

## 5. SET AND STAGE MOVEMENT IN ION BĂIEȘU'S THEATER

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**Abstract:** *The plurivalent meanings of the dramatic text allow the transcendence of the textual and the interaction of the characters who populate the scene, allowing the representation of the meanings of the fictional universe on another level, imagistic and aural. In this context, the aim of this article is to replay the role of scenery and stage movement in Ion Băieșu's work, an author who temporarily remained in the backstage of late 20th century theater. My intention is to reveal, first and foremost, the way in which the scenery supports the dynamics of dialog, offering another level of interpretation, constituting a new world against the background of which the story unfolds. First of all, the performance moves naturally forward amid the sinuosities of verbal interactions that verge on the grotesque and absurd, giving the director the possibility of giving the set elements various forms. The reader-spectator is not put in the position of decoding, but learns the lesson of reception as simply as possible, without this lessening the impact the display of meaning. Everything breathes decadence, ruin. It is a roller coaster of emotions that unravels the character, imprinting a laziness of living, of discovery. Examples are organized in a crescendo, from the monotony of a decadent universe, to the terrifying simplicity of others, which become the scene of atrocities: accidents or premeditated murder. Nowhere else is it so well this inclusion of the grotesque in the anguished and banal everyday. Factually, Băieșu's world is made up of gestures that are meant to be definitive, final, masterfully projected into apparently insignificant backgrounds. It is a tragic farce-comedy of the communist world in which the means of expression are but a world that does not lack tragedies.*

*But secondly, the stage movement is eminently allied to dull and bizarre, psychologically and mentally defining the distorted identities of some abulic individuals. The spectator is easily enlightened as to the nature of their experience and savoring every moment, following the chaotic, sometimes extremely slow, almost stagnant gestures. He seems to become a third actor who empathizes with the living situation, Băieșu reconstructing with humor and irony fragments of contemporary existence. The cuts are vivid and memorable, exhibiting not only a bitter taste of collective unhappiness, but also a sense of helplessness, coupled with the hope of possible moral and social rehabilitation. The exterior breathes the same domestic air and is an extension of the interior. Monotonous and dangerous, exterior spaces are repulsive to the truthful, they are populated by criminals, people with double identities, who wear, up to a point, the mask of bonhomie. The station platform or the tram station, the plain, the forest or the street itself become prototypes in which the object is confused with the human, in a game embedded in an insipid and improper nature. Therefore, this article-reflection aims to shed light on representations not of bitter but of an authentic scene in which the scenery and the movement are pertinent ways of affirming the spirit of the author's era.*

**Key words:** *duality, stage, grotesque, masque, variety*

### 1. Introduction

The plurivalence of the meanings of Ion Băieșu's comedies leads to the constitution of a real scenic world, in which individuals apparently devoid of ambition and depth manage to create memorable, edifying postures and attitudes, in the constitution of a collective mental of the world under communism. Literature is, above all, the valve through which this rigid environment breathes, but it also becomes the main source of a linguistic level in which sarcasm and irony, in brilliant subtexts, condemn a state of affairs, a direction. The author of comic farces of

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Caragialian descent, but unique in their access to peripheral spaces, which generate a fascinating contemporary slum, an absurd world in which movement is inert and repetitive, Băieșu manages to capture, equally through a symbolic setting and the detail of gestures that become characterological fingerprints, the "normal" of an universe that goes beyond the limits of naturalness or reason.

The scenery and stage movement convey two essential aspects that are reflected in the thematic content and the characters's image. The first of these is that the individual lives in a frustrated simplicity, an exhausting and morally degrading banality, which does not allow him to break out of his own soul and mental imprisonment. A captive of spaces that are themselves in ruins, he is content to live not so much in social anonymity as in spiritual anonymity, because he is alien to any form of inner elevation that could propel him beyond the material.

The director's choice of setting seems unequivocally to be committed to the strictness of didactic representation, the violation of which would alter the meanings imprinted on the text: *An extremely important element in theater, the set has evolved spectacularly throughout the history of universal theater and, each time, just as in the actor's art the solution to any deviation is a return to Commedia dell'Arte, in scenography it is synonymous with a return to the empty stage. The ancient theater solved the problem of the set by building a fixed one that cut the circle of the stage and offered possible technical solutions for the entrance, exit, and placement of the chorus for any performance. However, it would be wrong to think that the ancients did not pay attention to scenography, because there is enough information to affirm that they had solutions for appearances, disappearances and even flight. Commedia dell'Arte, by force of the fact that it offered its performances in the open air, apart from a more or less furnished stage and painted backdrops, had practically no scenery. As soon as the companies crossed the border and began to perform in France, they settled comfortably in the halls there and painted trompe l'oeil-style sets, which began to proliferate. The academic theater, the theater of the auditorium, however, builds the scenery up to sumptuous constructivist solutions, then it lingers for a while in the empty space, restores its strength to start again.*<sup>156</sup>

Secondly, the stage movement can only be carried out in two main directions that also reflect a dimension of interiority: pendulation between two spaces, usually inside and outside, or stagnation in the closed space of the house, the apartment, often captivity in the exterior universe, which is also subject to alteration, peripheral and miserable, of the station, the platform, the cafeteria where the tragic comedies unfold.

## **2. Inside atypical spaces**

Disconnected from the outside world and having a neutral, cold, impersonal look, the office of the Cooperative „The Perfect Bottle Cap” borders on the ridiculous by the fact that it is loaded with slogans meant to convey the good mood and motivation of workers who are otherwise devoid of a real and final purpose. The office is an ordinary one, seeming to lend nothing of the personality of the person who occupies it, namely Guzgănici, the person in charge of Unit No. 2. It is the place where absurd decisions are made and from where they spread out into the social

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<sup>156</sup> Mihai Mălaimare, *Decorul în teatrul stradal*, <http://www.caietelemasca.ro/2020/01/08/8-teatrul-si-cetatea/>

community. The drawing of a cork on its wall is a source of the comic situation and emphasizes the dimension of the ridiculous. The cabinet seems abstracted from the outside reality, being placed in opposition to the area outside where the sounds of infernal commotion can be heard.

From a directorial point of view, the separation of the stage into two areas, one imitating this cold interior and the other depicting the hallway, the entrance door, is one of the most felicitous choices that would highlight the contradiction that generates an overwhelming similarity: neither of the two places can express the inner self, the authentic affections, remaining transitory in the existence of alienated individuals. The hallway in front of the cabinet, subject to absolute degeneration, is populated by beings drawn as if from a burlesque mythology: the secretary, chief's Guzgănici mother, other relatives, who line up perfectly up to the third degree, symbolically called Nephew I, Nephew II and Nephew III.

Eloquent is the auctorial suggestion to number them on the back, given that they are triplets, resembling to the point of confusion. An individuality nullified, a uniqueness overshadowed or annihilated by a petty agglomeration that translates an acute nepotism. Another way of rendering the described scenery could be the existence of a single scenic space, that of the cabinet, while the backstage entrance could represent a palatable variant suggesting the corridor and the related bustle: *There are thumps, raised voices, commotion. Guzgănci climbs up on his desk and from there looks out of the window at the preparations, giving orders.*<sup>157</sup>

How would this last choice of staging affect the way we perceive the message of the text? In the first place, not exposing the exterior would only give an aural suggestion of the mood, even of the way in which preparations are being made for the reception of the inspector to check the proper functioning of the business. Visually, the scene carries various interpretations, and the audience would be interested to observe what these feverish preparations consist of and how Guzgănici's instructions are followed: *That's right, boys, sweep carefully and carefully! Don't throw the flowers at random. Break off the buds, sprinkle the petals. First the white petals, then the red petals.*<sup>158</sup>

Recognized for the versatility with which he manages to move from one space to another, constructing true scenic oddities, Băieșu projects exterior dimensions in the extension of the interior ones, which are unjustifiable by the event's unfolding. Changing the setting to that of a cemetery in which the entire cooperative participates in the burial of the hedgehog, symbol of the place and expression of individual human imprisonment, favors the description of the destiny of this main character, whom the author annihilates, promising to find a place for him in another play.

Self-deprecating, harsh in his attitude towards himself and the system, the writer fears the reaction of critics, who might accuse him of liquidating villains. The abrupt shift to the theater space complicates the play, but offers a new perspective on the stage. By abandoning the details of Guzgănici's office or the corridor in front of his door, the director will transfer everything to the theater hall, which remains the unique and primordial foundation of the show.

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<sup>157</sup> Ion Băieșu, *Teatru II-Preșul*, în *Teatru*, Editura Muzeului Literaturii Române, București, 2003, p. 15

<sup>158</sup> Idem, p. 16

The apartment is a relatively easy space to render on a textual and scenic level, especially through a meaningful association with the nature of the events, but it is, like the office, an impersonal space in which neither the author nor the director can manage to imprint anything but a bland, insubstantial personality of the man. In spite of the unanimously accepted environmental determinism, the staging of the apartment involves various possibilities of representation.

The setting of *Chițimia* is perhaps one of the most interesting exercise on visual duality. Projecting the double motif through the existence of two persons with the same name, differentiated only by the associated number (*Chițimia I* and *Chițimia II*), explained at the level of a flagrant theft of identity and, implicitly, of life, the author also chooses to outline a dual space: the two rooms of the apartment, separated by *glasvand*. The glass door separating the two rooms allows communication, a reflection of one world in the other. In one is Vica, and in the other is *Chițimia I*. It is interesting to see if the placement of a mirror between the two does not enhance the meanings associated with the characters and the spaces in which they roam. A *Chițimia* mirrored in Vica's world will emphasize the immersion of one universe in the other.

The same atypicality is present in the interior space of the medieval castle subject to decadentism, unsuitable for a life involving affect, intended for fraudulent intrusions, as in „Phantomade” or „The Ghost Tamer”. The castle is the perimeter for the unfolding of absurd events that the playwright transforms into the existential fires of stupefying lives. Florica pretends that she will study the castle's castle in which Biju, Zoglu, Traulică, common criminals, banknote counterfeiters, are hiding, caught red-handed by the daredevil policewoman. The problem of the flagrant returns obsessively in Băieșu's plays, projecting a complete comportamental absurdity. Pamfil P. Pamfil, character in the comedy „The Doormat”, doesn't marry for fear of the flagrant, a possible adultery of his wife becoming the motive for an atrocious murder. He also organizes a so-called flagrant to surprise his neighbor who wipes himself on his doormat. The need for truth, for evidence, for testimonies to incriminate the delinquent and establish guilt are recurrent in Băieșu's dramaturgy and a constant in his world: the guilt of the other has curative properties.

It will always be the stranger, the neighbor, the unadapted, the emotionally untable, the one who is unwilling to obey, to be educated or reinvented. The entire humnansanity is projected on the stage and the hyper-correct individuals, clinging to their own meaning of words that provoke them to reckless gestures. The realization of such a space of the ruined castle entails various modulations of the scenery, from fallen beams, eternal dust and hanging ropes to the total sense of desolation that the space exudes: *The Great Reception Hall of a very old and ruined medieval castle. Fallen beams, stones, bricks and a few ropes hanging from the ceiling. Upstairs, to the right and left, a few almost demolished lodges. In places, through the ceiling, you can see the sky. Poor, dirty light. When the curtain rises, the stage is empty.*<sup>159</sup>

### **3. Meanings of outdoor spaces: monotonous and dangerous**

Exteriority imprints the same sense of desolation that was emphasized by the limiting rooms, castles, and offices in which personal or collective dramas were

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<sup>159</sup> Ion Băieșu, *Teatru*, Editura Muzeului Literaturii Române, București, 2003, p. 23

consummated. From the absurdity of a social and political reality that affects the individual psychology by contaminating the environment, damaging it, one can observe a prolongation of the feeling of hopelessness, of being lost in the external universe, breathing the same air of decrepitude. In addition, the danger hanging over the wandering being in unhealthy, monotonous, solitary spaces gives a unique meaning to the dramatic text. In „Who Digs Another Man's Hole”, the landscape inspires absolute solitude, an open, exposed space: a field and a sky, nothing more. Maybe even a tree, with some shade for the performers when they tire of all the talking. At first, the field will be empty. The sun will scorch the barren land, devoid of any greenery. The whistling of someone walking in the field can be heard in the distance. After a while, a man of uncertain age appears with a spade on his shoulder. We'll call him Gravedigger I.

He will study the place carefully, feeling the ground with his bare feet, and declare himself satisfied. The directorial choice can have a double meaning. One could be the mucava setting, to which is added the image of a tree, a resting place for the unfortunates who want to escape the scorching sun, contrasted with the simple stage. In another vein, the scenery can be revealed to the audience through an audio-visual insert, a projection of a real image of a plain against the background of which the two gravediggers will find themselves, falling victim to the terrible and terrifying Jenica. Punished for digging the wrong hole, that of the other, they will experience the full absurdity of a situation in which Jenica, obsessed by a hilarious hypercorrectness, is the servant of proverbs whose letter is law. Ignorant, limited, but tenacious and fierce, Jenica makes no compromises. The choice of the second version of the setting, visual projection in the ciclorama, is preferable, especially for Jenica's entrance, as she seems to immerse herself in another world.

Observing her silhouette on the bright screen will emphasize the impetuosity of her image: *the two of them begin to dig with diligence, digging their spades deep into the earth. Moments later, a young blonde woman appears, dressed in purple, who will always have a white smile on her face. Meeting the two in her path, she doesn't seem surprised. She stops and stares at them for a long time, whistling, in a somewhat cheeky and provocative pose.*)<sup>160</sup> Being destiny itself, Jenica appears to deliver the verdict to the two gravediggers, who will be buried alive, as they are obliged to obey the proverb.

Quite slow, the secular movement is but a pendulum between interiority and exteriority, an extension of the vision of a playwright who hopes to imprint by the nature of his characters a moral meaning to the events that sum up an entire world constructed in the absence of empathy or morality. Disgraceful through her lack of humanity, Jenica becomes a mirror reflection of the Godfather in „The Strange Role of Chance”, a tenacious and terrifying individual, whom nothing sensitizes. Costel's refusal to take Tanța as his wife in the absence of a blood test, the terrible Wassermann, who only proves that marriage is a petty alliance, is cruelly punished by a murder that takes place on the station platform in front of the buffet where the defendant had not yet paid for his meal. Stabbed by the Godfather, Costel collapses, killed by the absurdity and grotesqueness of a situation that is essentially pathetic. Returning to an obsolete primitivism, obeying the crude law of the jungle, thus a

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<sup>160</sup> Ion Băieșu, *Teatru*, op. cit., p. 325

reversal on the moral scale, Costel's elimination resembles a historical tragedy of a society slowly but surely pushed into a precipice from which it will climb the rope in a unanimous and bloody effort.

The railway station is a place of oscillation, a space of heterogeneity where anything is possible and from where anything can leave or return. An audio effect that reproduces at intervals the sound of a train siren or the hustle and bustle of the platform is essential in the context of preserving authenticity. The railway station is not only this effervescent place where criminals roam free or where alliances are made and broken, it is the only gateway to possible liberation, but it is also a petty, miserable space where only certain trains run to predetermined destinations. Peripheral and unhealthy, the railway station is also a place where ethical deviations are possible and prone to such falls: *The backdrop shows the station cafeteria. It's clearly morning, the cafeteria hasn't opened. The siren of a locomotive can be heard in the distance. The waiter enters. He starts arranging the tables and chairs. At some point the Pensioner enters and sits down at one of the tables. At another table sits Costel, a nice young man dressed in a tasteful make-up.*<sup>161</sup>

The godfather sticks the shiv into Costel's back, then tactically wipes the knife blade with his handkerchief, saying: *I did what had to be done.* Theater in theater or theater about theater? Dramatically, the Godfather puts on a show of cruelty, he is a cold-blooded murderer, a product of Ion Băieșu's impertinent world, a torturer, an educator of those who want to obey the party's decision. This time, the party is the family, and disobedience is punished by elimination. Re-education is not possible, which is why they will resort to such methods, which, despite their atrocity, seem the only plausible ones. Thus, the paradigm of theater within theater works, as the godfather has another role, that of a much larger performance that goes beyond the modest Costel and Tanța's story. The fact that the characters leave the stage slowly allows for a double sense of the constitution of this movement: a slow but sure one, looking forward, without remorse, without conscience, or one filled with regret, Tanța looking back from time to time at Costel lying on the station platform in front of the buffet.

The directorial choice depends on the chosen perspective. In fact, just as Băieșu chooses to project the female character, Tanța mimics sensitivity, we don't see her able to protect Costel. Tanța would not look back, just as Silvică in „Vederea” would not marry her blind fiancé, because, at the urging of her retired neighbor and after self-reflection, she finds out that she does not, in fact, love him. As for the theater about theater, the playwright's choice to change scenery during the performance, to intervene, to remove or add characters, turns the motif into a recurring technique. He will always write theater about theater that his characters perform within the established perimeter.

#### 4. Conclusions

The dramatic universe offers, through set and stage movement, a second text that is told step by step, disavowing what lies behind closed doors by a playwright concerned with the meaning of his world. *The feeling of being in the antechamber of an essential event, in the temporal cul-de-sacs of an event of a vibration already*

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<sup>161</sup> Ion Băieșu, *Opere alese*, Editura Tracus Arte, București, 2013, p. 135

*floating in the air, is not foreign to any observer (...). A spectator in the making, on the threshold of a sudden change of rhythm in the fluid flow of events, this "reader" of the (as yet) unforeseen will be fulfilled. A theatrical 'as if' (als ob) is already installed in the anticipatory image of the scene to be performed. The empty space, traversed only by the unspeakable, foreboding breath of an imminent event in the order of the action subdues the spectator. The scene imposes itself with all its intrinsic dynamics.*<sup>162</sup> Breathing in unison, the two territories intersect harmoniously, realizing through movement and dialogue, an authentic hypostasis of the time in which Băieșu writes and which remains one of the most difficult in history. The stage set and movement are essential in the correct perception of the event that it reflects, becoming mirrors of a collectivity in which the individual is lost, immediately absorbed and yet so alien to it.

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<sup>162</sup> Lăcrămioara Petrescu, *Scena romanului*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 2005, p. 5