

# Theatre as expression of society - I.L. Caragiale

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**Abstract:** *I.L. Caragiale will be sought in the bosom of the world, in the heart of society, through the dungeons where painters, journalists, poor people, people of all varieties pervade. Caragiale's main source of inspiration will be man, in all its splendor and especially, with all its flaws. Using his keen observation spirit, Caragiale will be responsible for taking over and processing the typologies of character, which will give color through the language and which will integrate them into stories that become complex in their simplicity.*

**Key-words:** *I.L. Caragiale, Theater; Expression of society; Literature; Comedy.*

## 1. Introduction

The volume of studies dedicated to Caragiale's work, the national and world-wide area of distribution, all these lead us to a new and well-deserved term named *caragialeology*. An extended period of almost seven decades, when the unique creation of the great playwright needed protection against the common misunderstandings, against the ill will, against the openly declared hostility from press or even jealous brethren. In truth, Caragiale offered the world an innovative theatrical direction; he invented the modern Romanian satire and set an extraordinary landmark among the great comedies of the world. The great playwright is and will always be contemporary because he belongs to everyday life, not only to a certain period of time. His work cannot be limited to an era grace to the various meanings and literary subtleties one can discover together with each thorough analysis of the characters transformed in genuine symbols. Always troubled, Caragiale was that type of passionate creator, who characterized briefly and almost maliciously the facts of life as well as the humans, on different genres, the ones involved in the intellectual life of the city. Initially, it was thought that the playwright wanted at any cost to notice and condemn only the facts that belonged in the sarcastic scope of the satire. But at a closer look, one can easily state that Caragiale had joy in discovering every work or cultural fact and that he was supporting it at every opportunity. For him, who was always looking tirelessly for words, who was an excessively thorough artist, the shape of the literary work did not represent a purpose: "If the formal expansion cannot take appropriately the intention, the work becomes an unsustainable monster; the expression melts in an instant, it does not mean anything anymore because it does not represent the purpose, but the means itself..."<sup>2</sup>. Caragiale's attention was headed toward everything that was stiff and he was suspecting the bright things, which usually were hiding falsity and rottenness. He constantly tackled the works that were cutting off the spirit of the Romanian nation, the works that were not revealing its suffering. One can state that through his plays, I.L. Caragiale changed the general perspective regarding the Romanian theatre. To some extent, Caragiale became the maker of a new type of theatre and he managed to encompass on stage the breath of an entire world, the quiver of time and the vices of the society, usually played savagely, hilariously, while remaining in their essence sad. Caragiale took contact with the world of theatre since his childhood, when he was marvelling at the provincial theatre troupes and he remained fascinated by art until his last breath, managing to

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<sup>2</sup> Râpeanu, V. 1974. *I.L. Caragiale interpretat de...* București: Editura Minerva, p. 261.

take it to a whole new level. Whoever might search critically in the entire Romanian literature another dramatic movement as powerful as this, they would not have a single chance to discover a more original and profound work than the one Caragiale created. The genius playwright's success was ensured by the satirical representation of the middle class, with its either good or bad habits, with the lack of culture of the crowd, while mastering the exceptional skill of the phrases. Mainly an author of comedies, Caragiale identified the way of working of the society through the lens of a modern author who aimed to transpose on stage the characteristic elements of a universe invaded by the inflation of the irresponsibility. Not only the dramatized lecture, but also the stage as well as the film took part prominently in the spread of Caragiale's work among the masses, with the help of an incisive satirical style that ridiculed stupidity and self-sufficiency. Many of his creations were published in humour magazines of the period, especially *Moftul Român*. The highest mark regarding humour is to Caragiale the banter and high quality irony, which grasped the nettle strongly. He targets attacks against the faulty politics, against the hypocrisy and the whims shown to the world directly. He allows his audience to see the deep flaws of the society in its defective use of communication, through the powerful ridiculousness and the logic full of gaps. In relation to his art, the problem this study raises is the manner in which Caragiale treats theatre with respect to the surrounding world. What is the great playwright's opinion regarding theatre and how did he manage to illustrate it in his studies and plays over the years?

## 2. Caragiale in relation to the surrounding world

In the first place, the next best thing one can do is to consider that Caragiale's opinions regarding literature and art were in general not influenced by a certain theoretical spirit, but a strong knowledge of the surrounding world, a sharp spirit of observation and the reflections of an "old man", as he used to recommend himself. In his opinion, "if art reflects reality, its viability is insured by the worldly understanding it contains (no art without meaning, no meaning without art), but in the scheme of expressiveness, also by the author's talent and efforts". Thus, art is also born through the viewer's eyes. This is precisely why one can easily notice how Caragiale tries (and manages) to address each type of audience in his works by exploiting every stratum of the society. While observing the other authors of pathetic and sentimental prose, Caragiale fought bitterly against this habit hidden under a so-called talent umbrella. The multitude of differences in opinions and interpretations of Caragiale's works is grace to the above mentioned aspect, especially influenced by language and the cultural and aesthetic availability of each recipient. Acting as the icon of an entire period, Caragiale turns into a painter of contraries, contraries he brings on the same stage and puts them in the same plan of situations of life while having laughter as an only purpose. Despite all these arguments though, Caragiale was constantly and harshly blamed for the immorality and indecency of his characters, for the creation of ridiculous but expressive human beings. A certainly surprising fact is the awarding ceremony of the Romanian Academy in April 1890, when the award for literary production represented on stage was given to G. Meitani, while I.L. Caragiale obtained only 3 votes for and 20 against. Two years later, this situation repeated and Caragiale lost again against Ioan Mihaly de Apșa. Caragiale had only one response regarding this situation: "I have stayed quiet and endured waiting for my day to come"<sup>3</sup>. And his day has come when the Romanian critics as well as the international ones praised him for his originality and his work took a path full of brightness in the entire world. Following the existence of I.L. Caragiale, beyond the circumstantial and often picturesque aspects, sometimes a "man gone awry", so many times displaying the dignified confrontation with

<sup>3</sup> Călinescu, G. 1941. *The History of the Romanian Literature from Origins to Present*. București: Editura Litera International, p. 203.

diverse circumstances not only dramatic, but also stupid, sometimes an “unfortunate man”, as the writer seemed to consider himself, one may find it hard to avoid the suspicion of the great oddities inside his soul. Caragiale was more conscious than anyone else about the fact that the genius (especially the comic type) is pushed by his supernormal structure itself to get tangled through the norms created by a common world or even worse, by a world where he was meant to live. The surrounding universe served Caragiale a very long time as source of amusement and precisely the habit of ridiculing the tendencies of society was the one that kept him for many years in the shadows, without allowing the audience to understand the style and reason behind his literary approaches. Caragiale is the best observer of our leanings, one who never forgot to charge the injustice of a sick society, dependent of immorality and scandal. He confessed to his inner circle that he did not feel part of the world he used to describe and that he was trying to avoid the deformed environment he was living in. In an obituary written in 1912 with his characteristic torrential zest, Nicolae Iorga mentioned that, „The descendants who did not see or hear the particular human being will not understand his spirit or his strangely lighted eyes in tones of irony and tenderness, of admiration and destructive direct, this man with his voice meant for enforcing his beliefs and whims with vocal, shattering, withering gestures of a genius actor, this spirit full of ironic intentions and refined fads, capable of cruel elementary assaults, of blind enthusiasm, of unyielding daring negation, one day one way, another day another, maybe the perfect opposite, but always as poetry, as corrosive joke, beyond the usual measure of the human being. He was like this because in him, all these were always fighting in a tragic conflict that torn him apart” and “he was always the proudest when he was able to capture in the lucid classical form something from the concepts of a fiery romanticism”<sup>4</sup>. Eugen Lovinescu sees from another angle the typological affiliation and the deep structure of I.L. Caragiale because of his reluctance and his constant contradictions. Thus, “He was not only lacking idealism and generosity, but also poetry; his heroines do not have a feminine side or warmth. Devoid of insight, devoid of any ideology, of any generous, pessimistic breath, devoid of vulgarity but often coloured - after it has enjoyed the prestige of a too actual literature it is going to act later only as documentary value”<sup>5</sup>. “Caragiale’s dominant quality is intelligence”, states Șerban Cioculescu. He continues by stating that, „He is one of those writers meant to stir up controversies and vivid remarks depending on the unexpected angles in perspective the future generations will assume. This is the glorious fate of a writer with a message, be it an individual message as the great ironic artist had, who gifted the Romanian society a treacherous mirror for its real face. The attitude toward such a writer is a continuous response to the mirror game turned upon him as a tribute of reciprocity”<sup>6</sup>. Truly, even though he was manifesting an impressive ability to adapt in any social environment, although he was not exactly a literary man but a common one who enjoyed observing closely humans of any kind, Caragiale was strongly hit by this pleasure ever since he illustrated it ironically in his plays, some of them (especially *D’ale Carnavalului*, which was booed when it was represented) having been understood as pure mockery of the entire society. Unlike Eminescu, I.L. Caragiale was a complete extrovert such as the renowned comics are generally, but not particularly the monumental humourists (for example, Creangă). The agoraphilia so characteristic of Caragiale, although not exclusive and not protected of the mustering in itself, but prevalent anyway compared to the solitary existential monologue of Eminescu, represents the distinctive inclination of the “extroverts” highly endowed with the power to create. Beyond this, there are other epithets and unjust descriptions Caragiale was burdened with over the years and this study attempts to shed warmth and light over the work of a playwright who enriched so much the Romanian theatre.

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<sup>4</sup> *Pagini alese*, 1965. București: E.P.L., pp.140 - 141.

<sup>5</sup> Lovinescu, E. - *Critics*, vol. VI. București: Editura Ancora, pp. 23 - 24.

<sup>6</sup> Cioculescu, Șerban. 2003. *Cargialiana*, București: Editura Albatros.

C. Dobrogeanu-Gherea also considered Caragiale “indifferent” to the high ideals of society, a cynical human being lacking ideals (Lovinescu again), a non-adherent in the Romanian space, a late “phanariot occupant” of a certain class (N. Davideescu), an insensitive man toward the marvels of nature (Mihail Dragomirescu, Ioan Slavici), a man blind to the charm of the “eternal feminine” or other beautiful feelings (Lovinescu), and according to these statements, Caragiale -as artist and human being also- was a monstrous nest of snakes or an Aretino of the Romanian literature. Unfortunately, the ones who noted these injustices toward Caragiale remained only “trees” yearning to catch a glimpse of “the forest”. Through the natural data of his inner existence, Caragiale began and ended manifesting himself as a genuine chimera and a chimera is not only monumental, but also substantial in its principle and intakes, without any discrepancy between what it appears to be and what really is. According to the above mentioned statements, one can take two generic notes. First, “the world is a theatre” that ceaselessly directs its “representations”, distributes “actors” who have an actual role to play, including the native capacity to play it correctly, but also “pseudo-” or “similactors” who have no other ability than to improvise their roles. When such an “actor” endowed with the aptitude to remake everything in existence cannot repress -and does not want to- his response toward the “roles” compared, he is Eminescu. But when he represents his spectacle to the world from places or angles of observation which seem to capture only the exhilarating superficialities, presenting it with amused detachment, then he is Caragiale. The characters in Caragiale’s plays do not make themselves heard only on stage, they were seen by the author himself and this is the reason why they seem so alive, they shine on stage thanks to the excellent characterisation the playwright creates for them. Their precision and detailed description of the space of action has defined the actual orientation of Caragiale’s work. On the other hand, the heroes of his sketches or novellas, who were not created to appear on stage, are hard to be artistically drawn because the author usually suggests only certain features. For example, “his hair was neither black, nor yellow or brown...”<sup>7</sup>.

### 3. Conclusion

Caragiale as a man was confusing for the majority of his contemporaries, with the remarkable exception of Paul Zarifopol but also the late commenters of his life and work. But the harshest objection made was that Caragiale was lacking “ideals” and this could have been the reason why he populated the Romanian literature with moral monsters. The objection is reductionist for two reasons. First of all, in order to create plausible and diverse monsters, often surpassing the variety and authenticity of those around, you need plenty of models in the objective world, including the capacity to observe them in detail, to discover their proximate genre and the specific difference in their way of being, feeling, acting, while selecting them. One of the most important reasons why the reproach regarding Caragiale’s lack of “ideals” is woefully simple is when one realizes that one needs high ideals in order to observe closely and accurately their absence in the surrounding world. Is there a more categorical separation between an author and his heroes, other than the *caragialeian* laughter? And can be there a greater disregard of such characters when one does not even pay an effort to balance them an “ideal” although in its name one can distinguish how they are and how they try to be and often appreciates them for what they seem to be? One should add to the list of disregarding labels of those concerning the “lack of ideals” the one that stated that Caragiale offers the most pessimistic view of the world in the entire Romanian literature, since he illustrates in his work in most of the happenings vices, faces completely opposite to ideals. But the question arising here is, is there a need for an artistic writing, especially for those regarding the

<sup>7</sup> Silvestru, V. 1979. *Elements of caragialeology*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 198.

integrity of comic, to have an obligatory explicit “ideal”? Can it not be only suggested (through the variety of ways of the “reverse colour”), can it not be implicit? Caragiale’s comedies were represented all around the world. In Budapest, the staging of *O scrisoare pierdută* was made in black and white, in a seemingly funeral atmosphere, with furniture containing mourning elements. The Hungarian director attempted to show the image of a buried world, where the action was placed in a space-tomb. In France, the public television showed Caragiale’s stage as a puppet play where the setting and the characters were stylized. The comical side of the politicians was coming here from the turmoil of the stage movement. In Japan, the show was adapted in a modern and contemporary fashion, where the audience was included as a direct participant. Everything seemed to stem from modern era’s Japan and not from an East-European country at the end of the 19th century. In Turkey, the acting game was adapted and the atmosphere created was mysterious, almost full of dangers. While Cațavencu exposed proudly his speech, his adversaries were crowding silently and menacingly around him and Zoe and Tipătescu, overly excited, seemed to want to strange the harmless Drunk Citizen.

#### **4. References**

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