

Recenzii

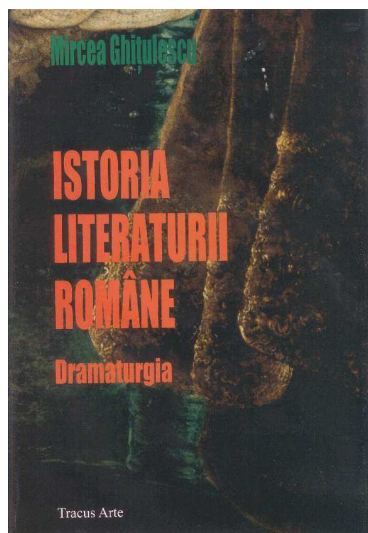
Ionesco, the Great Absent. Vişniec, in the Limelight of Romanian Theatre - "The History of Romanian Literature. Drama"

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The History of Romanian Literature. Drama

Mircea Ghiţulescu

Tracus Arte, 2008, 918 p.



In the context of the past few years, when the Romanian culture has been enriched by an impressive number of literary histories – whose substance unfortunately varies between diletantism and monumentality – the publication of the volume by Mircea Ghiţulescu may be received with a certain amount of skepticism. However, from the very first glimpse it becomes obvious that it is not just another literary history, but undoubtedly the amplest work of this type dedicated to Romanian theatre. In the almost one thousand pages one may find two centuries of literature and over one thousand of playwrights, the critic trying to capture, sometimes synthetically, but more often than not analytically, the evolution of a genre often placed at the periphery of literature. Without being autobiographical, "The History of Romanian Literature. Drama" is a synthetic view of Mircea Ghiţulescu's life and

critical work, and it may not be a random occurrence that it is the last volume published before the author's death. Its publication had been heralded by three other volumes, "A Panorama of Contemporary Romanian Dramatic Literature. 1944-1984" (Dacia Publishing House, 1984), "The History of Contemporary Romanian Drama (1900-2000)" (Albatros Publishing House, 2000) and "The Artist Book. Contemporary Romanian Theatre" (The Editorial Office of Foreign Publications, 2004). This study was a must, as Romanian drama, be it *great* or *small*, is definitely "unread or at most perused" (7), and in the literary histories mentioned previously, even the ones signed by Alex Ştefănescu and Nicolae Manolescu, it is treated in a fragmented manner and excessively lightly. It is also worth mentioning that, although its purpose is to bring to light theatre names, texts and facts that have been unknown or forgotten too soon, Mircea Ghiţulescu does not make the mistake of other authors of literary histories, among whom Marian Popa, to slip towards tabloid gossip or anecdotes, neither does he replace chronicler work with detective work, like Cornel Ungureanu.

In the circular, symmetrical, almost novel-like structure of the volume one may distinguish four parts, organised chronologically, devoted to the periods 1800 – 1900, 1900 – 1945, 1945 – 1990 and 1990 – 2008. If the first part is rather synthetic in character, the other two provide in distinct sections a bird's eyeview over the cultural context, the theoretical aspects, the main directions and representatives, a series of *profiles* of dramatists who are usually overlooked and, last but not least, a *dictionary* of minor or occasional theatre creators. Another proof of the minute research performed by the literary critic is the alphabetic index of over 60 pages placed at the end of the volume, to the purpose of completing the list of dramatists with a number of quasi-unknown authors and the titles of the plays, translations or scenarios signed by them.

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Moreover, the critic did not confine himself to inventory work, but searched for the primary sources, as apparent in the bibliographical card of a young Bessarabian writer: "SOBIETSKI MÂNĂSCURTĂ, Călin: *Skyscraper Terrace*, volume 2003. In *Skyscraper Terrace* the source is Pirandello (especially the one in *Henry IV*) which is also obvious from the Italian staging of the plot. The overendowed child, Roberto, in love with his teacher, remains a literary discovery perhaps similar to Jean Cocteau's *enfants terribles*".

However, it would be unfair to Mircea Ghițulescu to reduce him to the role of an artistic labourer, merely a good archivist of theatre. His critical analyses, the short monographies of the dramatists, the intertextual connections he observes with surprising acuity are always unpredictable, and beyond the methodological aspect of the book one may easily discover a very personal vision on the evolution of Romanian theatre. It is true that in the attempt to reinstate drama into its own rights he has the tendency to overevaluate authors or texts – he identifies expressionist accents in the dramatic poem *Antechrist* by Samson Bodnărescu (100) or he sees in Bogdan Amaru's play, "Chasing Butterflies", a comedy "of a unique type in Romania, at the border between classicism and surrealism" (292). These *slips* are nevertheless compensated by the subtle observations and ironical accents underlying the *profiles*, among which the one of the doctor Victor Papilian, whose passion for theatre, "also encouraged by the Cluj-based high office of director of the National Theatre", took shape in plays such as "Simona" or "The Prince Consort", written "specifically *not to upset anybody* and ending up by upsetting the reader" (320).

A possible controversy generated by "The History of Romanian Literature. Drama" is the absence of Eugène Ionesco from the segment devoted to the period 1945 – 1990, Mircea Ghițulescu only touching upon his plays in a section called "Ionesco, the great absent" in the prologue: "Active Drama". Although the reason of this absence is not directly mentioned, it may be easily inferred from the dramatist's blunt classification as a "French dramatist", reformer of the theatre, who made his dramatic debut in 1950, with the play "The Bald Soprano", considered as *the birth certificate* of "the so-called *theatre of the absurd*", but "not only was the *the birth certificate* preceded by an initial version in Romanian", but "years before, in Romania, the surrealist Gellu Naum had published in 1945 an *absurd play* called *Exactly at the Same Time*" (14). Mircea Ghițulescu's perspective changes when referring to another Romanian settled in France, Matei Vișniec. In his case, neither does he view him as a *French dramatist*, nor does he exclude him from the history of Romanian theatre, but instead he grants him ample space in his volume (508-524), comparable only to Caragiale (126-148) and Alecsandri (48-78). Overlooking the fact that the study of Vișniec's playwriting is also revisited in the third part of the book, devoted to the interval 1945-1990, despite the fact that most of the texts brought up to discussion are written after that date, it has to be admitted that the book constitutes an excellent exercise of literary criticism.

Therefore, besides its undeniable consistency, what defines this history of literature is the polemic tone, panoramic vision and exhaustive analysis on playwriting, seen both as literature and representation, Mircea Ghițulescu assuming to an equal extent his role of literary critic, theatre commentator and especially genuine theatre lover.