

**Apology of the Actor: from Stage to Fiction and from Fiction to Stage.**  
**On Mihaela Mîrțu, *L'acteur dans les rets de la fiction*, Editura Universității « Alexandru Ioan Cuza » Iași, 2014, ISBN 9 786067140170, 318 pages**

The book *L'acteur dans les rets de la fiction*, by Mihaela Mîrțu, associate professor within "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University of Iași, is structured in two parts, "Mythe de l'acteur romantique" and "Protée, le Caméléon et *coincidentia oppositorum*".

In the first chapter of part I, "Les Précurseurs", the author refers both to theoretical aspects, as proposed by Mercier, de Grimarest, de Du Bos, and to important moments in the life of the actors and actresses that marked the theatre universe of the epoch, such as those pointed out by Voltaire or by Dacier. The Rollenporträt of Mlle Duclos de Chateaufort playing Ariane at the Comédie Française, signed by Nicolas de Largillière, and especially the one of Adrienne Lecouvreur, in the role of Cornélie in *Mort de Pompée*, by Corneille, reveal the declamatory style in the first case, and the transgression of the playing codes in the second one, Adrienne Lecouvreur serving later on as a model followed to a certain point by Talma, Mlle George, Marie Dorval or Frédérik Lemaître.

Diderot also receives the due attention, the author insisting on his theorization of gesture, of the pantomime, in a theatre reform project inspired by the actors of the *foire* or by Garrick. Mihaela Mîrțu insists on one of the essential features of the actor's activity according to Diderot, that is the special treatment of sensitivity, until its annihilation as revealed by the artistic work of Baron, Molé, la Gaussin, la Clairon and especially Garrick (pp. 31-38). Mihaela Mîrțu notes that already at mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Descartes used to recommend actors to contain their passions, which are not to be avoided to the extent they are used for intellectual purposes (p. 45).

The role of Le Brun in establishing stereotypes in representing passions by the body is also pointed out, the actor becoming a source of inspiration in the epoch painters' coded iconography. The famous Rollenporträten and their pathetic message are illustrative for the actors' perception by the public (p. 52-56).

In France, the one who imposed the actors' dignity and talent was Talma, who was "at the origin of the Romantic actor, just like Garrick and Adrienne Lecouvreur" (p. 63).

The second chapter, "Kean le romantique", opens by a careful definition of the concept of myth and of its application in the field of literature, the author basing her statements on the writings of Georges Gusdorf, Roland Barthes, Pierre Albouy or Marx. Presented as a result of the structuring and ordering wish of man, the myth expresses the aspiration towards unity, involving a consciousness of moral values and non-values determining the relation of the individual to the Other and to the community (pp. 65, 67). In literature, each epoch created its own myth, the superman characterizing the Romanticism. Actor Edmund Kean, incarnating the fatal superman, was metamorphosed into an archetype by writers, of whom Dumas was the first, the play *Kean. Désordre et génie* being published three years after the artist's death. As for the subtitle, Mihaela Mîrțu reminds that for Diderot the genius was one breaking the rules, thus becoming, sublime, pathetic, grandiose, while the disorder inevitably recalls the Bacchic delirium allowing one to assume another identity, a fusion with the divinity (p. 70). Dumas' play was performed on 31 August 1836 at the Théâtre de Variétés, Kean's role being interpreted by Frédérick Lemaître, and was particularly well received (pp. 72-73). Dumas presents Kean as actor overwhelmed by his love for Elena, going through an identity crisis, that leads him to betraying his profession, leaving aside his role of Romeo and insulting directly the Prince and lord Meville (p. 90). Throughout time, Kean was played by Frédérick Lemaître, Lucien Guitry, Ivan Mosjoukine, who in their turn contributed to the mythification of the

personage. This is how Jean-Paul Sartre came to adapt the play for Pierre Brasseur, his *Kean*, dated 8 November 1953, being performed for the first time at the Théâtre Sarah Bernhardt on 14 November 1953 (p. 96). Sartre, who was not at all fond of the actor, turned Kean into a cynical and naïve personage, blowing away the aura of the romantic actor and demystifying him (pp. 98-101).

As for the romantic actress, she forms the subject matter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, bearing the title « L'impossible mythe de l'actrice romantique ». After signaling the dualist condition of the actress mistaken for the courtesan illustrated by La Tisbé, the two hypostases being rehabilitated in the name of love and sacrifice (p. 104), several pages are dedicated to the play *Adrienne Lecouvreur* by Scribe et Legouvé where the actress appears as a personage, thus demonstrating the degree to which both his talent and his personal life captivated the public consciousness. Valorizing the multitude of details characterizing an epoch's artistic life, Mihaela Mirtu refers also to Sarah Bernhardt, to whom the stage was the place of manifestation of the feminine. The author's conclusion is that women on stage place themselves in the field of the myth, thus exceeding the human condition. As for the courtesan actresses, they are a proof of the fading away of the myth power (pp. 113, 115).

Nerval is also considered within the argumentation as within his love for Jenny Colon he glides away, turning the beloved woman into a goddess and allowing the transcending of the myth into mystics (p. 119). Mihaela Mirtu points out that from Manet's paintings and Zola's writings results that the masculine body enjoyed a certain social superiority, this topic being also found in Nietzsche. Nana's case is emblematic for the courtesan's reception in the collective imaginary (pp. 133-134).

As the author indicates in a footnote, the history of theatre remembers Frédéric Lemaître especially for the creativity demonstrated in making the best possible usage of the costume and of detail of the stage design. Together with Marie Dorval and Bocage, Frédéric Lemaître counts among the greatest romantic artists, continuing the reform of the theatric performance introduced by Talma. In Schmidt's play, the romantic past is perceived in the light of the postmodern present, Frédéric's death occurring more or less at the same time with the

demolition of the Théâtre Folies Dramatiques. (pp. 171-176).

The second part of the volume bears the title « Protée, le Caméléon et *coincidentia oppositorum* » and consists of three chapters, of which the first is « Protée, un rêve d'enfance ». Starting from Louis Jouvet's statements regarding the actor's vocation, the self-possession and dispossession cycle, Mihaela Mirtu undertakes an incursion into Shakespeare's work, analyzing at the same time the more or less visible intertextuality of the story *Une belle matinée*, by Marguerite Yourcenar. Lazare, the hero of this story, chooses the theatre instead of the life and, continues to work for the theater even after the end of this career as actor (pp. 179-183).

With the help of the Jungian concepts of « ego » and of « self », Mihaela Mirtu considers Lazare as a personage « in the time » and « out of time », an actor that valorizes « the experience of the multiple » transforming it into a « mystic experience ». The relation between Lazare and his father Nathanaël invites to numerous interpretations, starting from their names. It is through dreams that Lazare – Protée is allowed to identify and appropriate « a *coincidentia oppositorium* that the alchemist discovers in the double nature of Jesus » (p. 194 - 195). If Nathanaël's life was entirely marked by obscurity, the one of Lazare is marked by light. From his father, Lazare inherited from his father the opening towards the others, while from his mother he acquired the wish of pleasing the others (p. 210).

« Oh les beaux jours du caméléon! » is the title of the second chapter of this part of the volume, reminding, inevitably, of the title of Beckett's play, as Flora Fontanges, Anne Hébert' personage of the novel *Le Premier jardin* is the actress to whom is assigned the role of Winnie of Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours* (*Happy days*) de Beckett on the stage of the theatre of Emérillon. This is a town whose name is not pronounced, being recognized by its geography and history (p. 213). Not only the topography is important, but also the affective past of the actress, who intends to use it in order to achieve her metamorphose into Winnie. Applying a very attentive critical scrutiny, Mihaela Mirtu notices that Flora Fontanges' playing style reminds of the personage authentication process advanced by Stanislavski in order to keep the actor away from

interpretative clichés, and assure the plausibility of the performance (pp. 228-229). The analysis invites the reader to discover the importance of names, their nominative and predicative force. Raphaël, whose name means in Hebrew, “God heals”, helps the actress reach that state of coincidence of thought and existence, known as *mundus imaginalis* or *mundus archetypus* (p. 239). Flora and Rosa – once again suggestive names – are personages whose body remains in the reader’s imaginary as a tree-body, ineluctably bound to the notion of Eden, of eternal garden, the garden of knowledge, modern man’s redemption taking place through art, that is through Knowledge (p. 242).

Marguerite Yourcenar, Anne Hébert and before them, Louis Jouvet understand the alchemist’s work undertaken by the actors in their process of coming to know themselves and the others, as intention of reaching the One through the experience of the Multiple (p. 254).

The subchapter *Coincidentia oppositorum* is the most captivating, as the author of this volume focuses on archetypal personages, such as Harlequin who, contrary to the general belief, was not born in Italy, the origin of the name being explained as follows: “Hellequin condense Hell (= enfer) et le mot gothique Kuni (<lat. genus) (...) un esprit infernal, ou même le roi de l’enfer” (p. 258). Personage enriched by the individuality of each actor that took up the role, Harlequin is essentially characterized by a huge bodily agility. Although the mask disappeared in 18<sup>th</sup> century Italy, Harlequin’s existence has continued in the puppet theatre and the circus (pp. 260-262). Beyond time and artistic trends, the apparently fixed character of Harlequin has crossed centuries, symbolizing the actor’s capacity of metamorphosis, and so did Pierrot and the clowns, who, like Harlequin, were rediscovered in the sometimes extreme researches of the 20<sup>th</sup> century artists who had the intuition of reestablishing the tight connection to the sources of the universe. Mihaela Mirtu provides as examples of this process the creations of Picasso (*La famille d’Arlequin*) and respectively Apollinaire (*Crépuscule*), considering the former to be the coulisses, and the latter the feast, in fact a veritable “rite for the initiated” (p. 271). Apparently a comic character, through the force of his laughing, Harlequin connects with the

immutable forces of the universe, being as such rediscovered and reinvested during the 20<sup>th</sup> century:

« Comme Lazare, comme Flora Fontagnes, l’arlequin fait cette expérience de soi qui l’arrache à l’univers profane et lui permet d’atteindre le sacré. (...) il réalise le passage du temporel au spatial, établit un rapport miraculeux entre le micro et le macrocosme et réalise la coincidentia oppositorum » (p. 279).

Mihaela Mirtu proposes a key for the understanding of the actor’s art that has a lot in common with the field of alchemy, that is the formula « *solve et coagula* (purifies and integrates) » (p. 281).

Finally, under the title “En guise de conclusion”, the author provides us with a dense presentation of the evolution of actor’s perception throughout time and space.

This book, worth reading for numerous reasons, provides in a very original form an abridged version of the history of the world’s theatre and dramatic aesthetics, inviting at the same time the reader to dialogue, even on the imaginative level, either with the author herself, or with the various authors invoked within the volume, thus challenging the reader to put at work his own intellectual luggage instead of leaving it undisturbed, in order to create his own understanding about the actor, this being subjected to a continuous creative splitting of the own self.

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