

Cultural Transformations at Pontus Euxinus and the Understanding of the Dramatic Text

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Abstract: *This article investigates the cultural transformations along the western shores of the Pontus Euxinus through the interpretive lens of dramatic texts and performance practices. By examining the reception and adaptation of classical drama in this historically hybrid region, the study highlights how local communities recontextualized theatrical forms to reflect shifting identities, power dynamics, and ritual traditions. Drawing on textual analysis, archaeological evidence, and performance theory, the article situates the Pontic area as a vibrant cultural interface rather than a passive periphery. It argues that the dramatic text served not only as artistic expression but also as a medium of intercultural negotiation and memory. Ultimately, the study challenges conventional narratives of classical reception, proposing a more fluid and decentralized model of cultural transmission.*

Keywords: *culture; theater; ancient dramaturgy; Pontus Euxinus;*

Introduction

To understand the interest of performing arts creators in ancient literature, we need to go back in time, specifically to the middle of the 7th century BCE. Among the most important colonies were Tomis, Histria, and Callatis, which played an immeasurable role in the economic and cultural development of the region. Histria is the oldest Greek colony on the shores of the Black Sea and, perhaps not coincidentally, the best-preserved ancient fortress in the entire Dobruja region. Despite harsh winters and scorching summers, the fortress continued to develop until the Byzantine era, when multiple attacks led to its decline, gradually turning it into ruins. This article explores the cultural transformations in the Pontic area through the lens of dramatic texts, both classical and reinterpreted, examining how theatrical forms—tragedy, satyr play, and ritual drama—were received, adapted, and recontextualized in a region marked by hybridity.

1.1. Beginnings. Ancient Theater at Pontus Euxinus

“As for the art that imitates using only simple or versified words, - either using several types of meters together or just one, - it still does not have a name for itself.”² Romanian theater emerged within the framework of work. Pre-theatrical forms included mimicry, song, dance, and disguise. As with most ancient peoples, various rituals were developed to obtain the favor, blessing, benevolence, and approval of the gods for good weather, abundant harvests, protection, and more. Sacrifices and offerings were fundamental in initiating sacred rituals. The richer and more significant these offerings were, the more they believed the gods would favor their prayers. In the Carpatho-Danubian-Pontic space, theater had a slow start because no single model could

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² Aristotel. 1998. *Poetics* [*Poetica*]. București: Editura Iri, p. 66.

be imposed. Barbarian migrations and the Roman conquest of the Dacians constantly changed the cultural patterns. Everything new that appeared either vanished completely or left small remnants from which new models evolved, resulting in Greek and Roman rituals, ceremonies, and spectacles blending with the influences of magic, spells, feast dances, and Geto-Dacian and barbarian ceremonies. "The Getae, however, who had made the foolish decision to confront him, were immediately enslaved, even though they were the bravest and most just of the Thracians."³

The first writing about the Geto-Dacian ceremonies belongs to Herodotus in his fourth book. He learned the story of the ritual dedicated to the god Zalmoxis from the Greeks who reached Dacia. Unfortunately, the Geto-Dacians did not rely on writing, so testimonies about the beginnings of theater on Romanian territory are extremely few. Herodotus remains, to this day, the best explainer of how the ceremony was conducted. He described the Getae as the bravest and most just among the Thracians, who believed themselves to be immortal, thinking that those who died went to Zalmoxis, a divine being. Herodotus also mentioned that Zalmoxis built a reception hall where he hosted his most important fellow citizens. In the meantime, he constructed an underground dwelling where he stayed for seven years. In the fourth year, he emerged and what he had predicted came true. The cult of this god promoted the belief in immortality and certain initiation rites. The most handsome and courageous men held spears with their tips pointed upwards. The elders drew lots, and the chosen one was thrown into the air, impaling himself on the spears. Every four years, the ritual was repeated to renew the connection between the Getae and the god. Human sacrifice and sending an emissary to Zalmoxis represented a symbolic repetition of the founding of the cult. Of course, as with any legend shrouded in mysticism, various theories about Zalmoxis's origin emerged. Strabo, for instance, theorized that Zalmoxis was a slave of Pythagoras, from whom he learned about the stars, which formed the basis of his knowledge. Another theory suggests that he traveled to Egypt, where he became a high priest, revered by people and pharaohs.

"The Geto-Dacians attended theatrical performances staged by Greek colonists, as well as some Athenian plays held during the Dionysian festivals. The development of Greek dance culture in that era harmonized with the existence of ancient dramatic art, which would later become known to popular culture. The dance of the Geto-Dacians fell within the realm of rhythmic expression, featuring independent and original forms."⁴ The first spectacular element was an initiation dance in honor of the great god, called Salmoxis. Strabo also documented rituals with songs and dances dedicated to the goddess Bendis, the goddess of the moon and forests. At the beginning of the 1st century CE, the first ceremonial manifestations with an official character appeared. The venue moved to the fortresses, at the courts of Dacian/Thracian kings, where performances with musicians and humorous storytellers took place. There were also warrior performances where battles were reenacted through dance and choreography. Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, noted: The dancers, through the rhythms expressed by their dance figures, imitate characters, passions, actions. "With all their care for the spectacle, however, and with all the staging highly appreciated by the audience, the Greek tragedians emphasized the dramatic text first and foremost, its literary value, its educational, moral, and civic content."⁵

³ Herodot. 1999. *Histories. Book IV [Istorii. Cartea a IV-a]*. București: Editura Teora, p. 91.

⁴ Lorette Enache. 2016. *Theater-dance – expressive communication methods in the dynamics of performing arts [Teatru-dans – modalități de comunicare expresivă în dinamica artelor scenice]*. Iași: Editura Artes, p. 15.

⁵ Ovidiu Drîmba. 1973. *Theater from its origins to today [Teatrul de la origini și până azi]*. București: Editura Albatros, p. 11.

The Greek colonies on the shore of the sea, in addition to developing economic and commercial relations, helped introduce Greek cultural elements into Scythia Minor. The cult of Dionysus, the god of wine and ecstasy, belonged to an ancient set of customs and beliefs. At the sea and Histria, numerous archaeological treasures included figurines and clay masks representing satyrs and *sileni* (satyrs – a Greek divinity depicted as a human with goat-like features; *sileni* – old men with grotesque appearances but who possessed ironic wisdom). At Histria, an inscription from the first half of the 3rd century CE commemorates the victory in competitions of a *team of singers, praisers of Dionysus*. From this inscription, we learn that there was a choir with a leader and a poetic instructor. Between the 3rd century BCE and the 3rd century CE, all kinds of masks were discovered in the fortresses of Dobruja. In the early centuries of the 1st millennium, the evolution of ancient theater ended. The Roman conquest took over territories and replaced Greek theatrical art with religious rituals and bloody circus fights. The art of theater was mercilessly replaced by gladiator fights, animal mutilation, and armed games. At Tomis, Porolissum, and Sarmizegetusa, gladiator funerary stelae were found in the amphitheaters. After the Romans left Dacia, everything disappeared, with one exception: the mime performance.

1.2. A Brief Evolution of Romanian Theater

“The romanian play must be the foundation of romanian repertoires.”⁶ Historical information to trace the cultural transformation in our country up until the 18th century is scarce. These come from descriptions of various peasant customs and traditions as they appear in chronicles and annals. Among these customs, we mention: the Călușari - the magical masks from the Călușari dance, animal disguises, the vigil with masks, the spinning bee - these are evolved forms of primitive performances. The Turkey dance or Brezaia, old men and the elderly, the cuckoos, the Drăgaica or Paparudele – all these traditions celebrated fertility, the guarding of solstices and equinoxes, the movement of stars, and the passing of seasons. Old forms of popular theatrical art connect with ceremonies and magical pantomimes from the archaic era and popular theater from the 19th century. In the Middle Ages, performances were organized at the courts of the voivodes and were not open to the general public, which delayed the theatrical phenomenon as we know it today by at least 200 years.

“The will to be present - with a sense of responsibility for their art - in contemporary times, to transpose its realities onto stage and to debate its problems, has also characterized the work of most *old-guard* Romanian playwrights over the last quarter of a century.”⁷ Cultured Romanian theater began to develop and flourish along with education and literature after the 1800s. It had strong French influences, with vaudevilles and boulevard plays being very successful with the public. The first cultured theater performance took place in 1816 and was a French translation by Gheorghe Asachi of Solomon Gessner's play *Myrtil and Chloe*, in an improvised space in Costache Ghica's house. “[...] the great tragedians of Greek antiquity are the writers of permanent topicality. It is no coincidence that on the great stages of the world today a revival of fundamental tragedies is manifesting itself [...]”⁸ Three years later, in 1819, Euripides' *Hecuba*

⁶ Victor Ioan Popa. 1977. *Small theater guide [Mic îndreptar de teatru]*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 26.

⁷ Ovidiu Drîmba. 2005. *The history of the universal theater [Istoria teatrului universal]*. București: Editura Saeculum I.O., p. 304.

⁸ Mira Iosif. 1979. *Our everyday theater [Teatrul nostru cel de toate zilele]*. București: Editura Eminescu, p. 156.

was performed in Bucharest. With the establishment of the Philharmonic Society in Bucharest and the Philharmonic-Dramatic Conservatory in Iași, dramatic art on Romanian territory took on a professional form, with these institutions forming repertoires mainly of French and Italian translations.

1.3. Theater: From Pontus Euxinus to Constanța

In the old ancient city of Tomis, later renamed Constantia during the Byzantine era, and under Ottoman rule known as Kustenge, today called Constanța, the atmosphere was bleak and desolate. Due to the Russo-Turkish War (1828-1829), which besieged numerous settlements, the once strong economic and cultural city became a ruined, poor, and defenseless village. Constanța underwent a long period of recovery, healing, and rebuilding. In this small seaside town, perhaps the most numerous ethnic groups found their home, living together in peace and harmony. Romanians, Aromanians, Bulgarians, Turks, Tatars, Roma, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Russians, Lipovans, Ukrainians, Gagauzians, Germans, Italians, Albanians, Serbs, Hungarians, etc., have coexisted for centuries in complete understanding and tolerance. Although the cultural diversity was unique, it also brought the disadvantage of developing a unified cultural environment. The first theater hall, still known today as the Elpis Hall, was built by the Greek community and inaugurated on December 20, 1898. The State Theater Constanța, as an independent institution, appeared in 1951. Since its establishment, the institution has had several names: 1951-1970 – State Theater Constanța; 1970-1974 – Drama and Comedy Theater; 1974-1992 – Dramatic Theater; 1992-1994 – Ovidius Dramatic Theater; 2004-2007 – National Theater Constanța; 2007-present – State Theater Constanța. “The Pontic theater did not pass over any major event of national culture, and not only that, without stopping to reflect on it and signaling its importance to its fellow citizens.”⁹

1.4. Evenings of Ancient Theater

Georgeta Martoiu confesses in her book *Thalia Ex Ponto*, “I saw this (n.a. the magic) in the ancient theater performances that, fighting fiercely against adversities that I wouldn't even want to remember- the Constanta theater managed to perform, in the open air, inside archaeological remains, without any arrangements.”¹⁰

The first edition of the National Festival of Ancient Theater took place in 1978. During this festival, nine theater performances were staged at archaeological sites such as Histria, the Roman Mosaic Edifice, the National History and Archaeology Museum, Adamclisi, and the Dobrogea Gorges, as well as on the theater stage. “(n.a. The festival's emblem) was an oversized copy (2m) of one of the masks discovered in the 1960s in the ruins of a pottery workshop in Mangalia, dating back more than 2000 years, as proof that theater was performed in the major cities on the western shore of the Black Sea since ancient times.”¹¹ The Ovidius Dramatic Theater opened the

⁹ Anaid Tavitian. 2022. *Art and theatrical history in Constanța. In The Worlds of Zagreus. From sacred drama to theatrical performance.* [Artă și istorie teatrală la Constanța]. In [Lumile lui Zagreus. De la drama sacră la reprezentarea teatrală]. Ed by Adriana Claudia Cîteia. 165-188. Târgoviște: Editura Cetatea de scaun, p. 168.

¹⁰ Georgeta Mărtoiu. 2001. *Thalia Ex Ponto at the crossroads of millennia [Thalia Ex Ponto la cumpănă de milenii]*. Ed. Georgeta Mărtoiu and Anaid Tavitian. Constanța: Editura Muntenia&Leda, p. 31.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 60-61.

festival with the play *Legends of the Atreids*, directed by Silviu Purcărete, who would become one of Romania's most renowned directors. The performance featured a scenario that combined fragments from Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, along with popular spells and laments, bringing back to the audience the ancient performances of old Pontus Euxinus. The show was performed without artificial lighting, recording, or any technical sound effects, benefiting from the extraordinary acoustics of the place and the fact that in the colonnade area – the actual stage, the wind was completely inaudible, recalled theater professional Anaïd Tavitian with emotion.

The second edition took place in 1981, where the Ovidius Dramatic Theater delighted the audience with Euripides' *Hecuba*, again directed by Silviu Purcărete. The performance allowed the great actress Ileana Ploscaru to create a monumental character. The image of the artist with her face covered in shells, sand, and algae after a heart-wrenching cry on the mother earth's bosom, as well as her haunting screams filling the air as she left by sea, are some of the memories I believe I will never forget, testified Anaïd Tavitian, a dedicated theater professional. Due to the lack of necessary funds to organize such a large-scale festival, the renowned National Festival of Ancient Theater ended after just two editions.

1.5. The Ancient Tomis Festival

“First, is there an essential difference between comedy and tragedy? Not at all. There is a difference in level. The same subjects are comic or tragic. The same subjects are comic *and* tragic.”¹² In 2012, the Ancient Tomis Festival was born in Constanța, aiming to revive the ancient tradition of the city. The event was designed to recreate moments from ancient life as we know it from the writings and testimonies left throughout time. Dacians and Romans marched in front of the Roman Edifice in Constanța, and workshops were held demonstrating ancient metalworking, pottery, and ceramics crafting techniques, as well as the reconstruction of Dacian cuisine and the crafting of armor, clothing, and jewelry. The festival was a great success, resonating widely in the press and among the city's residents.

In its second edition, the organizers aimed to enrich the festival activities. In addition to the workshops already established in the first edition, gladiator fights were organized, with several reenactment groups from both Romania and abroad being invited. The Arts Faculty of Ovidius University in Constanța was invited to participate in the festival with a theater performance, marking a premiere for both the faculty and the festival. The Faculty of Arts staged Euripides' play *Medeea*, directed by Associate Professor Dr. Daniela Vitcu, alongside faculty professors, alumni, and students. I had the great honor of being cast in the role of Medeea, a role that marked a clear direction in both my artistic and educational career. Understanding the dramatic text was an intense process filled with questions, the answers to which led only to more questions. “If desire is the character's engine, then it also contains causality (why?), purpose (for what?), and intention. Desire is always the reason, which is not the same as motivation, which desire nourishes and sustains.”¹³ Although the ancient period is the first studied in the courses of universal theater history, working on a character is completely different from discovering myths, legends, dramatic texts, and ancient beliefs. The student actor must overcome their own defenses and allow themselves to be carried away by the charm proposed by the author of the dramatic

¹² Emile Faguet. 1971. *Ancient drama Modern drama [Drama antica Drama moderna.]* București: Editura enciclopedică română, p. 3.

¹³ Ana-Maria Nistor. 2017. *The plot of theatre. [Urzeala teatrului]*. Iași: Editura Artes, p. 47.

text, regardless of the difficulties in understanding the characters' motivations. The theory is simple and clear – theater must inspire pity and fear; this is the purpose of tragedy, and only thus can one achieve catharsis, as Aristotle said. But when the actor constructs their character profile and must respond to the character's motivations, imagination takes the place of theory, and most of the time, the answers are frightening. After outlining the commonalities and antitheses with the character, the student actor must find solutions to resonate with opposing points and find within themselves the necessary arguments to be plausible in portraying the character. Of course, if the character is a criminal, this does not mean in the least that the actor must have criminal tendencies; they just need to find the motivation, understanding, and acceptance of the character's actions. And in ancient theater, the task becomes even more difficult due to the complex language of the texts, the versification, and the often complicated translations to stylize the text.

In 2014, the Faculty of Arts once again faced the audience of Constanța at the Ancient Tomis Festival, with the play *Electra* by Sophocles, also directed by Associate Professor Dr. Daniela Vitcu. Working on the character of Electra was somewhat more complicated than that of Medea, as Sophocles' tragedy involved much more text, the performance was much more static, and in order to keep up with the beauty of Sophocles' verses, the audience's increased attention was required for almost two hours. The appearance of the Furies/Erinyes at the moment of matricide broke the tension between the characters and announced the end and conclusion of the performance.

In the summer of 2015, the Faculty of Arts returned with another ancient theater performance at the festival, this time with *Antigone*, with the same team irremediably in love with ancient culture. We tried to break out a bit from the ancient patterns, with the text becoming an adaptation by reducing it to the most important fragments for the development of the main plot and with some atypical costumes for ancient theater. Antigone was the character I resonated with the easiest, due to the multitude of matches from the character profile and probably the experience gained with the two previous roles from ancient drama. In 2016, the Arts Faculty participated for the last time in the Ancient Tomis Festival, returning with the play *Medea* by Euripides.

1.6. Theater, Myths, and Legends

In the early months of 2016, after a discussion among several faculty members of the Faculty of Arts, the idea of a play combining at least three arts was born: theatrical art, choreographic art, and plastic art. “The reflection at the actor's level is based on another reflection, that of dramatic literature, and not directly, on objective reality. The musician is in the same aesthetic position as the actor. To this is added another particularity, entirely specific to the actor's art, which determines the characteristics of his creative act: the temporal and spatial identity between the creative aesthetic subjectivity, the work and the creative material.”¹⁴

Thus, in March of the same year, the play *Hades and Persephone* was brought to light, a legend about darkness and light. The scenario was created by Assoc. Prof. Alina Cristea based on texts by Alexandru Mitru, directed by Prof. Daniela Vitcu, and choreographed by Stela Cocârlea. The makeup for the premiere was done by students specializing in the Pedagogy of Plastic Arts,

¹⁴ Mihaela Tonitza-Iordache. 1980. *About acting*. [Despre joc]. Iași: Editura Junimea, pp. 89-90.

and the rhythmic accompaniment was provided by the great drummer Ionuț Micu. The cast included both faculty members and students from the theater arts - acting and choreography. It had dozens of performances in the two years it was part of the faculty's repertoire and won important awards at renowned festivals in the country. I completely agree with the theater critic Irina Wolf with the thoughts with which she opens her article dedicated to ancient dramaturgy in the volume *Sign of the Times. Theatre and Conflict*. "I have always been fascinated by mythology, even if I find the ancient Greeks intimidating. I was lucky enough to find out, from an early age, about Ulysses, Theseus, Heracles, Helen and so many other predestined people, and their actions always seemed to fade when compared to those of the immortals. Thus, every time a director decides to approach an ancient tragedy, I am always eager to see how he or she manages to make the truth of those old stories come to light in a simple, easy-to-comprehend manner for everybody. There is enough proof that this is possible."¹⁵

In 2017, in Constanța, it was declared the *Year of Ovidius*, the city celebrating 2000 years since the death of the great Latin poet, exiled to Tomis, Ovidius Publius Naso. Ovidius, through his writings, testified to a part of the life lived by coexisting peoples in the territory from the Danube to Tomis. To mark this anniversary, the Faculty of Arts staged the play *The Life and Sufferings of Ovidius Publius Naso*, based on a text by Paul Miron, in a natural setting, an amphitheater brought back to life. The play was directed by Aurel Palade, with scenography by Elena Coslovchi and choreography by Stela Cocârlea.

Also, in the desire to celebrate the life and work of the Latin poet exiled to Tomis, the Faculty of Arts staged the play *Ovidius – De Rerum Natura*, a choreographic performance with verses from the poet's work. The direction was signed by Prof. Daniela Vitcu, with assistant director and verse recitation by Assist. Prof. Daniela Cojan, and choreography by Stela Cocârlea. The bodily expressiveness given by the choreography aimed to highlight the barbaric character of the peoples existing in the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic territory, and the selection of verses describing the appearance of the inhabitants and the extremely harsh living conditions led to the creation of a new title, popular among the members of the creative team - *The Barbarians*.

In 2022, during the days of Constanța, the play *Scenes from the Life of Constantine the Great* was staged, an adaptation of a text by Cristina Tamaș, in which students from the Faculty of Arts were invited to be part of the ancient choir. Some moments of the play were supported right among the ruins of the old Tomis citadel.

In 2024, the attention of the people of Constanța, as well as national and international audiences, was drawn by the participation in the country's most important Theater Festival and one of the largest in Europe, FITS, with the street parade show *Thespis's Chariot*, conceived and directed by Mihai Mălaimare based on texts by Aristophanes and Shapho. The show takes a journey through time from the appearance of Thespis – the first official actor in the history of theater, to the dances of the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries. The moral of the show is that humanity's problems and those of society remain the same, the only solution to tame the difficulties of everyday life being the continuous love for art and beauty.

¹⁵ Irina Wolf. 2022. *Reclaiming the Female Body. Aspects of The Trojan Woman [Revendicarea corpului feminin. Aspecte din Troienele]*. In *Sign of the Times. Theatre and conflict*. [Sub vremuri. Teatru și conflict]. Ed by Oltița Cîntec, 187-198. Iași: Editura Junimea, p. 187.

2. Conclusions

To fully understand the dramatic text, the knowledge of our past, both in culture and civilization, should never be neglected, down to the smallest details. The most important thing is not to ignore the beginnings, to first understand the context in which those who wrote the dramatic text lived. Here we refer to all aspects that involve a good understanding - socio-economic and cultural. Only after understanding the dramatic author we can focus on the literary work itself, its classification into literary currents, its influences, and its uniqueness. Working on the character is the final step, but it is futile if the preceding steps have been ignored or diminished in their importance. As actors, there are numerous techniques we use to better understand the depths of a character. However, the character profile remains the cornerstone in dramatic construction, regardless of the actor's experience. The best mentors are still those who make their performance an example to follow for those to whom they reveal the secrets of the craft.

As a descendant of Thalia's art, I can only take pride in being born in a place where the oldest forms of theatrical art in Romanian territory are found, at the Pontus Euxinus. Although history has shown itself adverse to harmonious evolution, here, in the city I represent, art has fought to survive even in the harshest conditions. Whether it was Tomis, Kustenge, or Constanța, the creators were enchanted by the muse of inspiration and offered us the most spectacular events of art. Artists have transcended their own condition, evolved, researched, and educated themselves, and in 1999, the Faculty of Arts was established within the Ovidius University of Constanța.

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