A HISTORY OF ROMANIAN THEATRE FROM COMMUNISM TO CAPITALISM

CHILDREN OF A RESTLESS TIME

Cristina Modreanu
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A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism analyses the last three decades of Romanian theatre and connects it to the international stage. Cristina Modreanu questions the relationship between artists and power, both before 1989, behind the Iron Curtain, and in the current global political context, with nationalism manifesting itself in Eastern Europe, as seen in the critical work of Romanian theatre makers. This study covers the complex cases of theatre makers, such as Lucian Pintilie, Liviu Ciulei and Andrei Șerban, who built their international careers in exile, and the most innovative Romanian artists of today, such as Silviu Purcărete, Mihai Mănucițiu, Gianina Cârbanariu, Radu Afrim, and Bogdan Georgescu, who reached the status of transglobal artists.

Filling a considerable gap in Romanian theatre discourse, this book will be of great interest to students and scholars of contemporary theatre and history.

Cristina Modreanu is a theatre critic and curator, and co-founder of Romanian Association for Performing Arts. Holding a PhD in theatre studies from National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest, she is a Fulbright alumna and the author of five books on Romanian theatre.
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Children of a Restless Time

Cristina Modreanu
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Foreword

Frank Hentschker

CRUSHED

by Stéphane Mallarmé

culminating crushing CLOUDS
you sink deep
among the basalts and lavas
the echoes of a useless trumpet
are in BONDAGE

What a graveyard of a shipwreck
(you know IT, foamy froth,
mai mult și mai curajoși, more and brave)
this one stands out among the WRECKAGE
the cloth less mast missing

Or that one, madly mistaken
by some highbrow damnation
the whole ABYSS spread out in vain

next to a single bright white hair
that lingers
will have drowned pitiful
the child at the side of a SIREN*

For us all, Cristina Modreanu raises the curtain on the recent history of Romanian theatre. She presents us with an impressive assemblage of detailed reports from the field, personal notes, interviews and theoretical reflections. She maps the traumatic and inspiring periods of Romania’s revolving theatrical and societal stages – from communism to a neo-capitalism. Her account is the most significant and comprehensive so far. As an internationally recognized and highly respected Romanian theatre critic, curator and editor, Modreanu is uniquely well positioned to propose a narrative, create acts, write the scenes and name the principal actors. We should all be grateful to her.
Foreword

Modreanu is a life-long observer and active participant in Romanian theatre. She holds up the mirror but also shapes the scene through her impressive curatorial work at Romania’s most significant theatre festivals. Carefully, with great attention to detail, she describes the historical and newly emerging performative landscape like a cartographer. Researchers will find a most reliable birds-eye view as well as close-up inspections of Romanian artists — providing the recognition that they deserve.

History is important. By understanding it, we better understand why we do not learn from it. ‘From victims of totalitarian regimes people in the post-communist countries turned almost overnight into “heavy users” and joined the Western consumption system, finding out as soon as 2008 that they were just another type of victim’, writes Modreanu in her opening chapter ‘Red Past’. Her significant contribution reinforces the significance of theatre studies to historians, sociologists and anthropologists without doubt. She offers a valuable tool to help in understanding historical changes, exploring how artists detect these changes early, anticipate the future and create meaning. She asks, what role do theatre and performance play in transition? What do theatre artists focus on, and why? What is Romanian theatre, and what are global theatre practices? How do they all interact and influence each other? Modreanu delivers her survey with the curiosity of a reporter, the selective mind of a curator, the critical eye of an editor and the mindset of a passionate collector.

Modreanu is a friend and admirer of the theatre. Her insights offer highly personal but also scientific views. I compare her work to that done by a land surveyor. In fact, The International Federation of Surveyors defines a surveyor as

‘a professional person with the academic qualifications and technical expertise to determine, measure and represent land, objects, point-fields and trajectories; to assemble and interpret land and geographically related information, to use that information for the planning and efficient administration of the landscape, and any structures thereon; and to conduct research into the above practices and to develop them’.

For the theatrical landscape, Modreanu did just that.

What we learn from Modreanu is that Romanian theatre is unique, yet not so different from the rest of the world. I chose French symbolist Stéphane Mallarmé’s iconic poem about art and poetry to begin this introduction for the ways it evokes themes of Romanian theatre history. Romanian theatre has been crushed by culminating clouds of communism and capitalism. It sank deep within the stone walls of the political party and now dredges against the bottom line of bank accounts. The trumpet of the Romanian artist was muted over decades, its sounds and echoes clear only in exile. The theatrical landscape resembled a graveyard of shipwrecks, with broken masts and missing sails. A once promising communist vision turned out to be an abyss,
explored in vain for forty years before the Berlin Wall finally fell. But artists, like Mallarmé’s sirens, surfaced and left something behind, barely detectable.

The sirens of the Romanian theatre disappeared into international waters after they surfaced from the deep – refusing to abide by the rules of the superficial, brutal surface world. Modreanu takes a closer look and focuses our attention on the single bright white hair, the white foam that lingers. She mourns the children at the side of the sirens who drowned, young artists who never got support or plays that never saw the Romanian stage. That single bright white hair, the foam that remains, is the ephemeral essence of theatre. Words of a play on a white page with infinite space between letters, lines and margin. Left-over props and costumes, grainy videos, old photographs, YouTube clips, interviews – memories of theatre experiences that will never come back, like the melted snowman from last year’s winter.

But Modreanu reminds us what a great shipwreck Romanian theatre is! What brilliant explorers and sailors, captains, pirates, safe harbours and ship building sites Romania produced! Perhaps only rivalled by Poland and Russia in the Eastern Block, Romanian theatre represents an international force in global theatre. We read about heroic Lucian Pintilie, who threatened to set himself on fire after his staging of Gogol’s comedy The Government Inspector was censored, forcing the government to allow at least one more show before closing it down. We learn about the magical theatre of Liviu Ciulei and the imaginative realism of Pintilie; about Andrei Şerban as a prophet without a country; about Silviu Purcăreţe’s visions for the theatre; and about the innovative new work of Radu Afrim, Bogdan Georgescu, Mihai Mântuşi and David Schwartz. Modreanu surveys the waters for new sightings of sirens who will not drown; after all the siren lives and breathes under water. We hear about emerging Romanian socially engaged artists as well as Post-Feminist theatre and performance. We are reminded of the globally influential Romanian playwrights after Eugene Ionesco, like Gianina Cărbunariu, Peca Ştefan, Matei Visniec, Saviana Stănescu and Visky Andras, as well as new talent, like Csaba Székely and Elise Wilk, and Roma writer and performer Mihaela Drăgan waiting in the wings right next to them.

Romanian theatre, we learn, was never in pure isolation, and perhaps that might be a key difference between it and the theatre of other Eastern European states. Ionesco wrote in exile in France, Visniec still lives in Paris, Peca lives in Berlin and Stănescu lives in New York. The Royal Court School of Drama, under the leadership of the brilliant, late Elyse Dodgson, hosted playwriting workshops in Romania in the late 1990s and produced a stunning new generation of writers. The Royal Court theatre workers brought British plays with them in their hand luggage, including the work of Mark Ravenhill and Sarah Kane, and many others. Thomas Ostermeier and Die Barracke theatre in East Berlin was a lighthouse guiding the maiden voyages of Romanian dramatists and directors leaving behind the Russian Stanislavski’an favouritism of Social Realism and Shakespeare, Ibsen, Molière and Chekhov. After the New Brutalist British invasion, Romanian New Drama reinvented itself.
in 2002 with *dramAcum.* Starting out as a national contest, with Modreanu as an eye witness, it has since become a place where Romanian theatre artists regularly surface as Eastern European sirens of the twenty-first century. They sing songs and lure spectators into dark rooms of the theatre, where humans pretend to be someone else, so others may learn more about themselves, their past, their present and their future. Romanian theatre artists sing under difficult circumstances: ‘We have no agents, no managers, and it seems we’re not getting closer to a moment where playwriting will become a truly recognized profession’, explains Peca Ştefan. Still, they surface and use the centuries-old machines of theatre to create new techniques of writing and directing. In a symbolic space that imagines and anticipates a future these artists serve us again and again as an early warning system for the new dark, crushing clouds already forming on the horizon. As Jacque Rancière writes in his brilliant essay on Mallarmé’s *The Politics of the Siren*¹, ‘there has to be an awareness of the complexity of a historical moment and the role theatre/poetry had to play in it’. As Rancière points out, we need to reflect on the new forms of civic worship in theatre and performances that emerged to celebrate the new time – replacing the pomp of kings, dictators, ruling political parties, religion, communism and now the soulless, superficial, glittering, white packaged shows of hyper-capitalism.

Modreanu’s *History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism* represents, raises and celebrates the awareness of the contribution of Romanian theatre and performance towards a new form of society – just as Brecht did when he demanded new revolutionary forms of theatre for the new times we live in. Modreanu’s closely knitted assemblage signals that clearly, when she writes that we experience

‘a more encompassing revolution of the art of theatre brought upon it by its deep connection with social changes. When patterns and hierarchies are overturn, theater follows. Then time and time again, in theatre as in society a burning question rises up again: how many generations does it take for a revolution to really happen?’

• **CRUSHED** by Stéphane Mallarmé. Translated by Frank Hentschker, with Romanian adaptation ‘mai mult şi mai curajoşi’

instead of original Portuguese ‘Mais Y Braves’.

**Note**

I want to thank first of all the Romanian theatre artists whose work I have been a privileged witness to for the last twenty-five years. They have created amazing productions while navigating a troublesome transition from one socio-economic system to another and, at the same time, fighting to better the working conditions for all the artists in this country. My gratitude and admiration especially go to the artists in my generation with whom I am in solidarity in the attempt to reshape the Romanian stage, advance it and make it relevant in the contemporary global artistic context.

I began thinking about writing this book while I was a Visiting Scholar with a Fulbright Scholarship in the Department of Performance Studies at New York University (NYU) in the 2011/2012 academic year, which is why I want to thank all the professors whose classes inspired me and gave me food for thought: Deborah Kapchan, André Lepecki, Barbara Browning and Karen Shimakawa. A heartfelt ‘thank you’ to Richard Schechner, who was my sponsor at NYU and whose friendship I have long cherished: his advice was vital to the development of this book.

In the process of writing this book, the input of my American and British peers was essential, and it helped me focus on those issues that will hopefully make the book relevant for an international audience. I also want to thank the anonymous readers who evaluated this project and made suggestions that were essential to its enrichment. Many thanks to Magda Romanska for her guidance in preparing the book proposal and for giving me the chance to be part of the growing global platform The Theatre Times.

Many thanks to Tom Sellar, who took interest in Romanian theatre back in 2009 and edited a special issue of Theater magazine, where a slightly different version of Chapter 1 was included. This material was originally commissioned and published by Theater magazine (Yale School of Drama/Duke University Press), and it is reprinted here with permission. Tom reviewed a draft of this book and made insightful recommendations for which I am grateful. My deepest thanks also go to Maria Shevtsova, who commissioned and published one of my first articles written in English in New Theatre Quarterly and helped me shaped it to be useful for her readers. This article, updated and revised, became Chapter 6, here reprinted with permission from
Cambridge University Press. Chapter 5 is based on ideas first discussed with the late Daniel Gerould, whose generosity in advising me I will never forget. It was first published by the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center in *Slavic and East European Performance*, and it is included here with permission. Chapter 9 was first published by *Images. Journal of Visual and Cultural Studies* at the Center for Excellency in Image Studies in Bucharest and coordinated by Professor Sorin Alexandrescu, whom I want to thank. I also wrote versions of Chapters 7 and 8 on commission for projects coordinated by Oltița Cîntec and Irina Ionescu (on behalf of the Romanian Cultural Institute), so I want to thank them for provoking me. An early version of Chapter 8 was translated from Romanian to English by Samuel Onn.

I am also grateful to Bonnie Marranca, a long-term inspiration for me, as the *PAJ* magazine editor and a highly regarded intellectual. Bonnie generously read some of the chapters, and her notes and suggestions were extremely helpful for me.

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Last but not least, I want to thank Frank Hentschker, who wrote the foreword for this book. I have always admired his work as a promoter and producer of great events at the Martin Segal Theatre Center, meant to introduce worldwide artists to American audiences and give American emerging artists a chance to develop their work, and greatly benefit The City University of New York (CUNY) students in the process.

I would also like to thank the literary secretaries working for various theatres in Romania for helping me get access to their archives, especially for illustrations. The 1990s were a very confusing and unsettling time for Romanian society, which is why little information was preserved from that period. The photos reproduced in this book are courtesy of the theatres that preserved them in their archives, and I am most grateful for these permissions.

Thank you to my mother, Elena, and my father, George – who unfortunately is no longer with us – for their love and support. This book would not have existed without the constant inspiration that my partner, Lucian Ban, is for me and without our intellectual discussions mixing American-Romanian perspectives. Thank you, Lucian. This book is for you.
Forty years of frozen sleep is not exactly beauty sleep. It disconnects you and makes you wake up in a world that no longer makes sense. Snow White must have felt rather awkward when she opened her eyes in the glass coffin. Her dress was for sure no longer en vogue, her manners would probably seem provincial, she wouldn’t recognize the music and dance of the new times and all the people she knew were either dead or very old. After such a frozen sleep, besides being happy that you are alive again, you have a lot to learn or relearn so that you can walk again through the world as elegantly as you used to.

Before even being able to properly awaken from their four-decade sleep under the ‘protective arm’ of the Soviet ‘benefactor’, Eastern European societies were already caught in globalization’s whirlpool and transformed into new markets, joining at a fast pace those who had already begun to feel the effects of a new type of colonization. They were force-fed new products from all over the world, from clothes to cars to other commodities they had never even dreamed of, and exotic food filled the shop windows which until then had remained almost empty. Along with all these came the new finanscapes1 especially invented to catch as many consumers as possible. From victims of totalitarian regimes, people in the post-Communist countries turned almost overnight into ‘heavy users’ and joined the Western consumption system, finding out as soon as 2008 that they were just another type of victim.

As Nadia Seremetakis (1994, 13) observed, everyday life is the best ‘site of political colonization because the everyday, prepared as a zone of devaluation, forgetfulness and inattention, is also the site where new political identities can be fabricated by techniques of distraction’.

Snow White got up from her coffin to marry on the spot a prince she knew little about except that his kiss had awakened her (let’s not forget that he was not even born when she fell asleep because of that evil spell). But what happens if Snow White (in this case frozen Eastern European societies) had discovered that the Prince (aka global markets) wanted to feed her just another kind of poison? Not to mention that she still had the feeling of that piece of apple in her throat, making it hard for her to breathe properly.

The dialectic between the body and the world is deeply derailed in a totalitarian regime. Nothing comes naturally. Those who have escaped from such
a society need to pay more attention to the post-traumatic construction of the
Self, be it their private self or that of their community. Who would she have
been if not for these circumstances – the evil spell, the frozen sleep and the
kiss of the unknown prince? This is what Snow White must remember if she
wants to make the connection again with her true Self.

It is a truism that building the future is not possible without understanding
the past. And yet people still make the mistake of moving ahead too fast,
forgetting what shaped their present in the first place. Post-Communist soci-
eties are saturated with the reminders of a past that still must be deciphered
to make room for a genuine future. Some societies cleared their way better;
others are still figuring out how to do it.

When my mother told me how she cried in 1953 at the death of Stalin, she
was the first one to be surprised. She was telling the story after such a long
time. She was now another person living in another society. But she remem-
bered well how the whole kindergarten was full of tears, teachers tearing
their shirts in despair and children running home to find comfort in the
arms of their parents, who were also devastated by the news. I saw the same
reactions on television from North Korea, at the death of Kim Jong-II in
2011 – young women having real crises, and even the men crying or fainting
as Kim’s coffin passed by. Kim was declared after his death ‘the Eternal presi-
dent’: an amazing mix of politics and mysticism. After all, I saw with my own
eyes how people still visit Lenin’s corpse, on exhibit in one of the buildings
in the Red Square in Moscow. There is already a ritual of taking wedding
pictures there, so as to officially include the dead dictator in your life forever.
Our unconscious thoughts are fed from a history of habitual behaviour, and
we lack the power to free ourselves from the effects of the dressage (Lefebvre
2004) of which we are still the victims. How can we escape its influence?

In a totalitarian system, people are continually told that someone is Great,
Good and Perfect, no matter his deeds. Years after, we can still be under the
spell of the dressage that blinds us. That is why people cry and faint when a
dictator dies (Stalin yesterday, Kim today) or take pictures with his preserved
body. That is why they idealize the dictator years after his disappearance
and express nostalgic feelings and even regrets while living in the free, post-
totalitarian society they used to dream of. It may seem inexplicable, but this
is deeply connected to their unconsciousness full of images of that particular
person – as an effect of the personality cult. The dictator is always presented
as a Father, a Benefactor and a Protector. It is always easier to live under the
protective arm of a benefactor, so we entrust them, we give them power, we
automatically repeat what we hear and we submissively close our critical eye.
We are the ones who build our own Benefactor, our Father and our Protec-
tor. We are the ones who give power to the dictator.

But we are also the ones who can take that power back. There is always a
time for social breakthrough. The weaker he is, the falser the construc-
tion of the personality cult and the shorter the time until we deconstruct
the image of the ‘idol’. Information helps; communication helps; learning
helps; travelling (and seeing different social and political models) helps; the exercise of thinking with our own heads and discuss with others helps even more. But in the absence of all these – because communication, travelling and education were all dead ends in the Communist societies behind the Iron Curtain – the escape was in what De Certeau (1988) defines as ‘the practice of everyday life’, in other words, making cracks in the thick brick and stone wall built around you by the regime.

For people in Eastern European societies, part of the solution was to listen in the evening to Free Europe Radio transmissions; to borrow music and films from the few who could procure them, multiply them and hand them to the next person; or to hand-make books and circulate them among friends, even if you knew one day someone would end up turning you in to the police.

Samizdats were objects to have and to hold and to hide. Samizdats were small acts of resistance that challenged the Soviet regime. Samizdats were works of art that circulated secretly and inspired thousands. Samizdats were dangerous: produced, distributed and consumed at great personal risk.

It must have felt like digging under the wall of a prison with a teaspoon. But all these were instruments of changing the rhythm of our parents’ lives, to keep them from being totally dragged into the trance, or hypnotized by the repetition of the praises for ‘the one and only’. Everything and everybody should be the subject of critique all the time, thought Foucault. To make use of one’s sense of critique is the first step towards the ecology of the spirit and of our lives.

All these were conscious actions meant to undermine the system by contesting it in an intellectual way. But the creative potential of humankind also concentrated in those minor, private ways that were part of the practice of everyday life, helping the practitioner to escape the dressage in unexpected ways.

My maternal grandmother used to knit. And she liked knitting so much that when the time came, she refused to work on a plantation like everybody else in her working-class circle and instead began to knit her way out of the system.

She began to knit before the Second World War, when she was just a girl, the first in a family with three children. She was very good at it, always inventing new patterns and colour combinations, so as a teenager she already had her clients – women from the low and middle classes, fellow workers or even the wives of the doctors, lawyers or clerks living in the neighbourhood. After the war, she married, and her husband, my grandfather, joined the Communist Party, which promised and delivered jobs for everybody and housing at low prices. But the party was asking for many things in return: among these, it asked people to renounce their identities and devote themselves to the ideal
of building an illusory ‘new man’ living in a ‘new world’. For example, the
new man was supposed to wear uniforms: blue coveralls while working at
the plants, and sad black costumes on ‘special occasions’, which ranged from
joining children for the opening day of school to visiting friends or families
or attending a funeral. The black costume worked for almost every occasion.
No wonder my grandmother’s colourful knitted sweaters and dresses soon
became a sensation for the women in the neighbourhood. She would knit all
day long – unless she stopped to cook for her family. And everybody – from
the doctors and her two daughters’ teachers to the women asking for her
telephone number in the street, after seeing her wearing something knitted –
would wear the colourful, playful clothes.

The success made her earn more money than her husband did at the plant,
a situation not at all common in Romanian society of the 1960s and 1970s.
She became an independent spirit, claiming for herself a different status: she
would build her own house on the firm piece of earth that she and her hus-
bond bought near their parents’ house, instead of taking the party’s offer, a
small box in a block of apartments full of strangers; she would buy her furni-
ture with a down payment, instead of entering the debt system designed by
the regime; she would dress her two daughters in elegant clothes, knitting
and sewing their dresses after patterns taken from German magazines like
*Burda* or *Neckermann*. To get the new patterns from these foreign magazines,
as well as the finest threads for her knitting, my grandmother played a dan-
gerous game, entering into conversations with people who were making their
living by breaking the restrictive rules for commerce with Western countries.
I am not sure whether she knew she was engaging in illegal operations, but I
do know that she would do it no matter what in order to knit her dreams of
a different life, her parallel reality.

Like the embroiderers that Seremetakis (1994) speaks about in *The Senses
Still*, by giving away at a certain price the pieces of clothing she knitted, which
would bring colour into other women’s lives, my grandmother contributed
pieces of herself to change the texture of a bleak reality and make it more
bearable. ‘Embroidering engages a self-reflexive femininity: she will endow
artifacts with her content and yet allow them to speak for themselves’ (15).

Today, knitting is a nice way to spend one’s leisure time (*Vogue* has a spe-
cial brochure for knitting patterns), or it may be a metaphorical way of de-
scribing the production of art in the Western world (see a famous brand like
*The Knitting Factory*), but in the practice of everyday life in Communist
Romania, from the 1950s up to the 1990s, knitting was a creative as well as
political way to engage in reality and shape it to become more human. The
politics of knitting.

Untangling the lines of the apparatus containing my grandmother’s small
acts of resistance doesn’t mean that I am doing fieldwork about her life un-
der the Communist regime but rather that I am trying to understand my
past through the lived experience of the generations that made communism