

The theatrical worlds of Alexandra Ares

Often, in the Romanian theatrical space, there is talk about a certain vulnerability of our theatrical art: play writing. I myself often hesitate between believing that this problem is real and that, indeed, we do not have a recent dramaturgy that can generate new and vigorous aesthetics, and the strange feeling that, in fact, this dramaturgy exists, only that, from for one reason or another, the Romanian theaters, with the necessary exceptions, are not very interested in paying due attention to it. In general, in Romania, when we say "dramaturgy", as literature for the stage, we refer primarily to classical dramaturgy, and we invoke the same names that, for decades, we have relied on to console ourselves in this matter. We have Caragiale, what else do we need? We have a few major pieces in the interwar period, aren't they enough for us? Then we have a vast and mediocre dramaturgy produced under communism, why are we not satisfied, however?

Well, we cannot be satisfied, because if, in other theatrical spaces in the world, the evolution of performing arts has been closely related to the evolution of writing for the stage, in Romania the intersections between the two theatrical components are rare and superficial. In our country, the playwright is still considered, like the theater critic, a "character" from outside the act of creating the show. He hands over the play at the beginning of the project, after which he is invited to the premiere. Rarely, on the big state stages (the situation is somewhat different in the independent theater), the playwright is called to participate creatively, actively in rehearsals. There are almost no significant differences between him and an ordinary spectator. The other meaning, the German one, of the "playwright", is not very frequented by the Romanian theater creators. How many Romanian state theaters have in their organizational charts the position of playwright? The answer to this question is almost brutal, speaking for itself about a certain losing relationship between the theater institution and the playwright. We have, instead, the literary secretariats, inherited from times when the theater could only be ... literature.

Every time I encounter a solid local drama, I return to these dilemmas and bitter reflections. Recently, I had the opportunity to read the plays of Alexandra Ares, from whose creation I knew only the radio staging of the play *Sleeping and Awake Beauty*. At that moment, three years ago, he had attracted my attention by the strength and freshness of the ideas he was conveying. In fact, as a member of a jury of nominations, I also proposed the show for the UNITER Awards. Now, having in mind no less than seven titles by the same author, I had access to what might be called an overview of a dramaturgical system. It is a kind of very important critical experience, which allows you a deep foray into the mechanisms of creation, in the laboratories of ideas and characters, generating the possibility of analogies, bridges between seemingly different worlds but born against the background of a homogeneous theatrical thinking.

What surprises from the very beginning in this adventure of knowing a work is the maturity of the levels of reflection on which (us) Alexandra Ares writes. It is far from the writing of a simple theater lover who decides, one day, to try his luck in this "field of literature". The author's theatrical experiences are numerous and solid enough to make these plays not "literary pieces", but "theatrical", a very important difference in drawing fertile boundaries between literature and theater. The question Caragiale asked at the beginning of the twentieth century - Is theater literature? - Modern theater answered frankly: Theater is less and less literature. Alexandra Ares, at least in my opinion, gives satisfaction to this 21st century answer. The topics he approaches, the ways he treats them, the character construction schemes, the

complexity and the real (non-literary) usefulness of the captions, the ability to draw the outline of the story through a very good handling of the elements of musicality and lighting - all these attest to a professional playwright, anointed with all the ointments of theatrical art.

The intense cultural background within which Alexandra Ares creates seems to me to be of great importance. Its culturality is a complex one, resulting from the development inside two cultures (Romanian-American) that the author synthesizes harmoniously, showing them, both in their currents of tension, but also in their meeting areas. Some of the pieces in this volume explicitly contain this double game: in *Sleeping and Awake Beauty*, for example, the first two acts take place in post-December Romania, the third places the action in New York. The temptation to escape from a certain cultural space is also found in *Somewhere, Sometime* where the Amazon jungle, although a metaphor for heaven, indicates a fundamentally different civilization from the urban-western one. Likewise, in *A Grandmother of Millions*, the neighborhood in Bucharest where Grandma's old house is located suddenly opens up to the Turkish bazaar, after having previously witnessed such a familiar-Romanian hospital scene. Sometimes the topos explore traditional neighborhoods: Bo's father, from *Weekend at the Sea*, has a business in Bulgaria, a neighboring country that many of us often feel as a second "home". But there is also the impetus to create non-spaces or topographies that are difficult to locate. This is what happens in the first part of the play *Somewhere, sometime*, where well-conducted ambiguity gives a universally valid sense of chance. In the *Men's Store*, we are once again witnessing the intersection of different cultures. On the one hand, Alexandra Ares's dramaturgy is a recognizable-Romanian one, on the other hand, however, it gains in addressability by opening up, closing borders and customs (*grandmother of millions*).

The seven pieces that make up this anthology reveal some areas of interest that their author constantly shows.

herself a profound life experience, Alexandra Ares maps the psychology of some communities and some individuals, translating it into a plurality of scenic actions.

Nostalgia, loneliness, fear, violence, love, innocence and its loss, sexual drive, selfishness and many other aspects of humanity are part of the sphere of this psychological interest that I mentioned above.

Another major component is the social one; from this point of view; The play *Sleeping and Awakened Beauty* excels, extremely familiar, in the first two acts, for all those who were contemporaries with the chaotic Romanian democracy after 1990. Social relations (wealth - poverty, "money or life?") are common. and in *Somewhere, Sometime*, a play that can be read as a parable about the illusion of financial power, in *Weekend at the Sea*, where the protagonist is part of a wealthy family, and the modest social characters he interacts with play an important role in shaping his own training. ; the financial interest animates Bambi, George's girlfriend, the nephew who waits in vain for his grandmother's death to take possession of her imposing house (*A grandmother of millions*); in the *Pleasure Memorial*, the promise of a horn of plenty is treated with irony and vectorized to death; In the *Station*, the social success is contrasted with the failure, both personified schematically in the characters Plus and Minus. And the list of examples could go on.

Finally, a third register in which Alexandra Ares operates is the philosophical one. It is practiced especially in *Somewhere, Sometime* inspired by the subtitle "youthtopia", a play that abounds in reflections on youth and old age, on interpersonal relationships, on the complicated relationship between appearance and essence, between what really matters and what is superfluous. This fertile-philosophical terrain is

present, however, through various theatrical disguises, in all the texts of this volume. Sometimes bitter, sometimes serene, philosophical meditation is organically embedded in the drama we are talking about.

Undoubtedly, we have before us a writing in which femininity frequently makes its presence felt. From the first to the last play, a multitude of profiles of the female personality are displayed, analyzed, observed in strength and, at the same time, their vulnerabilities. We are dealing, I think, with a case of elegant feminism, manifested with intelligence, irony and humor, without excess and betting rather on a democratic observation of the sexes. This is despite the fact that, most of the time, the female characters are outlined more intensely than the male ones. I remember very strong figures such as Ariana and Eva (Somewhere, once), Viridiana / Onda (Sleeping and awake beauty), Monica (Weekend at sea), Grandma and Bambi (A grandmother of millions). All these characters generate tender roles that need strong, versatile, expressive actresses. Femininity is to be found, then, in a certain sensuality of writing, adjacent to poetry, to poeticity.

The general discourse is realistic, but the notes of lyricism that intervene at times, like some counterpoints carefully introduced in the pieces, subtly nuance the first impression of a rough, documentary observation of reality.

Alexandra Ares is very attentive to the types of atmosphere she creates; from this perspective, her captions, without abusing details, often contain her direction; they inspire and suggest directions for setting up situations. When proposing atmospheres, the author uses mainly music: harp themes, Celine Dion, "French music in crescendo", waltz music, funeral music, but also Fizz, "Thirst for fun" or violent speaker music which, In the Memorial of Pleasure, he swallows human voices gloomily. The light and its gradients, the video projections, the organization of the play spaces, the costumes of the characters - are also ingredients meant to cut out certain scenic states. The rhythm of the writing is very good, leaving no room for those puddles of the story so dangerous for stage productions. The songs are easy to read, with pleasure, the dialogues are consumed naturally, and the monologue fragments have substance and force of problematization. The alternation of temporalities, the diurnal-nocturnal dialectic, the jamming of the real and its orientation towards disturbing utopias / dystopias, the equal skill to provide comic and dramatic, and many others are guided with a safe hand and integrated in the playwright's paper, letter and word scenes.

Although the authorial indications refer only to Weekend at Sea as having a cinematic structure, most of Alexandra Ares's plays have this predisposition to think of scenes in the form of frames and to assemble them, as in a montage. More than once, reading the texts, I tried the feeling that I am going through cinematic scenarios, a very modern technique of writing theater, with relevance for possible future productions.

Ideally, every title in Alexandra Ares's anthology, whether we refer to the ample pieces or to those in an act, should have the chance of consistent stagings. It is true, most of them, in different contexts, reached the audience, but they did not exhaust their stage potential. He recommends the theme, the fresh air it releases, the generosity of the scores, the novelty of some situations. Once in the hands of the right director, these plays can broaden their horizons even further. And the lawyers of the idea that the contemporary Romanian drama is at a standstill can receive, on this occasion, solid counter-arguments.

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