

Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion. Edited and translated by Jozefina Komporaly.

London: Methuen, 2022. 352 pp.

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In *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion*, editor and translator Jozefina Komporaly showcases Romania's diverse and robust theatrical ecosystem through six plays sampled from the past 30 years.¹ The anthology is a triumph worth celebrating as this collection of contemporary dramas in translation feels like a festival without lifting even the cover of the book. The reader will encounter the very first publication of these dramatic works in any language by Mihaela Panainte, Matéi Visniec, György Dragomán, András Visky, and the Giuvlipen Theatre Company: Raj Alexandru Udrea, Oana Rusu, Bety Pisica, Zita Moldovan, Nicoleta Ghita, Antonella Leca Duda, Michaela Dragan.

As the curator of the collection, Komporaly expands the definition of a play, bringing us texts that are freshly canonized works of living playwrights; Matéi Visniec's *The Spectator Sentenced to Death* appears alongside texts that transgress traditional expectations of what a play is, like Mihaela Panaintes' dreamy *Lowlands*. *The Passport* by Dragomán György is included after being performed in the longest-standing minority theater with national status—The Hungarian National Theater in Cluj. While the Giuvlipen Theatre Company (meaning “feminist” in Romani) has still not obtained national status despite national and international acclaim, this anthology culminates with their bold and fearless collective dramaturgy.

In Komporaly's selections, “Romanian” becomes a Central-European flag bearer with a pan-European flair, as the chosen texts carry the voices and influences of Romani, German, Hungarian, French, Albanian, Italian, etc. identities. The thoughtful introduction to the plays also captures a strong sense of the multitudes that the regions' stages hold: the vibrant collaborations fostered by a nation that holds its

1 <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/plays-from-romania-dramaturgies-of-subversion-9781350214316/>, last accessed: 7 June 2023.

theater arts central to its identity and freedom. One only has to read the synopsis, production histories, and posters to understand that these are creators of international relevance with universal appeal who will enrich any syllabus that cares to decolonise and fine-tune what European theater can represent globally. Methuen's presently discussed publication, as well as the series it belongs to (featuring *Contemporary Plays from Iraq* introduced and translated by James Al-Shamma, and *Contemporary Plays by African Women* edited by Yvette Hutchison and Amy Jephta), give theater academics the tools and textual testimony to subvert and invent a new sense of what contemporary plays and dramaturgies could be. The highest hope is that this English-language publication will spark even more readings, workshop presentations, productions, and possibly published translations in even more languages.

The eclectic selections highlight the different dramaturgical approaches emphasized by the subtitle: dramaturgies of subversion, examining the act of writing for the theater both for its power and its methods. The anthology opens with an adaptation by Mihaela Panainte of Nobel-prize-winning Herta Müller's first collection of shorts (original title *Niederungen*). Here, the performance text is a side-product of the directorial work, highlighting the potentially hundreds of similar texts produced in director-driven cultures as radical cuts of classics and adaptations of non-dramatic works that are never again read or printed after a finished run. There is power in selecting a director-generated play, thereby acknowledging a new pathway for publishing writing developed through performance and providing life to nontraditional texts beyond their original productions. Panaintes' dramaturgical flair is undeniable; her adaptation transmits the rhythm of the source material, preserving both the surreal poetry and the visceral imagination of a child who sees herself as one with nature.

Panainte splits the storytelling in three ways: the narrative is shared between a child narrator and her grown-up version, and the chorus of villagers creates a very dynamic blueprint for future performances. Panainte reinvents how a memory play can operate, erasing a singular vantage point and orchestrating the child and grown-up voices of the storyteller simultaneously. (It is curious how the same narrative method of child and grownup narrator appearing side by side is also present in Andras Viskys' first novel *Kitelepítés* [Expulsion], published last year, as if conjuring the rememberer to help the one remembering would allow us deeper access into seeing our past) Panainte's method of narration gives the dramatic voices a universal quality, in spite of how specifically and terminally abandoned they are. Although Eastern European readers may want to feel that the play unearths history that is finished, the text brings forth the feeling that an all-consuming vortex of living mud is always just a stone's throw away.

History and her theatrical threat of repeating herself weigh equally heavily in Dragomán's desperate kitchen sink drama of Ceausescu's Romania in the 1980s and the large-scale absurdist extravaganza of Matei Visniec. Dictatorship in Romania

feels claustrophobic in Dragomán's work (as so aptly visually captured in Miklósi Dénes's set design on the cover of the anthology photographed by Istvan Biró) and like a carnival of infectious madness in Visniec's world.

The tetralogy of Andras Visky, dedicated to the female body, honors real women and offers a dramaturgy that seeks and encourages freedom. The four short plays that were commissioned by Theatre Y in Chicago offer endless variation in terms of staging. The playwright invites collaborators and spectators alike to witness the dialogue between the pieces. The proposition is deeply intrapersonal and intracultural: who are we as spectators when we experience the presence of Mother Teresa? Will you see the victim, the artists, or the activist in yourself when you encounter Artemissa? Visky writes your silences in the play. Each play creates its own *wunderkammer*—the source material is richly varied: anchored in research, inspired by conversations, triggered by paintings, music, and court documents—but the medium is always and inescapably the body.

The female body gains agency and personhood in Giuvlipen Theater Company's collective writing effort in this anthologized devised theater piece; members use performance space to tell their stories in their own words, guided by the framework provided by director Bodgan Georgescu. The company intends to tell the stories of Romanian *#metoo* frankly, boldly, and directly. "The entire history of white culture and civilisation is of rape and abuse," concludes Michaelas' character, ending with the suggestion of burning it all. As theater makers, these fierce and fearless Romany creators challenge us to evaluate in our practice of theater-making which systems to dismantle and which to build together for ourselves. Which stories are we willing to share, and which are we no longer willing to hear/write/direct about ourselves? While this piece is the least likely to land a new production since it is so tailored to its creators, it is very much the text embedded in the current zeitgeist and speaks in the present tense to their own traditional, transgressive, and very theatrical terms. Even as text, Michaela Dragan and her collaborators break their silence and claim space.

This anthology is a substantial contribution to scholars dedicated to Romanian theater or Eastern European studies and initiates first-time readers into contemporary Romanian theatrical work. Hopefully, readers will get the sense that theater is something very vibrant and precious in Romania. These plays indicate the multitudes that Romanian stages contain, which a single publication cannot possibly capture. Together, the plays reflect people who have multiple ways of gazing into their difficult past and finding inventive ways to frame and face that past collectively.

