

# LOOKING INTO THE ABYSS

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Mihai Măniuțiu's theatre is neither overponderous, nor contracted – signs of an exigent productivity, or, perhaps, a productive exigence: around twenty titles were rigorously chosen from theatre scripts that have passed the test of time, with an obvious attraction towards the grotesque and the Shakespearean theatre, but with significant incursions into the avantgarde (Mroczek, Arrabal, Ionesco), and existentialism (Sartre, Camus). In the context of his generation – alas, no longer the “young generation” as we called it not so long ago – Măniuțiu seems to me to be the most complex, not only because as someone involved in the theatre he must also double up as an important theoretician, but also because of the intellectual passion which consumes him, allowing him to explore contradictory experiences and styles. It took me a long time to decide whether the theoretician served to determine the director or vice versa, so close was the relationship between director and writer. The truth is that Măniuțiu extends to great lengths the ultimate power of the contemporary director, master of his cultivated art. He has not been, and never could have been one of the disappearing species of “the illuminated”, for he is a thinker, knowing as few others do, how to use that mental laboratory where intelligence can highlight talent.

His books on the art of theatre, *Rediscovering the Actor*, *The Golden Ring* and *Act and Mimetic Representation* correlate admirably with his first productions, being as it were the motto on the coat-of-arms of one's reading. Avantgardist at the age of the Avantgarde, while a student during the hard years of the 70's, Măniuțiu directed Mroczek's *Emigrants*, esoterical out of contempt for

Arrabal's assertions in *The Labyrinth* (where he had been interested in a new type of actor and of neo-declamation), archetypal in Radu Stanca's *Oedipus Saved* and later in Mihail Săulescu's *The Week of Resurrection* (he will always remain archetypal out of his need to grasp the essential); metonymical in the sensorial transcript of abstractness in Calderon's *Life is a Dream*; communicative, even frivolous in *The Taming of the Shrew*; triumphant in his approach to Molière's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. Măniuțiu's successful *Antony and Cleopatra* was the climax of his early productions and at the same time opened a period of synthesis where intelligence imbued with culture produces pure talent.

His productions after 1990 have an unmistakable style. In Ionesco's *The Lesson* the lines of the text were simplified to produce an essence in order to stress the atrocity of political terrorism; even more, *Richard III* was a performance full of blood and hallucination, remarkably inaugurating an epos on the delirium of power, which was going to continue in T. S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral*, Camus' *Caligula* and Sophocles' *Antigone*.

Eliot's poem, a contra-Faust (as the pact with the devil was no longer possible), becomes a rigorous demonstration of the need for God. One reads among the beautiful verses exalting Becket's sufferings, arguments for Eliot's own religious fervour. The director is also caught up in the contagious Catholic pathos. The stage is bare and the intensity of the parable is supported by every theatrical effect being used to its limits, so they became leitmotifs: the chain, the unleavened bread,



*TEMPTER. Real power  
Is purchased at price of a certain submission.  
Your spiritual power is earthly perdition.  
(Murder in the Cathedral, part I)*

*THOMAS. Who are you, tempting with my own desires?  
(Murder in the Cathedral, part I)*



the blood-coloured seeds and the chalice containing the blood of the sacrificed lamb which Becket will become. This conveys a performance conceived in symmetries and correspondences. Temptations no longer hold power over Becket for the very reason that they are rational. Nothing is more rational in an earthly logic than to let yourself be tempted. The religious man that Becket has become shies away from any rationality that is guilty of doubt. That is why he is inflexible and fears only the posthumous glory of martyrdom from which there is no escape. Nothing could be more suitable than the part of Thomas Becket for the eminent actor Marcel Lures, for his face expresses not only Romanticism but also damnation: a burnt, emaciated effigy, with an

inward, unnaturally illuminated look. To Mihai Măniuțiu, Becket repeats Jesus' destiny, and one never knows whether a saint is truly the multiplied image of The Saviour. There is only one opulence in this austere world: Doina Levintza's costumes, magnificent even when the women of Canterbury are dressed in rags. The movement on stage is magnified: there are few spaces for breathing, as if there was a risk of losing energy with any moment of relaxation. As in *Richard III* the rhythm is infernal, and the flux of the scenes unpredictable: Măniuțiu's direction is an organ played on full keyboard. Deafeningly and passionately using a range of sonorous possibilities from the human voice to the most bizarre instrumental sounds created by Iosif Herța, from recitation to scream, from rasp to moan. The performance grasps you without escape.

Almost twenty years ago, at Constanța, from the edge of the old ruins on the

bottom of which lies the famous Roman mosaic, I was watching dizzily Măniuțiu's first public performance with Radu Stanca's *Oedipus Saved* (at this time he was still a student at the Theatre Institute in Bucharest). The details have been swept from my memory, but I am certain that my eyes, quite bewitched, followed the moving creatures staring to us from the bottom of an abyss, attempting to get rid of that irony of destiny which is the condition for any tragedy. The prince's gaze, focused on the horizontal, was replaced by a suicidal gaze – by that glance down into the abyss.

Hallucinating a little, there was a moment when you could imagine you were witnessing a happening not only on the Roman mosaic, but also among the actors themselves, who seemed integrated into an archeological revelation. I had the very same sensation watching Măniuțiu's recent production of *Antigone* at the theatre in Piatra-Neamț, where the auditorium, completely transformed, had become an abyss you watched from the brink of balconies. While looking into this abyss the tragedy of others became your own tragedy. To look into the abyss is to dip yourself into the past, a past filled with guilts that challenge within us those new guilts that demand victims. The abyss cunningly absorbs you as knowledge does, for on the track of this 'downfalling' knowledge, one can never reach the ultimate revelation. The circle appears as closed as destiny: it would appear that from the production of *Oedipus Saved* to that of *Antigone*, Mihai Măniuțiu has done nothing else but place before us this unbearable mirror of the abyss.

CIFORU, seven years of waiting,  
Seven years of prayer, seven years of emptiness  
(Murder in the Cathedral, part I)

