

**Universitatea de Arte „George Enescu”, Iași  
Facultatea de Compoziție, Muzicologie, Pedagogie  
muzicală și Teatru**

**Comedia interbelică românească  
The Synopsis of the Thesis**

**Conducător științific,  
prof.univ.dr. Constantin Paiu**

**Doctorand,  
Cristina Neculăeș**

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The present thesis analyses the Romanian comedy in its interwar years, regarding both its artistic creation and its way of being set up into a show.

In order to start our investigation, I found it necessary to clarify a theoretical point of view. Hence the first chapter is dedicated to comicalness. If we consider the fact that there is no precise definition for this aesthetical category, however vast the writings on this topic, I have put together a possible clarification of the phenomenon in order to get as close as we can to what we generally call a comical appearance. Comicalness has biological, psychological, sociological causes and this is why it requires an elaborate and interdisciplinary research. The common aspect of every comical phenomenon is laughter. However, its theoretical sphere is larger than the one comicalness has. After a brief mention of the most significant theories regarding comicalness (Aristotle, Plato, Hobbes, Kant, Freud), I've reached the conclusion that one cannot define comicalness in

terms of ultimate resolving, and rather it may be defined through successive approximations, relative and temporary interpretations. The only certain fact is that comicalness provokes a specific and instantly recognizable psychological reaction. I have insisted on Henri Bergson's theory, which remains basically untouched by the invasion of interpretations, on account of the intuition of relating laughter to the new, the unexpected, the surprising and the observation that laughter isn't limited to ridiculing, it also points out and corrects faults, thus contributing to the redeeming of social harmony. The various ways of comical manifestations (the satire, the irony, the sarcasm, the grotesque, humour) are minutely analysed by Marian Popa in his study, *Comicology*, which we regard as the most important Romanian contributions to this field. Marian Popa is also the one that makes an analysis of Romanian comicalness, showing that Romanians have a sense of humour as a consequence of their down-to-earth intelligence, and that for our people (more than for other peoples) laughter has always had a cathartic purpose.

In any case, the comical discourse is preferred because of its multivalence. By relating comicalness with the theatrical, I have analysed it in complementarity with tragicalness. Comicalness transcends various forms of expression and cannot be isolated in its pure state. When it points out the existential void, the absence of moral and high ideal standards, comicalness gets close to tragicalness, obtaining a tint of severe woe and sorrow. Laughter reminds us of the distance we must keep from our own self image and from this perspective comicalness is proved to be a well adapted species.

The second chapter reduces the dichotomy of comicalness and tragicalness to that of comedy and tragedy. Comedy as a genre has had in most cultures an important history. For a long time it has kept its meaning of buffoonery and wild partying. The common perception is that tragicalness animates an entire sense of metaphysics, while in which comicalness is concerned, laughter needs no exploration of the cause. As in our vision, laughter relaxes us in the same way as the disappearance of the

tragic hero liberates us, I found comedy to be the essential counter piece of tragedy. Thus complementing each other, they maintain a just balance between excess and deficiency. Provoking either laughter or crying is a rarely accomplished Aristotelian ambition. If Greek tragedy uses the metaphor excessively, comedy is reality-oriented. I have noted the birth of comedy through Aristophanes; the landmarks of its slow evolution (Menandrus, Plautus, the Middle Ages, *commedia dell'arte*, William Shakespeare, Molière, Goldoni, Beaumarchais) up to Eugène Ionesco, the one that promotes a rough, excessive, unrefined comicalness that reaches the paroxysmal states, where tragism begins. In what tragicalness is concerned, the metaphor is recognized in itself. As for comicalness, the literal faces its sometimes naïve surpassing and delaying. Even inside the genre, I have detected another complementariness. Comedy as a literary genre fitted both the patterns of the Classic period and those of the Romanticism, as time passed. Taking into account that every genre is appreciated in itself as long

as it doesn't bore its public, comedy had to gain as it required and made use of wits and new ideas. In its evolution, comedy facilitates this phenomenon related to osmosis, interference and alternation. The first notable drama texts of our literature are obediently situated inside the borders of moral investigations that use comicalness to correct faults. The Romanian playwrights' preference towards comedy must be explained first of all through the satirical usefulness of the genre combined with the rather small effort of artistic elaboration in which concerns the fiction. Romanian comedy in between the wars assimilates all the past characteristics of the genre, only it is now based solely on observing the reality of the time. It yields into a synthesis that retains only the adequate means and finally forsakes the follies and uncertainties of the beginnings.

I have also reviewed the main contributions to Romanian comedy, insisting on Vasile Alecsandri and I.L. Caragiale. Alecsandri's legacy for Romanian comedy is a humouristic universe in the purest sense, in which social deformities are captured in their

evolutionary state, and the stereotypical characters wear the emblem of the century. Reality has shown that his human archetypes have spawned numerous instances over time. Caragiale's legacy can be reduced to the incredible force of fashion of his summarizing comicalness. His humour of speech, existentialist absurdity, his reducing of human behaviour to mere sketches, the unmasking of stupidity are vivacious proof that his work is still very much of present interest.

The third chapter deals with defining the drama character as an entity, together with the outlining of the specific traits of the interwar comedy characters. The character is a fundamental category of all epic and drama writings, occupying the central position in the literary work, embodying the centripetal force of the fictional universe, because it reduces all divergent actions under its unity. The drama character is an even more special case, capable of being both a paper doll that loves, suffers and dies, and also a flesh and bone being that emits the words and the behaviours that transmit the actions of love,

hurt and death. In theatre, the character is extremely necessary because it helps to elaborate the plot, which gives us the right to speak of its dramatic role. The character is necessarily associated to the discourse of a group or of a social class, and its most distinctive features are intimately linked with the characteristics of its discourse, with every chance of distortion and contradiction. The character also belongs to a higher tier of characters, with which he has common or oppositional features. The drama character is more of a stereotype than a real persona partly because theatre is unable to endorse it as a complete being with physically distinctive traits.

To talk about a character is to talk about the values he embodies. The interwar society claimed for a certain type of character. It was expected of it to stand out of a crowd by demolishing all stereotypes, to have deeper and more observable psychological processes, and to embody the echo of the stirring going on in the outside world. Interwar comedy was an excellent creator of atmosphere, although few memorable characters remain. The simple character of

the vaudeville is gradually replaced by the character that criticizes hypocrisy and is made of the convictions, the moral standards and the attitudes of an honest man. He is an anonymous, feeble man that bravely takes on the world. He stands for an important number of humane facets and this justifies why the audience immediately is taken with him. Despite the existence of the heteroclit character, the interwar comedy has some areas where the intentions of the writers interfere and also a common area that shows a single vision of human condition, powered by such artistic means that are destined to revolutionize theatre's ordinary means of expression.

The next chapter justifies choosing the interwar period for this investigation. The years between the wars have been a period of great possibility to which we would gladly return if such a thing were possible, for the sake of freedom: the freedom of approving or disapproving with the bourgeois standards, the freedom to have a conviction or to mock it, the freedom to leave the country or to return to it and so on. The interwar generation was

strong, active, intelligent and capable of its best. In this context, drama is looking to occupy an important place in the time's spiritual life, by exploring a broader universe and approaching life from a new perspective. The critics of the time (E. Lovinescu, G. Călinescu, Mihail Sebastian, Camil Petrescu) agree on a certain inertia of theatre, when compared to prose and poetry. Theatre seems to live isolated, but judging from the quantity of the productions and of the companies that were active during that time, we can speak of an intensive need for shows. Comedies satisfy the audience's need to recognize themselves in the characters on stage. The interwar theatre also became a means of escaping the ever more stressful environment.

The social satire is analysed in the fifth chapter exemplified with the work of Camil Petrescu. He is considered the most important Romanian playwright since Caragiale. He sought to write a comedy on the pattern of his own "theatre of concepts". Two years after his drama *Mioara* had stopped being performed, the playwright felt the need to try again both as a

writer and as a director. *Mitică Popescu* is a comedy written in hope that Romanian actors could easily be found worthy of interpreting the role. The main character is a replica of Rebreanu's dramatic character, Mitică Ionescu, and a replica of the famous character from Caragiale's plays. In appearance, Camil Petrescu's character is a frivolous, big-talking prankish rascal and a slacker. However, more profoundly, he is a stereotypical character, comparable to Dupont, the Frenchman, Smith, the American, Meyer, the German. He is the actual stereotype for the Romanian. In the corrupt Romanian society, Mitică realizes it wrong to be honest. This is why he bluffs and hides essential facts from his life. The actor playing Mitică Popescu has the opportunity to create a whole person, a veracious man with both competences and flaws. This comedy surprisingly completes Camil Petrescu's image of a man of theatre.

The first part of the sixth chapter is dedicated to the comical dramatic work of Alexandru Kirițescu, which is included in his *Bourgeois Trilogy* [*Trilogia burgheză*]. If in the first two plays, *Marcel & Marcel*

and *Florentina*, the author shows his preference for *Bovarism*, his last play *The Jays* [*Gaițele*], is one of the most modern theatrical experiences for the Romanian stage, a static play, whose depth paradoxically consists in the absence of any evolution of the plot. Our demonstration is concentrated on the dialogue which, the same as in modern theatre grants a sense of dynamics to the plot and to the puppet-like characters. Every single character becomes alive through the catharsis they feel with every naughty gossip they discharge. We distinguish Aneta, a character of force and firmness, who enchants us with her casual way of regarding life. The value of the play is enhanced by its popularity. For example, after the Second World War, it has been performed at the National Theatre of Bucharest for fourteen seasons; in 1955 there was the celebration of its 500<sup>th</sup> performance.

In the second part of the sixth chapter we analyse Tudor Mușatescu's comedy *I Arrive Tonight* [*Sosesc deseară*] whose action is set in the countryside. Old and conservative Olimpiu is shown

in opposition with Puiu, the stereotypical bohemian son who is a student in Paris.

The next section of the thesis deals with the political satire from two interwar points of view: Tudor Muşatescu's *The Last Waltz on the Titanic* [*Titanic vals*] and Mihail Sebastian's *Breaking News* [*Ultima oră*]. The part of the main character of the first play, Spirache Necşulescu, has made possible in time, the birth of many theatrical talents (George Calboreanu, Constantin Ramadan, Mişu Fotino, Costache Antoniu, Ştefan Bănică). The talent of the author is reflected in the creation of Caragiale-like characters, perfectly adapted to the interwar period.

*Breaking News* detects the mechanism of power; Grigore Bucşan is a very well delineated character which is remarkable for his forbearance and ridiculous for his fear of the harmless historic figure Alexandru Andronic. Mihail Sebastian proves enthusiasm, awareness, sensuality, intuition and the capability of showing both quintessence and finesse.

The lyric comedies by the same author make the object of analysis for the seventh chapter. From

the moment it was released, *Holiday Games* [*Jocul de-a vacanța*] has caught the attention and enchanted the audience through its perfect dramatic technique and through its vivacious, stimulating and clever dialogue. We can easily see this comedy as a part of the French theatre, in which reality, dream, humour and sensibility merge, although the author knew how to set his plays apart from their paragon by making atmosphere of more importance than the plot itself. The characters are psychoanalysed and endowed with the option of enriching their existence with discrete emotions.

The theme of the play *The Star Without a Name* [*Steaua fără nume*] is of solemn lyricism. Mihail Sebastian created an intellectual character that has the modest aspiration of becoming one with the essential, of living without the complications of introspection. The social climate in which he lives is of great importance because it symbolizes the adversity towards purity.

His last play, *The Island* [*Insula*], although unfinished, ends the cycle of Mihail Sebastian's

playwriting at the same time proving once again that evasion is the only way of escaping a limited existence.

Mihail Sebastian's plays were successful despite the fact that the author was brave enough to break away from the tradition of the period which was the satire that followed the pattern of Caragiale's work.

During the interwar period, few plays reached multiple seasons' performances. Rarely would a play be performed for the 50<sup>th</sup> time. This is why I've chosen for the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter the comedies of Victor Ion Popa and G. Ciprian, which stand out because of their achievements but also because of their fiasco. Based on the symbolism of repetition, *The Geranium in the Window* [*Mușcata din fereastră*], a sentimental comedy, has had a durable success because of its setting in the Moldavian countryside, but also because of the strong human emotions it promotes: a deep love for mankind, which seems to conquer all odds.

*Take, Ianke and Cadâr* is yet another daring comedy because of the topic of discrimination. The

play proves the fact that ordinary people living together in peace does not depend on nationality or religion. The part of Ianke was played by numerous important actors such as G. Timică, Jules Cazaban and Ion Finteșteanu. The character has a prevalent humanity, he is wise and witty, and his intelligence amazes the most in his conversational skills. I have then noted Victor Ion Popa's role in the evolution of the interwar comedy, through its kindness atmosphere which turns humour into fondness.

These two mild comedies aside, Victor Ion Popa is also the author of *The Revenge of the Prompter* [*Răzbunarea sufleurului*], an interesting satire regarding the mores of a carrier in theatre. All aspects of the picturesque theatre life are included in this play. The author handles the fugacious eclat of the actor which is at the same time the very heartbeat of this sort of carrier.

The particularity of G. Ciprian's theatrical work consists in the frail separation between reality and make-believe and in the wavering between the tragism of life and the grotesque. *The Man and his Old*

*Crock* [*Omul cu mârtoaga*] has been sold out after its premiere for three years, after which it began to be performed on great foreign stages such as Berlin, Paris, Bern and Buenos Aires. The main character of the play, Chirică the clerk, fits the description of the small pen pusher of the interwar comedy. A humble though bright character, he is able to see, to get a grasp of a new order of things. Through its moments of spiritual insight and self change that the characters undergo, we can classify G. Ciprian's play as part of the expressionist theatre. A genuine pleading against the act of limitation, *The Man and his Old Crock* is one of the few plays of the time that was capable of satisfying both the need of originality required by the specialists and the taste of the diverse audience.

In the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of the thesis, *The Burlesque Comedy*, we speak again of G. Ciprian, but also of Victor Eftimiu. We have first referred to the play *The Duck Head* [*Capul de rățoi*]. The menacing and dangerous world is replaced by a world regarded as a carnival, a world that is ruled by fantasy and flimsiness. This time, the modernism of G.Ciprian's

drama is accomplished through a rare trait, that of seriousness-filled simplicity.

*The Man that Saw Death [Omul care a văzut moartea]* revolves around the created situation and around the six characters, especially the main part, the Rogue, who, being the only one to have faced death, is the only one that learned to treasure life and feels justified to judge and teach others. A bold artistic creation, the play concentrates a remarkable amount of characters and lines.

If the first part of the thesis deals with the most notable comedies, its second part is dedicated to the forgotten interwar comic playwrights. Thus, the 11<sup>th</sup> chapter investigates Mircea Ștefănescu, I. Valjan, Bogdan Amaru and Ion Sava. The secret behind Mircea Ștefănescu's success is his capability of creating a staged show by exploiting all the possibilities it has to offer: motion, conflict, contrast, lines, dramatic or ludicrous situations. *The Comedy of Dawn [Comedia zorilor]*, his most renowned play, gives birth to an original character, the wretch. The lyrical vision on reality which is counterbalanced by

skepticism and irony complements the very idea of theatre. I. Valjan is a very vivacious comedian. He specializes in single-acted plays, in which the plot gives way to subtle conversation. Through *The Gordian Knot* [*Nodul gordian*] and *Generation of Sacrifice* [*Generația de sacrificiu*] the author intended to capture the humaneness of all social classes and to describe the turmoil of the Romanian society only a few decades after the World War. *Chasing Butterflies* [*Goana după fluturi*] is presented as a comedy in which its author, Bogdan Amaru, censors his lyrical enthusiasm through irony and minimization. This is complemented by the spontaneity of the lines, the sprightly dialogue which is an actual series of jests. Ion Sava's drama evades simple reading because the written word is best transposed into motion. *The Doll is Dead* [*A murit păpușa*] and *The Crate* [*Lada*], the two single-acted comedies prove that their author is a pioneer on this domain. The particularity of the plays consists in a powerful sense of dynamics.

The 12<sup>th</sup> chapter deals with the interwar prose writers that also played a major part in the evolution

of comedy. Liviu Rebreanu quickly understood that success may be obtained on this domain because of the ponderous context of the time. The characters of his comedies (*The Quadrille [Cadrilul]*, *The Envelope [Plicul]*, *The Apostles [Apostolii]*) are perpetually mystified and confused. Concordant with western-Romanian morality, Rebreanu captures the ethical abandonment, in three stages: adultery, trade business and peripheral politics. In the same accord, the four-acted comedy *The Fellowship [Confrății]*, by Gib Mihăescu handles the judicial system which is depleted of any trace of ethics and truth. The comedy is an excellent example of the fine borderline there is between honesty and depravity. The playwright is taken with surprises, climaxes and anticlimaxes, the perpetual conversion of pathetic into ridiculousness and vice-versa, from all these emerging the raw theatricality. Felix Aderca saw himself as a true modernist. He was an active member of the *Sburătorul* Group that had an influence on his work. *Zburător cu negre plete* is an abstract play. The playwright also established a dialogue between arts, including them in

a show with allegoric and fantastic intentions. Our analysis denotes the fact that his comedy becomes almost encyclopedian. Victor Papilian, a writer and a brilliant interwar physician, writes drama for the sake of his spiritual elegance. *An Incurable Optimist [Un optimist incorigibil]* is his most renowned play, which I've mentioned for the exaltation of the feeling and for its numerous encyclopedian echoes.

In an obvious order of this investigation, the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter is dedicated to poets tempted by comedy. *Fantasmic Comedy [Comedia fantasmelor]* proves the playwright's attraction towards the coloured history of the Italian Renaissance. As in the case of any worthy poet, under the disguise of a tragedy there lies a comedy. Ion Minulescu chooses the theme of the classic love triangle. His drama catches the eye through the symbiosis of Symbolism and Expressionism. The result is a melodramatic exercise that is not devoid of lyrical charm, emotion and exotic which undoubtedly ensures its place among the interwar theatre. Ion Minulescu's comedies (*The Sentimental Mannequin [Manechinul sentimental]*),

*Allegro ma non troppo, The Anonymous Lover [Amantul anonim]*) show a world of unrequited love and self search. The characters live in an equivocal and contradictory world and are powerless in their passion and in their intangible goal.

Few people are aware that E. Lovinescu was also preoccupied with theatre. This is dealt with in the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter.

The last chapter was conceived as a review of all the personalities involved in the interwar comedy, to which I have added a few words about the audience. The interwar directors (Paul Gusty, Soare Z. Soare, V. Enescu, Victor Ion Popa, George Mihail Zamfirescu) understood and promoted the concept that theatre is a real academy for the audience that meets here with the grand repertoire, of which comedy is included. Many a time, comedy was the one that made the audience more open to modernism.

The actors of interwar comedy (Ion Sârbul, Agepsina Macri, Ion Iancovescu, Maria Filotti, R. Bulfinsky, G. Ciprian, I. Manu, G. Vraca, Aura Buzescu, Marioara Zimniceanu, George Calboreanu,

V. Valentineanu, Ion Finteşteanu, Nataşa Alexandra, Nicolae Bălăţeanu, Sonia Cluceru) endeavoured to be real cultural mentors through the means of suggestion of their performance, concentrating the taste, culture and the spirit of the period.

The audience changed its taste with great rapidness. They could prefer horrid drama for one week, and the farce for the next one. The audience will always play an important part in the success or failure of a play and its education have troubled the specialists and the publications of the time.

For the *Conclusions* section I have noted some facts about interwar comedy: the connection with the artistic legacy of their predecessors, the temptation of playwriting exists with all writers, the period contained a number of very complex men of theatre, the diverse means of expression etc. The dramatic character is chosen from all social classes. The character is always the echo of the Romanian society's vibration at that time.

Through this thesis I intended to prove that the interwar comedy doesn't need to be regarded as

invariably easy and with a univocal significance. Romanian comedy in between the two wars proves to be a sufficiently prolific and at the same time interesting area of study, that still invites to researching and at the same time having a dominant place among the hierarchy of values of our national theatre.