

THE 13th INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE OF



ISSEI

International Society for the Study of European Ideas
in cooperation with the University of Cyprus



Iolanda Mănescu, Mihaela Albu
University of Craiova

”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” in the Romanian Theatre Before and After the Fall of the
Iron Curtain

Introduction

The National Theatre of Craiova is one of the oldest and most important theatres in Romania. It was founded in 1850, and appeared as a need of the cultivated people for art. Some French and German companies used to visit Craiova in early 19th century, and to play different performances that must have inspired the theatre enthusiasts to create their own company. In the late 19th century, and early 20th century, the Craiovan theatre’s repertory included both classic and contemporary plays of the national and international dramaturgy. Thus, at the middle of the 20th century, the National Theatre of Craiova was a strong and stable institution with a rich repertory, and a one century long history.

Although valuable and interesting, the Romanian theatre during the Cold War was forced to produce only plays carefully selected and controlled by the totalitarian regime. Thus, the repertory of the National Theatre of Craiova mostly included Romanian historic drama, contemporary Soviet authors, and contemporary Romanian plays that praised and promoted

the political so-called achievements of the time, and the communist party ideology. The production of world classic and Western plays was restricted to a limited number of performances.

However, the censorship accepted the presentation of Bertolt Brecht's work in the Romanian theatre. Admired and denied, in turns, both in the East and in the West, Bertolt Brecht occupied a special place in the 20th century's theatre. His political convictions enabled his plays to be staged in the theatres in Eastern Europe, while his innovative ideas conferred on him celebrity in the West. His plays were also staged in Romania during the Cold War era. Every text is perceived differently from one epoch to another, and political plays are no exception. Directors and theatres return periodically to relevant texts to address their contemporaries. Our attempt is to compare the perceptions on the same Brechtian text, before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain, in an Eastern European country.

"The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui" before 1989

"The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui" was staged at the National Theatre of Craiova, Romania, for the first time in this country, as early as in 1962, less than six years after its author's death. The performance was presented nine times during the season 1961-62, but, because the cast rendered incomplete, it was played only during that season. In 1971, the same theatre produced "Man Equals Man", proving a constant interest in Brecht's dramaturgy at the time. The main article in the brochure of the performance of "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui" stressed the idea that,

"twenty years after the world premiere of Arturo Ui, one can witness the apparition of the mushrooms whose poison is the fascism. In the America of the „gangs”, the blacks

are hanged or burnt under the sign of a cross very much resembling the one hanging above the entrance of Buchenwald, and, under the same sign, the communists are persecuted; in France, the apartments of people who love democracy and peace are blown up, as it would happen in Berlin some time ago; in Italy, plaques engraved with the resistance heroes' names are blown up; in Congo, the people's true sons are kidnapped and killed secretly; in Asia and in Latin America, dictators on the grin, and with marionette behaviour, rule using the whip, the gun or the 'big cudgel'. In the Federal Republic of Germany, the Communist Party is forbidden by law, while the former 'stabs', 'unters' and 'gruppen-fuhrers' join together in bellicose meetings, walk insolently, hardly concealing their goose step through lands they once would ravage, and impudently claim the nuclear weapon.”¹

The brochure of the performance was also accompanied by a leaflet with quotations from Brecht, but also from Karl Marx and Lenin, mentioning that the texts were taken from a leaflet of the Berliner Ensemble Theatre. Under the title "What the spectator of 'The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui' need know", the leaflet also contained explanatory notes on the words 'trust', 'gangster and 'racket', and on the characters. It is obvious that the censorship approved the play to be staged, as long as the author's warning in the famous quote "Do not rejoice in his defeat, you men. For though the world has stood up and stopped the bastard, the bitch that bore him is in heat again" served the political regime's ideology according to which the Hitlerism was associated with the capitalism. The same indoctrination against the capitalism and the imperialism is present in the interview with the actor who played Arturo Ui. He states that he prepared the role by studying the modern history of Germany as well as Marx's Capital and "comrade Hruschew's report to the 22nd Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" (12), and characterises Hitler as "a sinister marionette in the hand

of the capital” (12) (where the word 'capital' - meaning 'capitalists considered as a group or class' - would have a negative connotation during the totalitarian epoch, the same, in fact, as all the words connected to the free market economy). The critics' reviews on the performance underlined, in the first place, the significance of the performance, linking it to the idea that the social order that had generated the fascist dictatorship still existed, and the rise of a new Hitler could be possible in the world of trusts, namely in Germany or even America.

”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” staged by the director Radu Miron in Craiova in 1962, was an interesting performance whose cast included both reputed and famous actors of the National Theatre, and talented representatives of, then, younger generations. The set design was minimalist and very inventive, using simple and mobile elements, while the music was signed by Hans Dieter Hossala, the Berliner Ensemble's composer. The critics praised the actors' performances, and their accuracy in depicting the characters, as well as the director and the set designer for having understood and illustrated Brecht's ideas.

”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” aroused a great interest during that time in Romania and was also staged by the students of the Bucharest Theatre Institute, in 1963, by the ”Giulesti” Theatre in Bucharest, also in 1963, and, later, in 1983, by the National Theatre of Timisoara.

Brecht's theatre would arouse an equal interest in the Western theatre at that time. After his return to East Germany in 1949, Bertolt Brecht had no longer been quite accepted in the Western theatre world: ”his plays were shunned and they did not come back into fashion again until 1962, six years after his death”.² ”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” presented within a Berliner Ensemble's tour in London, in 1965, was commented by the theatre critics rather from the perspective of the resemblance between the characters of the play and the persons they embodied than from the point of view of the historic consequences of the Hitlerism and the possible danger of its revival: ”We see Goering, big, bluff, leonine, a

rampaging predator more spinechilling even when he smiles than when he roars; Goebbels too – as if someone had lovingly dug up his cadaver outside the bunker and embalmed it so that every simian feature is preserved; lastly Roehm – his face an elongated visor cleft open by a gash that runs from nose to ear”³ says Richard Grunberger in the Tribune Magazine, in 1965. Regarding the political implications, the author of the article comments the background and causes of the Nazism: ”It tells a story quite brilliantly – but it is not the whole story. Unbridled bloodshed and corruption were major ingredients of the Hitler phenomenon, yet ballots paved his way just as much as bullets. In the eyes of fully half the German nation Hitler appeared as Christ – before he even was in a position to dragoon them into seeing things his way.”

”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” after 1989

In 1961, the view on ”The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui” was, of course, influenced by the tendencies and directions of that time. It is interesting to notice that, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, the same play was staged again at the National Theatre of Craiova, in 2003, and, of course, the ideas conveyed by the new production, were different. The director, Kincses Elemer, had staged the play before, in 1976, at the Hungarian Section of the State Theatre in Targu Mures. In the brochure of his 2003 production, staged at the National Theatre of Craiova, the director states: ”Back then, the performance talked about one person; today, I hope it talks about a whole mafia system, that functions perfectly”⁴, and explains that the Arturo Ui in his 2003 production is not only Hitler ”but also the whole mechanism which, like cancer, pervades all the society structures.” (5) The set itself conveyed the idea of destruction and dissolution, illustrated by Bruegel’s painting ”The Triumph of Death”, at the end of the performance. The whole conception of this production is based on the idea that the

apparition of a new form of dictatorship could lead to devastating results, to distorted human relationship, and finally to extinction. If rationality is replaced by ignorance, the image of the future of mankind is pessimistic. The critics' reviews on the performance of 2003 aim at explaining and decoding the message of the production. The most important theatre magazine in Romania, "Teatrul azi", stated that "the intellectual motivation is quite sinuous"⁵, and that the contemporary audience's interest in Hitler and Nazism might be questionable. Nevertheless, "Kincses Elemer's performance, solidly built professionally, expresses the atemporal and generalising dimension of the text, as well as the warning according to which the apparition of a new Arturo Ui is not at all a theoretical risk nowadays." (122) Another important cultural magazine, "Ramuri", from Craiova, explains in detail the comparison between Brecht's character and Shakespeare's Richard III, and the director's intention of asking "grave questions on honesty and the generalised corruption, and on the possibilities of stopping these tentacles of evil that cover stealthily, like an octopus, the human societies, suffocating them in anguish and terror."⁶ The critic describes also the stage sets which are seen like being part of the cast as long as they suggest an oppressive atmosphere in dull colours, and convey the same ideas of a world threatened by the a hidden danger of the totalitarianism through corruption. Another review in a local important magazine, "Scrisul romanesc", compares the Craiovan production with a production of "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui" staged, in about the same time, on the Broadway, starring Al Pacino. The critic finds many similar aspects in the two performances, compares the casts and the sets, the two actors in the leading role, Al Pacino and Valentin Mihali, and concludes: "Both the productions keep the classic spirit of the play without many metaphors or experimental excesses, each of them intervening only at the level of adaptability to a social or historic reality."⁷

It is interesting to mention that, while the play has several translations in English, there has been only one translation in Romanian, made by Florin Tornea, which was used both in the mid-20th century, and after the turn of the century. This is in fact one of the major problems that the Romanian directors are facing: the lack of new contemporary translations of the classics.

Conclusion

We will conclude by quoting John Elsom whose panorama of the Cold War Theatre includes a chapter dedicated to Bertolt Brecht and the way he has been perceived in the Eastern and in the Western theatres:

“What he saw through the framework of his philosophy was sharp and vivid: what he ignored were the blurred edges or that which did not fit, such as Coriolanus’ volte-face. In Poland, his plays were often staged for the laughs which he did not intend, while in Moscow *The Good Person of Setzuan* created a furore in 1963. In the West, Brecht’s impact spread slowly but deeply. It was felt at the Theatre National Populaire (TNP) at Chaillot, whose director, Jean Vilar, declared that the theatre should provide a ‘a public service in exactly the same way as gas, water or electricity’. For the new wave of British directors, despite Devine’s skepticism, the Berliner Ensemble became a vey model of a modern major company.”⁸

Bertolt Brecht’s role in the 20th century theatre is very important, not only because he is the initiator of the epic theatre or because he is the founder of the famous Berliner Ensemble, but

also because he was equally promoted both in the West and in the East in a time when the Iron Curtain separated dramatically the Western and the Eastern civilizations.

Endnotes

¹ Dragu, Petre, "The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui – a Current Play", in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui - Playbill* (Craiova, 1961): 9-10

² Elsom, John, *Cold War Theatre*, (London and New York, Routledge, 1992), 47

³ Grunberger, Richard, "Theatre without Heroes",

<http://archive.tribunemagazine.co.uk/article/27th-august-1965/7/-heatre-without-heroes>

⁴ Kincses Elemer, in *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui - Playbill* (Craiova, 2003): 5

⁵ Iordache, Antoaneta, "Oglinzile lui Kincses asupra lui Brecht, la Craiova...", *Teatrul azi* 8-9 (2003): 122

⁶ Vranceanu, N. P., "Premiera la Teatrul National din Craiova", *Ramuri* 9-10 (2003): 30

⁷ Firan, Carmen, "Ascensiunea lui Arturo Ui ... la New York si Craiova", *Scrisul Romanesc* 3 (2003): 25

⁸ Elsom, *Cold War Theatre*, 48