

Trespassing borders: singular approaches in Romanian contemporary drama

by Irina Wolf

Inspired by real-life events, Romanian plays span well beyond national borders. There is, for example, **Alexa Băcanu's** chilling text ***MoSI**Anderstanding (M.I.S.A. Părut)* telling the story of a girl entangled in the Movement for Spiritual Integration into the Absolute, a harsh encounter with manipulations and prejudices. The “Transcendental Meditation scandal” fueled by the use of yoga as cover-up for illegal practices such as sexual acts with minors started in 2004 and involved several European countries. Băcanu intelligently counter-balances narrative sequences with dialogues, press excerpts and statements of political leaders.

Bogdan Georgescu, for his part, picks up in *#minor* the international controversy sparked by Norwegian officials at the end of 2015 when they seized five children of a Romanian family. The ensuing scandal raised the issue of the child protection system and potential discrimination against foreigners. This second part of Georgescu's trilogy *How far are we from the caves we came from?* can stand on its own, as the subject of his first play, ***ANTISOCIAL***, is based on a real case which happened in 2015 in a Romanian high school. The story concerning a secret group created by pupils on a socialization platform and infiltrated by teachers with the help of some of the pupils is cleverly told from three angles (pupils, parents, teachers). Finally, ***MAL/PRAXIS***, the third part of the trilogy, is a feminist queer active art manifest dealing with the limits of power structures and responsibility. A director himself, Georgescu's texts are conglomerates of brisk dialogues with techniques of devised and documentary theatre.

Based on the political relations of her native country to Romania and Russia, the play ***MOLDOVASHOP. We have everything!*** (***MOLDOVASHOP. Avem di tăti!***) of Moldovan born author **Olga Macrinici** is also situated on an international level, even if its language is kept in Moldovan dialect. Besides highlighting different aspects of Moldovan politics, Macrinici's text deals also with the migration issue, another topic extending far beyond geographical borders. But whereas Westerners are preoccupied mainly by immigration and asylum matters, Romanian playwrights examine their fellow citizens' massive emigration to Western Europe. The causes of this phenomenon, such as rising Romanian unemployment rate are considered in **Csaba Székely's** play ***Minewater*** (***Apă de mină***). As member belonging to the Hungarian minority of Romania it was understandable that his

play, which is part of a trilogy, examines issues concerning, but not limited to the Hungarian population in Transylvania. Although Székely's text covers among others, tragic circumstances like alcoholism and paedophilia, his language full of humour and irony turns the drama to a delightful comic satire.

But the focus of emigration lies above all on its effects, such as the lack of parental affection children left behind are facing. Both **Mihaela Michailov** and **Elise Wilk** tackle this sensitive subject in *Momlovesyou* respectively in *Paper planes (Avioane de hârtie)*. Michailov's plays are based on a thorough documentation partly obtained through interviews. Her dramas have a fragmented structure, being a collage of press excerpts, monologues, dialogues and choral moments.

Whereas Michailov has experienced documentary theatre, her language being strongly political, Elise Wilk makes use of a more poetic language. Known for her interest for the problems of teenagers, both of Elise Wilk's plays, *Paper planes* and the monodrama *Crocodile (Crocodil)* are part of a trilogy dedicated to adolescents. The latter plunges into the gender identity theme, as in Romania stereotypes border on racism and all types of discrimination. Thus, Michailov's *Google My Country! (Google țara mea!)* focuses in particular on ethnic prejudices and the inequalities to which Roma are exposed. However, LGBT is the most hottest issue which raised heated debates during the last two years. The reason for this is that in 2016 the Coalition for Family collected 3 million signatures in favour of changing the constitutional definition of marriage as a union strictly between a man and a woman from the existing "spouses", thus trying to crush Romania's same-sex marriage hopes. No wonder that several playwrights tackle this topic in their dramas, e.g. **Gabriel Sandu** in *My father, the priest (Tatăl meu, preotul)*, **Radu Popescu** in *The Will (Testament)* or **Alexa Băcanu** in *Neverland* – the latter being an unusual, but all the more convincing mix of songs, monologues and dialogues in both Romanian and Hungarian language. All three ponder on different types of boundaries.

Personal boundaries, social boundaries, emotional boundaries, religious boundaries – analysing them seems crucial in a society exercising intimidation, violence and harassment on its citizens. Csaba Székely's play *I regret nothing (Nu regret nimic)* gives frightening insight into child abuse, but, above all, into the perpetual existence of the notorious Romanian secret police Securitate. Child abuse is likewise the main topic of Gabriel Sandu's play *Bambies (Căprioare)*. His fictional dialogues based on real news address the issue from three different angles, illustrating, at the same time, privacy violation, generational conflict and the lack of freedom of expression. As a matter of fact, several playwrights (Băcanu, Georgescu, Macrinici, Székely, Vlădăreanu) are engaged in

addressing these borders which infringe human rights. Quite a number of plays in the corruption-plagued country place the emphasis on moral boundaries concerning bribe and media manipulation.

Standing quite apart from the rest is Olga Macrinici's play **DOCUANIMAL**, an invitation to reflect upon the human-animal relationship and the abuse of power. Another quite solitary appearance is Radu Popescu's monodrama **Pancakes (Born with a silver spoon) – Clătite. (Norocos de la naștere)**. While targeting nutrition and health issues, Popescu's sole narrator is engaged in cooking pancakes, transforming the play to an interactive storytelling. Spectators turn into active participants also in **Elena Vlădăreanu's play A secure life (O viață sigură)**. Vlădăreanu's interrogating, inconvenient and provocative text presents a number of scenarios that are part of our daily lives, like video surveillance and data manipulation, questioning the borders of ethics and of fear. Fear is another recurrent topic, as emigrants who have undergone humiliation while working in the West are afraid to return to Romania (e.g. in Michailov's **Momlovesyou**) or teenagers left on their own are manifesting anxiety symptoms (e.g. Wilk's **Paper planes**). Vlădăreanu's manifesto about maternity **Habemus Bebe** also deals with fear generated by stereotypes about motherhood. In present day Romanian society these are mainly caused by the discourse of official institutions like the one of the Orthodox Church. Along with nutrition, her poetic text raises the subjects of the condition of the woman artist as well as women's personal physical and emotional borders challenged by social pressure.

Alexandra Pâzgu, for her part, dedicates an entire play to the topic fear. Starting from own subjective experiences, memories and perception, Pâzgu's **Supernovae (Supernove)** "proposes a poetic-philosophical research, a playful documentation and a political investigation of the real". Structures that support among others childhood fears, fear of planes, fear in society, are analysed in a collage of devised theatre, monologues, songs, choral and improvisation moments as well as filmed elements. Pâzgu's interest lies in proposing different ways of narration shapes in theatre. Starting from notions of Deleuzian philosophy, her play **Fluorescent proteins (Proteine fluorescente)** is an essay of rethinking the relation of an individual person to art and to reality. Pâzgu devised a text on voices, without characters. It is a ten-part poetic journal that expresses some of the thoughts of the world we live in, a kind of reflection about the continuous agitation of present-day reality, about our growing isolation and loneliness caused by the use of technology as well as about the relationship we have with the city we live in.

Romanian playwrights go far beyond international borders when analysing the potential causes and effects of emigration. Their plays are featuring characters coming from diverse

backgrounds and covering all ages and gender groups. On the other hand, as European citizens they are critically addressing, in real or imaginary approaches, by means of a wide range of expressive elements, the trespassing of boundaries which infringe human rights like freedom of expression, privacy, discrimination, violence, corruption.