

POETRY ON STAGE: GAMES, WORDS, CRICKETS..., DIRECTED BY SILVIU PURCĂRETE

By Ion M. Tomuş

The poetry recital in the Romanian performing arts landscape holds a special position which needs to be described in its general coordinates. First, before 1990 and the fall of the Iron Curtain, most poetry recitals given by Romanian actors were part of the job description of those with certain visibility. The poetry recital thus became, in most cases, a job obligation and part of the Communist party's propaganda. Of course, this situation meant that the relationship between the audience and those who recited poetry benefited from a special configuration, deeply marked by the social-cultural particularities of the period between 1947 and 1990. The patriotic poems that had to be recited by the Romanian actors were part of the communist propaganda and had nothing in common with real poetry. Socialist realism was expressed in the field of poetry in topics like outstanding crops, comrades who break new records in industrial production, or ones who work on the homeland's great construction sites and compete with those around them. There was also the category of patriotic poetry in which the image of the supreme leader of the country and of the Communist party were praised. Moreover, during the last fifteen years of the Communist regime, there was a lot of insistence on the glorification of the presidential couple through poetry, a situation that now, almost 50 years later, seems completely ridiculous. Finally, the last major trend in the recitals of patriotic poetry before 1990 was represented by the reinterpretation of some of the great classical Romanian poets in a special key that served the purposes of propaganda. For example, in the work of Mihai Eminescu (the last great European romantic poet), the same propaganda identified certain elements that could be useful for its purposes, thus an important series of themes was diverted towards these ambitions.

After 1990, Romanian society and the national artistic environment found themselves in a situation of total freedom of expression, and the transition was very sudden. The situation was similar in the whole of Eastern Europe and this new freedom was rather difficult for coping with not only for the artists but for the whole society. The world of theatre rightly tried to detach itself from the traumas during the Communist regime and establish a safe distance from the unfortunate clichés of the past, from the procedures and means of stage expression so well established during half a century of Communist propaganda.

One of the genres that lost substantial ground, though, was exactly that of poetic recital. Most prominent Romanian actors avoided it because they wanted to evade the association with an outdated way of artistic expression which was for so long diverted from the true purpose of art - that of creating stimulating emotion.

Of course, there were exceptions: those who understood the importance of poetry and emotion for the general audience. Several actors did not shy away from publicly reciting true poetry (as they did before 1990), insisting on artistic truth, emotion and value: Lucia Mureșan, Ovidiu Iuliu Moldovan, Ion Caramitru, Valeria Seciu, Ilinca Tomoroveanu, Traian Stănescu, Constantin Chiriac, Mircea Albulescu and others.

Even more than others, Constantin Chiriac, from the very beginning of his career, understood the importance of “real” poetry in a society that responds to emotion and truth. Addressing the public through poetry and, thus, serving the community – this is the solid foundation on which he built his career as an actor. It is also crucial to note that he is the author of a doctoral thesis focused precisely on the act of interpreting and reciting poetry. His thesis has become a textbook for the poetry recital technique for students and professionals in the field of performing arts.



Games, Words, Crickets... Photo: Dragos Dumitru.

At Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, the theatrical autumn of 2022 was marked by the opening of *Games, Words, Crickets...*, directed by Silviu Purcărete: a performance of poetry by Constantin Chiriac, with the support of more than a dozen of the company's actors who performed a series of stage exercises that derived from improvisations led by the director. The text of the performance was based on fragments from a diverse and surprising selection of Romanian and international poets: Carl Sandburg, Nazim Hikmet, Serghei Esenin, William Shakespeare, Paul Verlaine, Mihai Eminescu, Marin Sorescu, Radu Stanca, and others.

Silviu Purcărete is a director who has made his audience expect to see in his shows a special dynamic involving usually a group of actors on stage who are driven by the energy and emotion instigated by improvisational exercises. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Faust*, *Metamorphoses* and *The Scarlet Princess* are just a few of the performances staged by him in Sibiu in which a group of actors acquires the consistency of a real character that is in direct relationship with the central performer (or performers). The performance of the group of actors is usually accompanied by music or is itself a music generator, the stage, thus, becoming a space where Silviu Purcărete creates a functional, extremely colorful, and diverse world—a universe that works according to its own special rules where this collective (but also individualized) character evolves and develops organically in their relationship with the main performer and the particularities of the space on stage and the universe in the script.

This is also the general context for *Games, Words, Crickets...*: At the beginning on stage there are the main elements of a naive and picturesque winter universe. The snowmen melt, the carrot used as a nose falls off, the snowbanks also melt, the birds chirp. Then the white and cold nature transforms, and comes back to life, as a sign of a new beginning. It is with this sign that the show begins because we feel a state of expectation and impatience—an emotion like that in childhood at the reawakening of spring. Gradually the group of actors breaks away from the theme of the end of winter and of the new beginning, and start an exercise of balancing several dozen glasses on top of each other, in a scenic expression of fragility and transparency and, of course, of the joy of building a spectacular foundation marked by these coordinates. Constantin Chiriac, in his first moment on stage, makes use of Carl Sandburg (the story about the king and the shah from *The People, Yes*) to start a *captatio benevolentiae* exercise, based on the textual formula specific to telling stories: “Once upon a time...” In this way, he establishes the dramatic convention, opens the story, and initiates the magic of emotion.

The script never aims to tell a story, which is a rarity for Silviu Purcărete, a director who has adapted some of the most important stories from world literature and drama: *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Pantagruel*, etc. This time, more than ever before, he uses the text as a pretext and the main intention is to create emotion. The protagonist of the show, Constantin

Chiriac, is configured as an ordinary character in a light-colored costume, who stands out in the chromatics and the special configuration of the stage, as implemented by Dragoş Buhagiar, the set designer.

Of course, the commonality of the character reciting poems is an element sought out by the director and well assumed and carried out by the actor. Through this artistic approach, the poetic text is emphasized in all its nuances and labyrinthine, deep, extremely differing substrata, both for the performer and the audience. In addition, the stage direction of the performance is extremely attentive to the means of expression of the character who recites the poems: his banality is not pushed into an existentialist zone, as is the one in which, for example, Ionesco's famous Béranger works. On the contrary, Silviu Purcărete places his actor, Constantin Chiriac, in a detached area, where the great questions raised by the text have a welcomed ludic counterpoint, assumed both by the role itself and by the group of actors on stage, who develop and continue their improvisations in parallel with the poetry in the text.

Performing arts professionals know very well the fundamental difficulties related to expressing poetic texts on stage. The enunciation that reaches the audience must be precisely distilled by the performer and a truly interdisciplinary approach to the text is needed. Philology, as a field that is tangential to dramaturgy, is particularly useful in this sense, because it may offer a helpful set of theoretical tools that may help in this whole endeavor. The technique of the poetry recital requires the development of an activity that is, to a great extent, similar to that of a detective: good knowledge of all the nuances of the text and the entire work of the poet (for the best possible selection of texts), and also identification of several cores of the poetic text that will later be used by the performer and passed on to the public. In addition to all this, it is essential to establish a possible dialogue in the text that is spoken on stage, which can then be verbalized and delivered with theatrical means. This is, for example, why conceptual poetry is so difficult to recite on stage.

Through the main performer and the group of actors who carry out the improvisation exercises, *Games, Words, Crickets* establishes a dialogue that works in several ways, all of which are suffused with emotion. First of all, the dialogue between the protagonist and the audience should be mentioned. The foundation on which it is built is the poetry recited by Constantin Chiriac, which does not communicate a precise content of ideas or facts, as the audience is used to when going to the theatre, but focuses on the delivery of emotion from the poetic text. The “sender” (the protagonist) may use means that are sometimes theatrically exaggerated and dissolve the fourth wall of the stage. Theatrical convention and the routines of watching a theatrical performance may make the audience see a character in the protagonist. However, the director's stage reality proposes a concept that uses poetry to convey not ideas and facts, but emotion. The script is not made up of a chain of events that link together to build up dramatic tension and reach a climax, but

of successive emotions, which are communicated by the protagonist to the audience through often playful means and the goal is the creation and the stage configuration of a whole universe, with its special rules, in which not only those on the stage but the entire audience take refuge.

Furthermore, also regarding the decomposition of the poetic text and the identification of dialogue vectors, it is essential to detail one of the most important moments of the performance: two life-size marionettes, copies of the protagonist, appear on stage, manipulated by the actors. The marionettes become part of the mechanism that configures the dialogue: the performer is in a communicative relationship with these marionettes. Questions are answered; answers generate new questions; the poetic text, loaded with deep philosophical meanings, becomes more and more accessible to the general audience, without its universe of meanings being altered. Moreover, for one of Mihai Eminescu's poems, approaching the possible dialogue with ludic means on a theatre stage implies a happy adaptation to the horizon of expectations of the contemporary spectator. The world is now fast, communication has changed enormously in the last decades, and identifying new nuances and levels in the process of delivering the poetic text to the public through a (re)configuration of the dialogue may be a useful and rewarding approach. Finally, the two marionettes convey extra theatricality and fit perfectly into the characteristics of Silviu Purcărete's theatrical universe: the apparent grotesqueness of the images is augmented by dialogue, emotion, and playfulness.

The music of the show is composed by Vasile Şirli and is a complex of sounds that accompany the stage actions and the emotions transmitted by the protagonist to the audience. The sounds are created spontaneously, on stage, under the gaze of the spectators, and in a close relationship with the text, which emphasizes the playfulness mentioned earlier. Furthermore, when the protagonist and the improvisations of the group of actors are accompanied by recorded music, it joins the general tones of an open and bright space. The playfulness that marks the whole show is accentuated by the set design signed by Dragoş Buhagiar: the space is wide open, referring to the universality of poetry, the colors are bright, so that the lights can provide nuances and brilliance, or even texture to all the images.



Games, Words, Crickets... Photo: Dragos Dumitru.

The group of actors behind the protagonist (seventeen of them) behaves as a parallel mechanism which associates with the poetic text, enhances its potential, and completes it, or ironizes the actions on stage. Their costumes are also light-colored (shirts and shorts with suspenders)—a reference to a possible eternal childhood associated with playfulness. The games primarily belong to the group of actors. This suggests a character that stands out from the crowd or, on the contrary, a comic-grotesque uniformity caused by the masks they wear at a certain point. In *Games, Words, Crickets...*, the seventeen who accompany the protagonist on stage have the precise role of increasing the playfulness of the whole artistic endeavor.

Finally, one last thing to be emphasized: in an artistic and social context marked by a troubled and complex reality, Silviu Purcărete turns to true poetry in order to create a sensitive and emotional show. He has been known as a creator of poetry on stage through the images and energies of his performances. In *Games, Words, Crickets...* we have the opportunity to see how he uses a selection from the world's great poetry to enhance his own stage emotion.

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