

„The Cherry Orchard” - Notes from the Theatrical Performance Lab

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Abstract: *This article is a conceptual analysis of a selective biography regarding the performance based on Chekhov's The Cherry Orchard. Its purpose is to emphasize the importance of this play through the performance's creators, trying to come up with original elements to unveil hidden meanings of this text. Comparing different representations of this play, we can notice that each of them attempts to unfold obscure meanings within Chekhov texts. In this respect, besides having a brief analysis of the most important and famous performances of this play, I participated in this study with my own representation, brought out at Ariel Municipal Theater from Râmnicu Vâlcea.*

Key-words: *Cekhov; play; theatre; scenery; performancers; scenographer*

1. Introduction

*One must regard a theater play from different angles, just like in the case of a statue, so that all its contradictions might be surprised, because they, as a whole, represent the nucleus of the play.*²

The immanence of the great texts are justified through their strength to reveal expressed thoughts. Great authors do not clarify, do not give sentences. Their significances appear from written pages and result into multiple interpretations so that the truth of the plays remain valid in the times to come. Thus, in the case of theater plays, the most important ones are an opportunity to change the mood of the times, in which it was portrayed. We take into account Anton Pavlovich Cekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, a play that has always been a challenge for the ones approaching it, unveiling the truth of the Chekhov works, in accordance to the times it was written. *The Cherry Orchard*, Chekhov's last play is an encrypted text, that always comes up with something new to those who direct it as a stage performance. George Banu, a theatre critic and careful observer of this text from the point of view of stage directing, asserts: *Famous Orchards, Unknown Orchards, all bear a type of metaphor or a particular discourse on 'orchard complex'*³. While George Banu, in his book, deals with a thorough analysis of Chekhovian work from *the competent audience point of view*⁴, in this article, we will analyze it from the director-scenographer perspective.

2. Materials and method

It is very difficult to bring in a radical vision of Chekhov's world, when this text involved numerous stage representations. The force of this text cannot reside only in the actor's

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² George Banu, *The Cherry Orchard, Our Theater*, Liternet Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 26

³ *Ibidem*, p. 7

⁴ (The expression belongs to Mihaelei Michailov: *George Banu has the vocation of the specialist audience, capable to surprise and sense the finest intercalations and shades belonging to the whole view*) <https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/5280/Mihaela-Michailov/O-carte-de-George-Banu-Livada-de-visini-teatrul-nostru.html>, accessed in 16.01.2021

ability to find new symbolism in the rehearsing techniques. The performing dimensions become surprising when the pair director-scenographer create a Chekhovian universe where the same old plot acquire different extents, capable to touch unthinkable depths of the text. While Stanislavski's representation in 1904 impressed with a realist scenery⁵, further performances had to get out of the comfort zone and look up for a semantics of representation.

2.1. Famous highlights

Giorgio Strehler's performance in 1974, with Luciano Damiani as a scenographer shocked the audience with the image clarity. An ambiguous universe, where the idea of indoors and outdoors was not taken into account: a space surging with white cloths, white on the ground, a blind hanging by a white veil, penetrating in the actors' space, the actors were dressed in white and their dynamics reflected white on white shades. Cherry flowers from Chekhov didascalia turned into a spectacular concept where the text had impressive dimensions.

In Peter Brook's case, there was no orchard. The only scenery elements were carpets (something specific for him) and the separating walls broken down by Lopahin, making appear the ghost-like characters of the death ball. The space of the orchard conceived by the scenographer Chloé Obolensky, was a pace in sight, where the theater must not be hidden and suggestion was of major importance. For Brook, the orchard is the theater itself. Actually, it is a state of mood, its lost beauty is related to the interior, reminding us of François Villon's *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*:

*Mais où sont les neiges d'antan*⁶. In every performance, the orchard has different significations. György Harag's tormenting representation in 1985 at Târgu Mureş was a sort of swan last song, the same way *The Cherry Orchard* itself was a sort of testament for its author.

Generally, to the Romanian director, the orchard universe was some sort of space towards nowhere. Some sort of tunnel like-vortex sucking up scenery and characters, with the features of a huge lens that made images appear closer or farther. The stage significances of the play from the point of view of its creators was revealed by the scenographer Romulus Feneş. He managed very well, to portray death so vividly, an image of double death, on one hand the vortex announcing the imminent distress of losing the orchard (in the end, the entire framework of cloth, supported by ropes, falls down leaving the theater empty) and on the other hand, director Harag's death itself⁷, who could not see his performance, finally, accomplished. The braveness to approach this text comes up from an inner incentive belonging to the creators of the performance. There is the need to turn into reality own fears and troubles using as a framework Chekhov's work. The *Cherry Orchard* materializes as a performance, once one can understand it. Lucian Pintilie created in 1967, a performance with an approach from Beckett's waiting point of view. A troublesome yet serene waiting, that used to function like a drug: *The actual title of „The Cherry Orchard” could be „Oh, What Fine Days!”*, it represents the history

⁵ (At Stanislavski, a few tiny branches appear at windows, but, besides this suggestion, not particularly visible, he adds delicate flowers and trunks on the walls of the house.) *Op.cit.*p.18

⁶ (Where are the old times snows?, aut. trans.)

⁷ (*The Cherry Orchard* -last work, written with the perspective of the end- was directed by György Harag, in Romania, while being terminally ill at home, from where he was giving directions to the actors that came to his place. If Chekhov, emaciated from the disease could attend the premiere of his play, in 1904, Harag died before the first performance, leaving for that corridor of time, that he had used as the main scenery element.) *Ibidem*, p.85

*of an agonizing mood lacking outrage, an idyllic, unwitting, carefree agony, more precisely the history of a dying way, of one of the possible ways.*⁸

In Peter Brook's case time is compact, the play developing fast, while in this performance time develops slowly and peacefully as if prolonging the waiting for a fast-approaching end. Harag's vortex becomes the wheat field from Act II, where the character Liubov Andreevna seems to submerge in some sort of ecstatic euthanasia. It is a way to cheat death by time expansion. The story of the wheat field started from a real event⁹ (a car crash) in which Pintilie was involved and from which he inspired to create the performance. The dynamic space, reminding of the cinema, but so drama-like at the same time, portrayed by scenographer gives the sensation of a timeless world. A comfortable silence announcing the end:

*Salvation through the wheat field At the time, we used to ignore this fact and astonished, we watched it as a total bliss on the extinction, as some sort of goodbye before the end, as a pending moment before the last fall. In this Act II, Pintilie, Bortnovski, Clody Bertola, Fory Etterlé unveiled the subtly poetical powers of a performance where melancholy was interweaving with the frame poetry*¹⁰.

2.2. The subjectivity of an Orchard

The Cherry Orchard, the paradoxal performance without conflicts needs an external incentive to become significant. The story of *The Cherry Orchard* from Râmnicu-Vâlcea began from a real fact. At some point, I as the witness of an unhappy moment from a prosperous, neighbouring family. Their improvidence and recklessness made them lose their once beautiful house (at that moment in ruin) at the auction initiated by the bank due to some debts. The incident that impressed me the most, was the following: while the old owners put their stuff in a truck, the new owner threw away the former doors of the house with a roaring sound, of a drill in the walls. A nightmare framework, in which those that were taking the furniture belonging to the former owners, were crossing ways with those that were bringing new pieces of furniture for the new owners. The new buyers did not have any delicacy to offer a less painful farewell. I was actually watching Act IV of the play, but in this case, there was not time for Ranevskai to say the line: *I will remain for one more minute. Let's sit down. It seems that I have never seen the walls in this house, the attic and for the moment, I am regarding everything, with love, craving for something...*¹¹ That reality did not involve any loftiness, it took place in an objective and harsh actuality.

When meeting scenographer Elena Cozlovschi, we agreed that our Orchard is an agonizing world from the beginning. In some notes from 2015, I read... *The house is not inhabited....perhaps, there are places where there are water dropping from rain ... the plaster on the walls is fallen down, there is a mix of chalk and brick everywhere...a ladder in two watery shades forgotten somehow in the scenery ...they have tried some consolidation here and*

⁸ *The Contemporary*, 3.11.1967, p. 117

⁹ („Pintilie retells the story of this metaphor: one day, while he was a novice driver, he missed a turn, landing off, by miracle, in a wheat field, where he plunged like in a blessed mattress. While there, he could recollect memories from all his life. Like in the case of poets, the accident was transformed and integrated within his directing elements, which had an autobiographic mark, without the public being aware of this. Those who saw this performance never forgot the wheat field, where Liubov, just like a porcelain doll, confessed his mistakes and begged for mercy.”), *Op.cit.*, p. 50

¹⁰ *Ibidem.*, p. 495

¹¹ file:///C:/Users/Palade%20Aurel/Downloads/apcehovlivada.pdf, accessed in 18.01.2021

*there....the pieces of furniture is covered by white linen. I can see the cold beginning...lacustrine.*¹²



The Cherry Orchard - Ariel Theater, Vâlcea 2013, Act I director: Aurel Palade, scenographer: Elena Cozlovschi, Costumes: Maria Dore, Music: Vasile Şirli, personal records.

The Orchard close to specter of death is a mood. The supersized walls of the house show a world once prosperous. There is no window in this space and this gives the sensation of a huge crypt. Act II, the only external location where the author's indications show a field near the deserted church, there is a ghostly like space where the walls reveal crooked, dreadful crosses, supported by the dead shades of some lifeless trees. The characters' costumes designed by scenographers Maria Dore did not belong to a particular period of time, on the contrary, they were completely atemporal. Their chromatics showed some grey shades, a lifeless shade of uncertainty and abandonment. Perhaps, the only time when a colourful shade appears is Anya,

¹² Personal notes from correspondence with scenographer Elena Cozlovschi and composer Vasile Şirli

with her reddish hair, a symbol of vitality, in a world on the brink of death. Act III, the act of the ball, was marked by an exaggerated, almost insidious vitality. Excluding Liubovei and old Firs, everything happened with a grotesque cheerfulness. The mother's and servant's immobility in balance with centrifugal, fast dynamics of the other characters, created a continuous gloomy atmosphere, that cheerfully chaotic storm before the absolute silence of the announcement concerning the selling of the orchard. The end of Act III, where Liubova, the discrowned queen of the land, gets the implacable news with dignity, confirming once again the future of the orchard, a truth actually confirmed by every final part in the acts. Here, the chandelier on the stage, the only element as a sign of the past aristocratic times, is swinging like some sort of crown upon the mother's head.

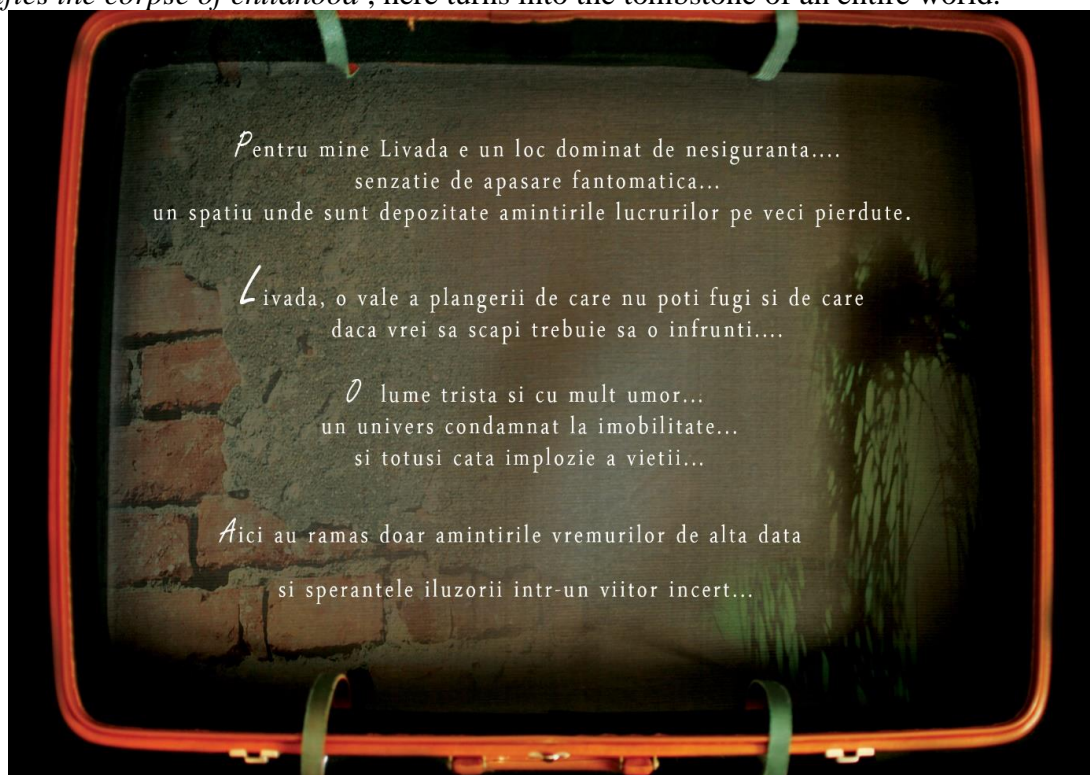


The Cherry Orchard - Ariel Theater, Vâlcea 2013, Act III, director: Aurel Palade, scenography: Elena Cozlovschi, Costumes: Maria Dore, Music: Vasile Şirli, personal records

In the text of the play, one of the scenery elements that Chekhov refers to and not within the stage instructions, is the well known wardrobe. Analyzing Chekhov work, we notice a peculiar lagging upon a particular object. Moreover, through the character of Gaev, he tells a story about it. Could it be a way to create a comic moment in the organization of the play? Gaev's Cațavencu-like rhetorics seems to take the characters towards the absurd. The way in which the wardrobe is presented, can balance Gaev's monologue between comic and tragic or perhaps both of them. In Strehler's case, where white is the key to the performance, it becomes some sort of warehouse for childhood memories, so across the monologue, the toys are spouting on the stage. Childhood memory unveils by the actual objects coming up. German director, Peter Zadek does not exhibit it, it hides it like some sort of stage vertical slide and lets Gaev character to have his plethoric monologue on something that we can only imagine. Peter Brook creates a comical note upon this moment, bringing on stage a overwhelmingly common wardrobe. Andrei Şerban makes it functional by the fact that it turns the oratorical stand where

Gaev has his ludicrous monologue. In the performance from Craiova, quoting his former mentor Radu Penciulescu's scenery, Alexa Visarion comes up with a wardrobe, forgotten there, as some sort of remnant witnessing some storm. Each of the creators motivated this moment from the point of view of the director's own visions.

In the performance from Vâlcea, the key of the wardrobe appeared out of an apparently small event. Looking for an object that can symbolize the wardrobe, we crashed, by mistake, a metal thread of an empty metallic wardrobe, which in a deafening sound fell to the ground, causing dust to spread, as a sign of forgetfulness. On the corner of the wardrobe there was written loosely, the year when the play *The Cherry Orchard* was issued -1904, but also the year when Anton Pavlovici Chekhov died. Thus, in Act IV, while the actors say their lines, the technical team take away the furniture from the stage. The only remaining object is the wardrobe and it is also dismantled. The doors and the drawers of the wardrobe disappear. All musty books and objects are removed, leaving the skeleton of the wardrobe empty and in sight. At the end of the play, Firs having a blanket upon his shoulders and a lit candle comes and goes on the stage, tired and bewildered, stopping in the middle of the stage where he lies down. Finally, he covers in the blanket, like in a shroud while the candle goes on being lit, while some discordant piano notes, composed by Vasile Şirli, can be heard. When those discordant notes create the impression of a breakage, the wardrobe falls down upon Firs, the only thing that can be seen being: 1904. The wardrobe of the innocence age, which in George Banu's opinion: *mummifies the corpse of childhood*, here turns into the tombstone of an entire world.



Notes¹³ from the program notebook of the performance *The Cherry Orchard*– Ariel Theater Râmnicu Vâlcea–personal records

¹³ (To me *The Orchard* is a place dominated by uncertainty...the sensation of ghostly overwhelm...a space where there are stored the memories of long-lost things.

The Orchard is a Valley of the Weeping that you cannot escape and if you want to escape, you must face it...A sad but also humorous world... a universe doomed to motionlessness...and yet, so much implosion of life...Here, there are only memories from long-lost times and the deceitful hopes for an uncertain future...) Translation of the text from the picture, personal records.

3. Conclusion

This article sought through the analysis of several variants of the show to emphasize the ability of the Chekhov opera to leave open the way of interpreting the signs deeply embedded in the dramaturgy of this author. The lack of obvious conflicts, specific to the canons of classical forms until then, allowed the dramatic creation to seek its fulfillment in various spectacular forms. All the important Orchards, as a form of stage performance, have only demonstrated, through the diversity of approaches, how current Chekhov is. Timeless, classic or violently modern, the forms in which these performances materialized justify their polysemantism of interpretations through a research work of the show creators who in a joint effort managed to fulfill as much of the meanders of the Chekhov text.

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