Of Iubirea la oameni (Human Love) and Other Demons

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Abstract: Being a reading performance turned into a stage representation, the text Iubirea la oameni (Human Love) signed by Dmitry Bogosvlavski is a love radioisotope into an oppressive cloister space of a Belarusian isolated community. The show with the same name created by Bogdan Sărătean surprises the stage valence of the emergence, the evolution and the extinction of this feeling, from the sacrificial love of a mother, which often conceals the faults and the sins of the children, to the brutal love that snatches what it believes as deserved, to the strength to believe in love as salvation, as redemption, as many forms to illustrate and to dramatically represent such an old theme, yet always different. The personal approach of the double distribution formed by the young 3rd degree actor students, probing their own interiority and sensibility, nuances and enhances the evolutionary line of characters’ destiny on stage in an extremely profound performance.

Key words: Dmitry Bogoslavski, Bogdan Sărătean, naturalism, scenic area, from text to stage image.

Reading performances, one of the performing art components not very well exploited in the Romanian theatrical space, find at Sibiu, on the occasion of the International Theater Festival, a privileged place, facilitating contact with the young voices of the contemporary universal drama from theatrical spaces as varied as possible. Where the scene can be too selective and restrictive, the reading performances find total freedom to bring into the public’s attention new trends in the art of playwriting, in order not only to sensitize the drama text amateurs, but also to detect the directorial potential texts which shall become successful scene representations.

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Thus, one of the texts that have crossed the line between text and representation is Dmitri Bogoslavski’s *Iubirea la oameni*, translated from Russian into Romanian by Raluca Rădulescu. The playwright, both actor and director, is one of the young voices of the Ukrainian space, whose writings were awarded with the Special Prize of Jury in the “Premiera.txt 2010” Playwriting Contest. The young Ukrainian playwright’s texts focus on the theme of the contemporary daily events, sounding human relationships in a dysfunctional environment centered on explosive and violent conflicts, as they find a resolution in some illusory shelters, alcohol and stagnation in a promiscuous environment, in the profound failure of the individual. In Bogoslavski’s texts, the anodyne, the banal become central themes, defining a universe of related areas, in a rather naturalistic aesthetic, a violent primitivism defining the concerned geographical area.

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Formally, *Iubirea la oameni* occurs as a series of 21 sequences, each focused on a character, but unevenly dispensed. This textual and sequential distribution ensures the cohesion of the dramatic narrative plot, generating
also some directing liberties. This strategy ensures not only an operational spatial discursive cutout for the dramatic conflicts deployment, but also an individual questioning of the different types of characters populating this depressing rural area.

In terms of content, the author analyzes the existence of a social evil, of a hereditary evil, of a collective pathology which haunts the enclosed space of a community surprised in a constant state of moral and physical degradation, sometimes going into episodes of a slow dehumanization process. The violence of some scenes are sometimes the emblem of an incomprehensible psychosis, the syndrome of a bad spirit which haunts the mundane existences of some social losers, in whose description the writer uses the superstitions of this community, captive in an insurmountable obscurantism. The text’s title appears to be, in this case, an attempt to define the feeling of love through the instinctual compulsion. As the main character male, Sergey, will make, at some point, an analogy of the love which people manifest as an arsenal of fireworks discourse and gestures to the mating rituals of birds, love seems to be understood by most characters like a primitive impulse, a game of domination and submission. However, the author manages to draw adjacent facets of the love instinct, sometimes giving it devotion and tenderness in making the connections between people on different types of relationships. We confront, in this case, the love as passion/obsession, which leads to violence and death, the maternal and filial love synonymous with self-sacrifice and self-giving. In addition to these forms, there subsists the friendship-love that misses because of a poor social environment. Bogoslavski’s text is thus a query on love in a hostile, poor environment, doomed to the impossibility of consuming it which turns, finally, into a degrading, crippling obsession, into an ideal projection.

The dramatic conflict focuses on presenting an emotional core that gathers three key-characters of the play (Liuska, Kolia and Sergey), of which she catalyzes the other connections: Liuska is married to Kolia, a violent and alcoholic character who disappears at a time; Sergey, the policeman investigating the case, is in love with Liuska and tries to regain her love, despite the terrible truth which lies behind Kolia’s disappearance. Besides this trio, there are a number of other emblematic characters that determine the
social framework concerning this dramatic tension: Lydia (Sergey’s mother), Olga (Liuska’s mother), Mashka, Ivan, Nastia, Ciubasov and his girlfriend, Olga - inhabitants of the land, who the three central characters create temporary relationships with, some characters that reveal the underlying developments specific to the protagonists. Although, apparently, women seem to be affected by this degrading patriarchal space, they become, in time, the strongest characters, the dynamic elements of dramatic conflict, which, although not able to escape from the influence of this unhealthy rural area, they can still provide, in an illusory space, at least, an optimistic alternative of their own destiny.

All this complexity of the dramatic conflict and of the typology of characters may explain the three successive stage versions in less than a year in the Romanian theatrical space. Thus, the first performance took place at the Ioan Slavici Classic Theater in Arad in 2016, directed by Vlad Massaci, the second in February 2017 at Nottara in Bucharest, directed by Evghenia Berkovici, and the latest, that we will discuss in this paper, at Sibiu at CAVAS with the third year students of the Department of Theater, under the direction of Bogdan Sărătean.
In an interview given to *Capital cultural* magazine, the director Bogdan Sărătean talks about the topic of love discussed in the Ukrainian text in the following terms: “So many different forms of love. The text’s core. Human love. Our purpose - exploring these sorts of human love. So different, so intense, so complex, so human. Let’s tell the story. Their stories. And maybe we can attempt the salvation. Finally, in the end.” From the sacrificial love of a mother, which often conceals the faults and the sins of the children, to the brutal love that snatches what it believes as deserved, to the strength to believe in love as salvation, as redemption, as many forms to illustrate and to dramatically represent such an old theme, yet always different.

The scenography signed by Alexandra Constantin, who also created the costumes for the stage, draws a scenic area along the playing area, very close to the space for the public. The concreteness and the materiality of the stage, rendered by the textual didascalia, configure the desolate area of the village, showing in a metonymically way a leafless tree, several metal barrels, a public lighting pole. Scenography reveals several spatial dichotomies, but also the idea of a closed isolated concentric space, enrolled in other areas. The rural area is charged by reference to a concentric circumscribing space and determines metaphorically an aspiration to an ideal. Beyond the village is the steppe, and beyond it the city seen as a Promise Land as a solution to the aspirations of some of the characters. The nylon curtain of the background has, on the one hand, a functional role, serving as backdrop for projections and, on the other hand, its transparency provides the communication between concrete space and the exterior unreal space. Within the space of the play, the broken window which in other scenes suggests a TV is a transitive space, between other dichotomies of closing / opening. Thus, the interior space, the house is warm, secure, as opposed to the external space, haunted by the winter, and by the supernatural invasion. In fact, the entire course of the dramatic action in the domestic space is determined and conditioned by what happens in the unreal, fantastic space or, rather, the characters’ interiority who project their own fantasies and faults. The director uses the bi-dimensional array, adopting the vertical side in order to identify the supernatural elements that shatter the silence of the protagonists. Kolia’s spirit is shown in the scenic space in a
constant ascension to heaven, being portrayed at different heights where he talks to Liuska, but also to his own child who is a sort of bridge between two worlds: the real one and the supernatural one. The spatial transition is marked by the characters who handle the barrels, delineating new perimeters within successive pictures that do not follow a chronological evolution of the dramatic action. Revealing the crime and the psychological mechanisms that trigger the instinct of the killer occurs in a sequence which succeeds the absence of Kolia, while the scenes which are not directly represented are revealed by the lines of the witnesses-characters, accompanied by the chromatic suggestions of a light design with a purely illustrative role (blood-red shades suggest the moments of physical violence and bluish shades are assigned to the moments of isolation).

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Among the essential components of stage that enhance, or de-tense the atmosphere of this drama with a supernatural twist, there is the sound dimension of the show which either recreates a immaterial space of
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remembering the crime committed by Liuska, through some macabre pig sounds, the stridence of which suggests the atrocity of the gesture, or counterpoints the drama of the Kolia-Liuska-Sergey trio by a pop hit reinterpreted in Russian (Lady Gaga’s Alejandro, in a Slavic version, transits the demonized interior of the main characters through the easy casual atmosphere of the bar). Moreover, the comic inflexions of this performance are ensured by the Ciubasov-Olga duo which uses not only props which border on humor (clown noses, motorcycle glasses matched with a bridal veil), but also a series of authentic replicas as trivial, as they are specific to the community.

As for the characters, the entire performance can be viewed as a slow crescendo of Liuska’s psychosis, caught between the deaths of the two men that she chose to share her life with: on the one hand, the murder of her own husband, and, on the other hand, Sergey’s suicide. Moreover, Liuska and Sergey’s psychological tension seems to evolve in opposition, as the crime’s fault haunts the murderess’ existence: if Liuska is at the beginning a physically abused character, who fatalistically laments her fate (“Why do we have to love daddy if he does not love us anymore? We will not love him anymore, will we?, my treasure, we will not love daddy anymore? That’s what we will do, my little soul. We should kill daddy, instead.” says Liuska in a moment of sincerity facing her infant child), she develops throughout the play an increasingly withdrawn attitude, reaching isolation in a bubble of silence similar to autism; Sergey evolves, as well, from the comfort of a banal existence, dedicated to his policeman job and to his small joys of some drowned in alcohol evenings, to a harsh, explosive attitude which will culminate with an almost successful attempt to kill Liuska and with his own suicide. In other words, while Liuska goes through a process of internalization of her own emotions, to end up in a bubble of total silence, Sergey goes through a reverse process, into a volcanic externalizing and aggressive instincts of self-flagellation. The highlight of gestural violence against oneself and also the only manifestation of Liuska’s paroxysmal emotional reactivity is her mutilating gesture by which she offers her hand to be eaten by the same pigs that have devoured her husband. Liuska passes thus from hatred, forgiveness, reconciliation with herself and with the spirit of her husband, to
feelings of guilt, regret and redemption through suffering, reiterating the violence endured by Kolia.

Of all the characters, Liuska and Sergey are, in fact, the only round characters who suffer fundamental changes, while the other characters do not go far beyond their flatness. Apart from the couple of two widowed mothers and Mashka (the bartender, representing the public voice), all the other couples, whether love couples or friendships, undergo alteration. Ivan-Nastia, the ideal couple of lovers for the community to which they belong, become antagonistic and their desires are totally different from the partner’s. Dissatisfaction, loss of ideals, routine’s distorting concreteness delete the outlines of a warm and loving relationship. The two widowed mothers, Olga and Lidia, represent perhaps the constancy of tradition and resignation to the loss of the beloved one, expressions of ways of life turned to each other and less susceptible to flaws of their own interiority. Slowly, the aggression of a cold violent climate also marks the monotony and lack of perspective of an empty existence, filling the characters with the illusion of artificial paradises created by alcohol and madness.

The characters have a tragic destiny, crossing without much chance of counter-kind a sort of black water of an almost mandatory fatality. The naturalist dimension of these destinies is given as a deficient hereditary inheritance, in a cold Inferno circle which abandoned the hope of a spring to remove the emotional coldness.

A significant directorial trick to exploit the full dramatic potential of this representation is Bogdan Sărătean’s choice to opt for a double distribution of some of the central characters: Liuska Sergey and Mashka. The different theatrical approach nuances and enhances the evolutionary line of the characters’ destiny on stage in an extremely emotional performance which, while calling the analyzation of an almost primitive community, away from the noise of the modern world, of the urban spaces, succeeds to portray the various facets of this human love.

DIRECTOR: Bogdan Sărătean
DIRECTOR ASSISTANT: Daiana Mădăraș
SCENOGRAPHER: Alexandra Constantin
THEATRICAL COLLOQUIA

TRANSLATOR: Raluca Rădulescu
ORIGINAL MUSIC: Claudiu Fălămaş
LIGHT DESIGN: Dorin Părău
CAST: Sergiu Argeşanu, Denisa Pintiuţă-Caian/ Denisa Lupu, Daiana Mădăraş, Marian Bureaţă/ Alin Turcu, Codruţa Vasiu, Bogdan Constantin, Ștefania Marola, George Ciucă, Malvina Hanea, Georgiana Codreanu
PROJECT MANAGER: Luminiţa Bîrsan
PROJECT ASSISTANT: Raluca Mitea