

Through the Cracks and Crevices of Theatre History

A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism. Children of a Restless Time. By Cristina Modreanu. New York–London: Routledge, 2020. 180 pp.

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Cristina Modreanu's book, *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism. Children of a Restless Time*, published by Routledge in 2020, examines the communist past of the Romanian theatre scene as well as the region's post-communist recent past, with the goal of mapping out the contemporary Romanian theatrical and performing arts landscape.¹ Although the title suggests a more comprehensive history lesson that spans from decades of communism to the present day, Modreanu focuses on the processes that have shaped Romanian theatre culture as we know it today rather than providing a detailed historical account of this admittedly long period. In this sense, the introductory chapter provides a panoramic view of the decades preceding the regime change in 1989, most notably the slight opening in the 1960s, the so-called Rethatricalisation movement that shaped the artistic trajectory of theatre makers at the time, Ceauşescu's new thesis on Romanian culture that reverted the relative freedom of the previous decade, and the introduction and consolidation of censorship and other surveillance modes in the 1970s and 1980s. These events are primarily told through the example of one of the most notable theatre directors of the time, Lucian Pintilie, who, along with many other Romanian artists, ended up emigrating to the West to escape the repercussions of dictatorship.

This introduction is followed by a series of chapters, each focusing on one or more theatre directors and giving a professional portrayal of some of Romania's household names in the profession. The first four chapters are dedicated to theatre directors born and raised before 1989: Andrei Şerban and Silviu Purcărete

1 The book was published by Routledge in New York and London in 2020. This review is based on the eBook version made available by the Taylor & Francis Group.

emigrated to the West before 1989 and returned to their home country only after the regime change, while Mihai Măniuțiu and Radu Afrim, both from a slightly younger generation, had their real start in theatre after the fall of the Berlin Wall. As a result, the account of their careers is primarily focused on this later period, which Modreanu was also able to witness as a critic. In this sense, the book is indeed about the artistic trajectories of the children of a restless time, who are post-communist but not because they have surpassed communism, but because they still bear its consequences. Modreanu demonstrates how the political system prior to 1989 shaped not only the personal livelihoods of certain figures in the Romanian theatrical scene (in the way they were forced to flee the country) or their artistic freedom (in the way their works were censored) but also an entire artistic system, including its institutions, conventions, aesthetics, and politics. The story that this book tells of the lineage from communism to capitalism in Romanian theatre is the story of structures inherited from communism, namely the state-subsidised system of theatre institutions, their lack of interest in overtly political topics after the regime change, and the subsequent formation of the so-called independent scene in the light of all of the above and in the context of the new, free world of capitalism.

While the first four chapters trace the history of twentieth-century Romanian theatre through the singular portrayals of internationally renowned theatre directors, the second half of the book is devoted to various topics, such as the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, participatory art, feminist theatre, and contemporary drama, with a few notable mentions included in the chapter titles. An exception is Gianina Cărbunariu, who gets a whole chapter all to herself, one that also seems rather peculiar as it is a personal account of important moments, captured also on camera, that included both the author and Cărbunariu. Although it may appear strange at first that the big names in Romanian theatre, all of whom are male, are given their own chapters while the younger generation is divided into thematic blocks, the latter approach feels more in line with the intentions of the theatre researcher. These later chapters also provide a much deeper understanding of the workings of the theatrical scene as a complex, fluctuating space full of liveliness and inconsistencies rather than engaging in the stories of exceptional theatre directors racing against the system.

One of the paradoxes of this contemporary scene is state-subsidised institutions' apparent ignorance of new discourses around aesthetics, politics, and the role of art in society, as well as the disinterest in challenging their conventions and changing their relationship to the audience. This is in stark contrast to the vibrancy and energy of the poorly funded and under-developed independent scene. The latter is the context for all the theatre artists Modreanu discusses, an aspect that is repeatedly noted in her book but could have been contextualised more profoundly.

Nonetheless, the overall picture that is painted here is of generations of theatre artists who, in one way or another, have pushed against the constraints of their reflective systems, whether that was a communist dictatorship with full-blown censorship and overt state propaganda, or a neoliberal capitalism, entrenched by the ghosts of the previous political system's unrevised cultural policies.

Modreanu's style of writing has an essayistic feel to it. The aforementioned chapter on Gianina Cărbunariu, which brings the lives of the theatre critic and the theatre director together in an unconventionally personal tale, is one pertinent example. Through this gesture, the author presents herself as a fellow, a contemporary to the younger generation depicted here. The figure of the theatre historian and critic, who typically remains unmarked in theatre history, comes to the forefront. This personal touch reappears later in the chapter on feminism, which recounts a project curated by the author herself: while she admits in a footnote to the impossibility of objectivity (as if objectivity was an attainable goal), she assures the reader that in her account of the aforementioned project, she assumes the role of the observer. Both these interventions feel in keeping with the overall tone of the book, though they also raise the larger question of genre and form in relation to theatre historiography, as well as the book's overall goal.

It is clear that *A History of Romanian Theatre from Communism to Capitalism* is aimed at international audiences who want to learn more about Romanian theatre and contextualise names already well-established on the international stage (all theatre artists in the book are people with some international career). What is missing is some theoretical and methodological precision to reflect on the questions and issues indirectly raised throughout the book. One of these issues is the role and position of the theatre historian and, related to this, the issue of multiple roles assumed by one person in the theatrical scene, which is quite typical of female professionals in the Romanian independent scene and, thus, could serve as a poignant starting point for the feminism chapter. Another point worth noting is the author's methodology for accessing historical time through portrayals: this approach diminishes the importance of certain groups, initiatives, and projects, a few of which, such as dramAcum, Replika, the playwriting MA course in Târgu Mureş, and others, are noted but never serve as protagonists, only as backdrops for the accounts of singular theatre artists. An in-depth chapter is dedicated to important processes, such as the renewal of Romanian contemporary drama, which was influenced in part by British playwriting initiatives. The author builds on several interviews with Romanian playwrights to paint a picture of the current state of the art, which is yet another novel methodological approach to the topic.

This book's eclectic style makes it a pleasant and light read, while also undermining some of its strengths. Unfortunately, there are numerous grammatical and

syntax errors that take some of the pleasure out of reading. The proposition of the volume, “to connect the dots between the small acts of resistance in Romanian theatre before 1989 and after this moment, writing about those who take action onstage and around it, to produce “crevices and cracks” in the official culture and fill them with real moments of truthfulness, of pure imagination and magic”, is accomplished without giving much thought to the means and methods, following an oratorical and essayistic style that nonetheless feels personal and frank.

