

Life and work of George Mihail-Zamfirescu

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Abstract: *The greatest playwrights of the Romanian theater managed to prosper through their writings. Although qualitatively it was not a flourishing period, the Romanian theater did not decline, on the contrary, it enjoyed a diversification of expression through dramaturgy, directing and scenography. Although the lines given by history and politics were not favorable to the theater, it managed through the struggle and the support of some people truly dedicated to the theater to fight through the dark and hostile times to the culture and to develop as much as possible with the western openness given by the union of Transylvania with Romania, but also through the mud left behind by the first world war and the mist that threatened to come with the second world war.*

Keywords: *playwright; bibliography; theatre; creation;*

1. Life of George Mihail-Zamfirescu

On the 13th of October 1898, the great Romanian playwright George Mihail- Zamfirescu was born, born Gheorghe Petre Mihai from his mother, Raluca Costache and father Petre Mihai, who was a carter. He lived in a slum, a place that inspired him in the creation of his future works. He was born into a poor family and did not manage to escape poverty until the last moment of his life. Although he was without material means, he loved books from primary school and remained devoted to the process of education and training until his death. Because he wanted more than he could have, he often suffered from fits of rage and anger. He finished high school in Bucharest, but during the holidays he worked with his father in the factory and managed to save some money for books. By the time he finished high school, he managed to build up a small personal library. As soon as he finished high school he had to go to war in 1916 when he was drafted. He started in the middle of the war as a scout, but at the end of the war he was promoted to second lieutenant. He took part in the battles of Tabla-Buții and Răzoare. Even though he was brought up in the slums and was used to poverty, he was devastated when he returned to Bucharest to find it looted, vandalized, and plundered. This state of siege, however, was not only found in Bucharest but in all the towns and villages of the country. The middle class was almost non-existent. Poverty was everywhere, and the few wealthy post-war people were still profiting from a country close to collapse. Although the war was over and people were slowly, slowly resuming their usual strolls down the boulevard, and the few aristocratic class balls were beginning to make an appearance, the general atmosphere was gloomy and depressing with no obvious solutions to the country's problems. George Mihail-Zamfirescu had just turned 20 when these heinous images flashed before his eyes and he felt demoralized, tired and fed up with the situation, although not defeated yet. The war had robbed him of his naivety and innocence, the

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morbid images of the war would remain imprinted in his mind forever and he would constantly seek solutions and remedies for this state of neglect and faintness that gripped the whole nation. He takes up writing during the war, but his notebook is lost in a dispute in which it is confiscated. Perhaps this event strengthens him and gives him the determination to write down his thoughts, frustrations and revolt when he returns to Bucharest. Through various circumstances he crosses the threshold of Alexandru Macedonski's house, a writer who will influence both his debut creation and that of his creative maturity. In addition to Macedonski, he also mentions in *Viața literară* other writers such as Eminescu, M. Săulescu, Iuliu Cezar Săvescu, Ștefan Petică and G. Bacovia: "If we take a cursory glance at the few years of Gemi's early poetic career, we can certainly notice the striking similarities with Macedonian poetry. The same open - and sometimes declamatory - affirmation of artistic ideals, the same tormenting questioning of the meaning of life, the same haunting awareness of damnation, of the unfortunate fate destined for the poet, the same jubilation full of ecstasy before the great mysteries of nature"².

Gemi is the pseudonym he signs his works under quite frequently and is starting to make a name for himself. He works more and more and publishes just as much and we can see his evolution in the creative artistic field. Even if his early work is not of great importance for the history of Romanian literature and does not strongly influence the literary movement of the time, we discover through it, the artist, the sensitive man able to feel the hardships and needs of the world he lived in. In his poems, stories, and sketches we discover the questions that troubled and tormented him. In a world shrouded and controlled by mediocrity he had that gentleness and tenderness with which he managed to get through another bleak day: "George Mihail Zamfirescu has an attentive and precise eye open to the world. From the dust of events in which we live - in which he lives - through a sure intuition he knows how to choose the characteristic feature, he knows how to make up the synthetic mosaic of a work of art. This is how he reveals himself, as he once did to Caragiale, only in a different tonality - that of his sensibility – a main feature of the soul of the slum people"³.

One of the most important things he does in life is when he takes the initiative and establishes the "*Asociația tinerilor scriitori români*". It is the first association of its kind in the country but it does not last long because the only financial supporters of the association are a few founding members of the association. Also during this time, he prints the newspaper *Eroii patriei*.

In order to support his family, he takes a job as a civil servant in a state-owned company. Although clerical work is not a "calling" but a necessity, he continues to write with his characteristic diligence in the evenings when he gets home and the whole family is asleep. In 1922 he married and moved to Satu-Mare, also as a civil servant. Although his work here is more rigorous than before and he finds no peace and understanding from any of his superiors, he finds time for writing and remains persistent in his attempt to improve the literary writing of the time. The first version of *Maidanului cu dragoste*, *Gazda cu ochii umezi*, and *Cuminecătura*, his first play, appear.

„Without primarily being a comedy writer, George Mihail Zamfirescu also devoted time to writing with the intention of making people laugh or amusing the audience. To some extent, he succeeded, as "The Idol" and "Ion Anapoda" are not devoid of comedic situations and characters.

² Ripeanu Valeriu. 1958. *George Mihail-Zamfirescu; Schiță monografică*. București: Editura de stat pentru Literatură și Artă, p. 13.

³ Zamfirescu – George Mihail. 1986. *Teatru*. București: Editura Minerva, București, pp 539; 540.

However, the writer did not overlook the hidden dramas often concealed by certain circumstances, apparent situations, and false relationships. In these cases, comedy seemed bitter to him”⁴.

During this time, the love for theatre is irrevocably and irredeemably established. He sets up a theatre company in Satu-Mare, which is not subsidized by the state. He leads the company, acts and directs. Even though the company lacked funding, with the help of its troupe of amateur actors, it brought out plays such as *Patima Roşie* by Mihail Sorbul and Săulescu's *Săptămâna luminată*. He feels the limitations of provincial life, burdened by poverty and a larger family, he has two daughters with his wife and decides to return to the capital and take up a job as librarian of the *Libertatea* circle.

The years spent in Satu- Mare are decisive in his future career. Confined and limited by his possibilities, unsupported by anyone in his love for the theatre, he would remain permanently frustrated by the mediocrity of the middle class, by the mud and dust that settled on the bodies and souls of the people of the province. The capital was beginning to move, the spiritual and cultural life of the city dweller let him breathe and dream of a better world and a better life. But once back in the cruel quagmire of reality he resigned himself and wrote. And he wrote a lot because it was the only thing that helped him get his ideas and frustrations out. Only if he could change something in the system and make it work better.

For Zamfirescu, theatre as an art and an institution is placed on a pedestal. Of everything he has tried to write, and has written, the most he has succeeded and enjoyed has been in drama. His characters are lively, full of life and enthusiasm, he crosses a sea of unknowing with them, he is carried along by the waves, he is curious and discovers fundamental emotional states that only life spent in the provinces has helped him to understand the drama going on in the soul of the average man. The search for happiness remains the main theme in all his works, especially his drama. Theatre was for George Mihail- Zamfirescu the second existence. He gave it his best and spared nothing, he searched, he worked, and he was ground in darkness. At the end of this strenuous toil, he did not reap the laurels of gratitude, but the painful thorns of misunderstanding and envy. He was a daring but also a great naive. He believed that the ideal could triumph, but he was struck down by the petty and selfish. He thought he could triumph, but saw himself strangled by ankylosis and routine⁵.

After a life dedicated to writing and theatre, he dies sad, depressed, in poverty and misery, as poor as when he was born. The years he spent in a hut where in winter he could not afford to build a fire to keep warm would leave irreparable marks on his already fragile health from his childhood.

2. The work of George Mihail- Zamfirescu

His first volume appeared in 1924 but was written in 1921. *Flamura albă* is strongly impeded by the awkwardness of the beginning. Throughout the volume we don't capture a clear narrative thread, but the images depicted come straight from the artist's wartime youth, images of bodies dumped in mass graves, mud and frightened people. Many ephemeral characters are seen only as brutish apparitions, dominated by bestial instincts and shameless lust. The picture of the battlefield is complemented by the disgusting view of the mores of the Romanian proletariat at

⁴ Brădăţeanu Virgil. 1970, *Comedia în dramaturgia românească*. Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, p. 279.

⁵ Ripeanu Valeriu. 1958. *George Mihail-Zamfirescu; Schiţă monografică*. Bucureşti, Editura de Stat pentru Literatură şi Artă, p. 172.

that time. The satirical vein, permeated by a disgust that goes as far as revolt, one of the constants of Zamfirescu's work, begins to stand out from now on⁶.

In 1925 the first play signed by George Mihail-Zamfirescu appeared. *Cuminecătura* is a one-act play with characters drawn from Costache Negruzzi's novel *Alexandru Lăpuşneanu*. The subject is not chosen by chance, as the playwright seeks in his writings the most complex, powerful characters and situations of maximum intensity. His dynamic style can be found in all his plays: *Cuminecătura*, *Domnişoara Nastasia*, *Idolul și Ion Anapoda*, *Sam*, *G.R.8* and *Adonis*. In *Cuminecătura*, Zamfirescu presents Alexandru Lăpuşneanu from the side of his rejection of the bohemian class. The scenes are short, full of charm and dynamism, torn as if from a film script. The events follow each other in quick succession. The action begins just before the feast when some of the nobles sense the danger that awaits them; the family of a nobleman hanged by Lăpuşneanu curses him for his crime. They plan revenge with cold blood and even if for us today the ruler's gesture is inhumanly cruel, at that time his bloody behavior was not out of the behavioral pattern of the time. Negruzzi portrays Lăpuşneanu as we imagine a ruler. He is diplomatic, with small outbursts of violence, the strength with which he directs his plans for revenge, whereas in Zamfirescu he is human, effervescent, dynamic and impulsive. In his conversation with Vornicul Moţoc, he no longer hides, the slight irony of the beginning turns into passionate sincerity and he admits how much he hates the Boers.

However, Zamfirescu doesn't keep the plot as Costache Negruzzi did and dares to change the ending of the play. Lady Ruxandra does not take the cure for fear as in the novel, but jumps at the prince's throat to strangle him. In the meantime, his son Bogdan appears in the hall and crushes his head with his foot. Like an ancient Greek heroine such as Medea, Electra or Antigone, Lady Ruxandra takes her destiny into her own hands. In a man's world, feminine power stands out even if the author didn't yet have the secrets of building such a complex character.

Domnişoara Nastasia is the most famous play written by George Mihail-Zamfirescu. It is said about him, about the writer, that he is the illustrator of the periphery, of the barrens. The actions of his plays take place in the periphery and the mediocre people in the plays want a better social condition, a quieter and more human life. Many have associated Zamfirescu's plays and his characters with those written by Caragiale. But Caragiale's characters come from the slums, that inner city of upstarts who do not know true social values and who do not strive for a better ideal but for a better appearance.

The farce life plays on the heroes is tragic, the farce of unfulfilled hopes, of dark dreams, the tragic farce of murdered loves. George Mihail Zamfirescu's play ends with the ultimate tragic farce played by Vulpaşin's Nastasia, the wedding with death, the union of reason with madness.⁷

Zamfirescu's characters live a real drama, they come from the periphery where most people are limited and do not move towards an ideal, do not have a particular goal. And those few who want something better only run into barriers and stumbling blocks in their achievement. Nastasia longs to break out of mediocrity but is not supported in this goal. Her father, the priest Ion Sorcovă, is the first to try to discourage her, but not out of malice. He has bitter life experience

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁷ Brădăţeanu Virgil. 1970. *Comedia în dramaturgia românească*. Bucureşti, Editura Minerva, p. 278.

and out of kindness he thinks he will help her if she sets smaller, achievable goals so she won't be disappointed.

This Nastasia-Luca-Vulpasin trio is doomed to failure from the start. Each of these characters has a goal but no one gets to fulfill it. Nastasia's final gesture, when she realizes that she will never escape from the slum of Veselia and that her years of torment and suffering have been in vain, she decides to end her life. Suicide seems like a good solution for a man who dedicates his life to escape the clutches of mediocrity and the indignities of social slavery. Both in *Cuminecătura* with Lady Ruxandra and in *Domnișoara Nastasia* with Nastasia, Zamfirescu uses heroines to end suffering. None of these women let themselves be trampled until the end. From this point of view, Miss Nastasia represents a moment of the influence of Russian realism in our literature, otherwise assimilated with the help of an autochthonous literary category. George Mihail Zamfirescu characterized his work as a tragic comedy, an expression used by Mihail Sorbu. in the subtitle of *The Red Passion* and his other dramas, which are, therefore, at the beginning of the literary series, where Miss Nastasia takes her place.⁸

When Nietzsche classified art into apollonian and Dionysian, Zamfirescu went more towards Dionysian, his characters living their dramas to the fullest.

3. Conclusions

For George Mihail - Zamfirescu, the theater as an art and an institution is placed on a pedestal. His characters are alive, full of vigor and enthusiasm, he crosses a sea of ignorance with them, lets himself be carried by the waves, he is curious and discovers fundamental affective states that only the life spent in the province helped him to understand the drama that takes place in the soul to the average man. The search for happiness remains the main theme in all his works, especially in drama. George Mihail Zamfirescu's theater is a vibrant and captivating world, populated by complex and lively characters. In his works, the theater is more than just a mere setting - it is a space where the subtleties and contradictions of human nature are reflected. In conclusion, George Mihail Zamfirescu's theater is a fascinating journey into human complexity and the picturesque world of the Romanian province, captivating and deeply moving for its audience

4. Refernces

- Rîpeanu, Valeriu. 1958. *George Mihail-Zamfirescu Schiță monografică*. București: Editura de Stat pentru Literatură și Artă.
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⁸ Vianu Tudor. 1977. *Scrieri despre teatru*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 385.