last two-three decades of the past century, counts a few frequent and successful attempts at exploration of the fantastic: Alexandru Tocilescu with *The Feather Suit*, a NO theatre performance played in Ploiesti, Adrian Lupu and Tompa Gabor with *Ivan Vasilievici* by Mikhail Bulgakov in Galati and respectively the National Theatre in Cluj, Horea Popescu with his *Generous Foundation* by A. B. Vallejo, at the National Theatre in Bucharest, Silviu Purcarete with *The Mad Woman of Chaillot* by Giraudoux, at the Little Theatre, Alexandru Darie with *R.U.R.* by Capek, at the Youth Theatre in Piatra Neamt and others, of the same directors or others. The concern with this universe and well-documented approach led to notable though unequal results. The simple tackling of a text which is related to this theme does not necessarily generate that special feeling of the fantastic, that *ineffable*, so hard to achieve in an art where both the mirage and the miraculous need to be produced with concrete means. And if we have said this, we have said the essential, since we have established that the **fantastic** is something that cannot be seen, heard, touched, something that does not exist, except as a notion and this notion defines a feeling. *The feeling of the fantastic*, the chill of a specific fear, born of the presence of mystery, the undefinable vibration, cannot be easily obtained on stage, nor can it be the predictable result of a recipe, as sophisticated as it may be.

Attempts, adventures, encounters – a succinct look at our own incursions in the realm of the fantastic

Our preference for this field has been manifest ever since our student years, since the first exam, and it was materialised in the staging of the story *The Tree of the Night* by Truman Capote. After this first attempt, without abandoning the search in this area, we first completed the obligatory tasks so that, only after university, answering unintentionally but enthusiastically a call issued by Ion Sava decades before, we staged *Six Characters in Search of an Author* by Luigi Pirandello, in 1989, at the National Theatre in Iasi. To this we later added *The Ghost Tamer* by Ion Baiesu, *Tonight We Are Improvising*, by Pirandello again, *The Mad Woman of Chaillot* by Jean Giraudoux, *The Gate of the Scent*, by Marguerite Yourcenar, *Yvonne The Princess of Burgundy* by W. Gombrowicz and many others as well as those, many more, we were only dreaming of...