DOI: 10.35218/icds-2025-0012

Theatre as Eroticism

CĂLIN CIOBOTARI*
"George Enescu" National University of the Arts, Iași
ROMANIA

Abstract: This study explores a relationship that has been rarely discussed, but which, viewed form certain perspectives, becomes important: the relationship between theatre and eroticism. It is not about strictly scenic eroticism, conceived and led by a director working with an actor, but about multiple other layers: from the eroticism of dramatic writing to the eroticism of the critical act. One of the answers to the classic question "Why do we go to the theatre?" may therefore be the one suggested by Anne Bogart: "We go to the theatre to fall in love" or to experience states of minds similar to love in its various forms.

Keywords: eroticism, theatre, Anne Bogart.

Introduction

One of the 20th-century theorists' favourite questions was, "Why do we go to the theatre?" Aristotle was the first to ask such questions; for him, art was not at all disinterested but, on the contrary, had clearly defined purposes; thus, the ancient Greeks were supposed to watch tragedies in order to acquire feelings of fear and pity, plus, as a bonus, the possibility of catharsis, while watching comedies was supposed to strengthen their moral sense by means of the public condemnation of society's ills. We do not know how much Aristotle believed in these prescriptions or whether he was merely trying to mitigate the harsh sentence that his predecessor, Plato, had pronounced very forcefully: artists were corrupters and needed to be quickly banished from the city.

Beyond these initial answers, there were many others to this not-so-simple question: some go to the theatre out of cultural necessity, others go to the theatre to feel good, in the same way that you feel good at a restaurant or going fishing (like Trigorin on the lake in *The Seagull*), or walking in the park; for some, going to the theatre is something ritualistic, while for others it is the equivalent of a shopping trip to the mall; they seek to "acquire" feelings, sensations, emotions or other states that they will not find at Zara, H&M or Calvin Klein. Some go to the theatre out of snobbery because they feel that this is social validation or self-validation; a photo with the chandelier of a 19th-century theatre is worth at least as much as a photo with a cat or one with a tree

* calinciobotari@yahoo.com

in bloom, or a photo in your patio at sunset, with a glass of Aperol Spritz in your hand. Some go to the theatre against their will, almost forced by their spouse, family, or an aesthetically passionate fiancée, or compelled by who knows what other problematic and ephemeral context. Some go to the theatre for the director, others for the playwright, yet others for the cast. Others seek catharsis or neo-catharsis, while others go in order to prove to themselves, once again, that no purification makes sense in our day and age. And the list of answers to the question "Why do we go to the theatre?" could go on and on.

Going to the theatre in order to fall in love

I once had the curiosity to compile such a list. I was struck not only by the multitude of possible answers, but also by their discouraging diversity. Very late in life, last spring, while reading an excellent book by the director Anne Bogart[1], I came across an answer that I had never encountered before. It disturbed me and made me think. It was a very simple answer – also a very dangerous and, at the same time, incredibly seductive one. Why do I go to the theatre? Well, Anne Bogart says there, I go to the theatre in order to... fall in love. We must admit that such an answer is in itself a... theatrical coup. Especially since its author did not formulate it on a symbolic, metaphorical level. Nor did she speak of the act of falling in love as some ethereal, platonic, rational-and-poetic feeling, but used the word "love" in the most concrete sense possible. With this, we are fully in erotic territory[2].

Perhaps some of us, without even realizing it, go to the theatre for the same reason – we fall in love or long to fall in love. After all, why do we seek

[1] Anne Bogart (2001). *A Director Prepares. Seven Essays On Art and Theatre*, Routledge, London.

[2] Beyond the multitude of possible definitions, Octavio Paz's distinction between sex, eroticism and love seems like the most acceptable one to us: "...sex, eroticism and love are aspects of the same phenomenon, manifestations of what we call life. The oldest of the three, the most comprehensive and the most basic is sex. Sex is the primordial source. Eroticism and love are forms derived from the sexual instinct: crystallization, sublimations, perversions, and condensations which transform sexuality, very often, into something unknowable. As in the case of concentric circles, sex is the centre and pivot point of this geometry of passion (...) Eroticism is, above all else, exclusively human: it is sexuality socialized and transfigured by the imagination and the will of human beings" – Octavio Paz (1996). *The Double Flame. Love and Eroticism,* translated from Spanish by Helen Lane, HarperCollins Publishers, pp. 7-8. We also mention the nuance brought into discussion by Georges Bataille – any form of eroticism is, in its essence, a disequilibrium of the human being losing himself: "I said that I regarded eroticism as the disequilibrium in which the being consciously calls his own existence in question. In one sense, the being loses himself deliberately, but then the subject is identified with the object losing his identity. If necessary, I can say in eroticism: I am losing myself" – George Bataille (2001). *Eroticism*, translation by Mary Dalwood, with an introduction by Colin MacCabe, Penguin Books.

love?! Most likely from a feeling of incompleteness.[3] We are not enough for ourselves, we feel the need for a very intimate, very organic completion, a fusion. Perhaps I go to the theatre because I am looking for the other person, an ideal other one that social norms can no longer prevent me from loving, whether I am single or I have a wife, a mother-in-law, a dog and three children. Or perhaps, even more concretely, I go to that environment full of eroticism with the hope that somewhere, not necessarily on stage, but in the fertile penumbra of the theatre hall, perhaps in the row right in front of me, perhaps somewhere in the balcony[4], my soul mate is found, the one who would satisfy the oh-so-relative phrase "the love of my life".

Love and the unpredictable

What defines a new love relationship? First of all, the unpredictable. I don't know what comes next, I don't know what his or her kiss will taste like, I don't know what we will talk about or how we will be silent in our intimate moments. If love were predictable, it would end up being a calm, comfortable, boring feeling of "at home". The type of feeling that exasperated Ibsen's women… Let us remember Hedda Gabler, Nora, the Lady from the Sea and so on. Love means first of all the unpredictable! Saying that you are going to the theatre to look for the unpredictable is the same as saying you are going to the theatre to look for love.

True theatre creators have always operated with the unpredictable. I think that, when actors go on stage, they should be at least as preoccupied with producing and maintaining the unpredictable as they are with their acting technique. I am not talking about the unpredictable produced by the writing (such as an unexpected line written by the playwright), but about the unpredictable produced by the body, emotion, or energy. I believe that here, in the Romanian theatre space, we do not yet know how to really enjoy a body talking to us. We are still so captured by the verbal language, that we are superficial in our treatment of other languages which are more subtle, more capable of surprising us and putting us in the position of meeting… the unpredictable.

Sometimes I imagine that the hidden ideal of any actor going on stage is to trigger some form of "falling in love" in the audience. Actors are involved not only in an artistic act there, but also in a complicated and sophisticated mechanism of seduction. They build not only a role, but also an erotic

[3] This is Plato's classic theory – see Plato (2007). *The Banquet*, translation by Petru Creția, Humanitas, București.

[4] This situation evokes the theme and characters in Chekhov's work *The Lady with the Dog*, in A.P. Chekhov (2009). *Logodnica. Nuvele și povestiri* [The Fiancée. Novellas and short stories], translation by Anda Boldur, editor, introduction, chronology and notes, Sorina Bălănescu, Polirom, Iași.

relationship. And distinctions such as main character / supporting character or good guy / bad guy are irrelevant to this. Once upon a time, this personal bet was almost explicitly formulated. Elderly actors nostalgically remember the concrete, direct aspect of their relationships with the audience. The heaps of flowers that old actresses boast about having received in their dressing rooms (apart from the obvious exaggerations) were also the effect of the erotic success they enjoyed on stage. In the '70s and '80's, many intellectuals of Iași were in love with the actress Cornelia Gehorghiu. There was something very bohemian in her acting, although she was actually a very rational and family-oriented person. But on stage she was such a master of the mechanisms of seduction that important poets such as Emil Brumaru and Mihai Ursachi wrote poems dedicated to her, while the painter Val Gheorghiu had publicly acknowledged her as his official muse. I saw her act in the 2000's, playing Sarah Bernhardt – it was her last performance and the last production directed by Anca Ovanez. She was close to 70 and echoes of the tremendous eroticism of her past were still lingering in the air. I would leave the theatre full of a strange melancholy, with all kinds of indefinable yearnings and, generally speaking, with symptoms that most of us would associate with the terrible disease of love. In the '80's, the actress Mihaela Arsenescu-Werner came from Craiova to Iași. She had a kind of very provocative noble air, like a serene, luminous aristocrat and this generated a different kind of seduction, a different kind of eroticism.

The turn to corporality taken by the Romanian theatre quite late, in the '90's, would dilute psychological eroticism or redirect it towards something more concrete. Afrim's whole theatre work, from the beginning of the 2000's all the way to the present day, has taken on a very carefully conducted eroticism of corporality[5] as a fundamental element – it is a refined poetics of the naked or near-naked body, meant to trouble the audience in various ways. Other trailblazer directors in the direction of this eroticism are, obviously, Silviu Purcărete and Andrei Șerban. A notable appearance in the Romanian theatre has also been that of Alexander Hausvater who, in the '90's, as we remember, was campaigning for a theatre of multiple challenges, including the erotic one. In 1999, in Roberto Zucco, a stone's throw away from the metropolitan cathedral of Iași, the whole cast had a scene including group nudity. I only saw that show on film, but the people in the audience remember the tremendous erotic tension travelling the length and the width of the Iași National Theatre.

[5] See Ada Lupu (2024). *Radu Afrim, picătura prințului Rupert* [Radu Afrim, prince Rupert's drop], Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu", București, where the actress from Iasi frequently approaches the theme of her own corporality as directed by director Afrim in her roles under his direction.

Excessive eroticism

Whether consciously or not, all these actors and directors used to cultivate the erotic emotion – an emotion which seems to be very rare in our theatre nowadays. When eroticism gave way to pornography[6] and something lower than culture, something was lost on theatre stages. The theatre performance as flirtation is no longer possible, because the institution of flirtation[7] (and, with it, the awareness of the fact that we are flirting) is greatly suffering right now. All we need to do is watch today's teenage generation to understand that flirtation, seduction, and eroticism seem to be archaic, outdated, useless rituals – complications whose meaning is lost on Gen Z. Nowadays, flirting has been replaced by the crush. If two teenagers have a crush on each other, they make it public immediately and they do what they need to do without the old ceremony of flirtation. Teaching in a Theatre Faculty, I use Mihail Sebastian's play *Jocul de-a vacanța* [Holiday Make-Believe] every year with my direction and choreography classes. We find in this play an environment of what used to be flirtation, in an excellently preserved form. The relationship between Corina and Ștefan Valeriu is decided mainly under the sign of flirtation. I am amused, but also sad to see my students' first reaction – these characters seem weird to most of them. And I think young actors also find it hard to act flirty on stage, not because they are not talented, but because, in an almost genetic way, they no longer have access to the diffuse, ambiguous, delicately lascivious eroticism of flirtation. Under these circumstances, the art of flirting with the audience is almost impossible – it is a lost art. We are not talking about direct acting for the audience (where the actor addresses the viewer directly), but about the very rare ability to act while being aware of the viewers' presence in your character's world. I know few actors and actresses whose acting comprises this ample and refined horizon of flirtation – Ada Lupu in Iași, Elena Ivanca in Cluj, Ofelia Popii and Cendana Trifan in Sibiu, and Claudia Ieremia in Timișoara.

Technology does not seem to get along with stage eroticism, either. The fine-tuning of the channels between the stage and the audience which can turn a video installation into an erotic entity is still missing. Technology generates feelings that are not yet so elaborate as to aspire to the name "emotion." Right now, most Romanian actors do not manage to develop profound stage relationships with technology. This may partially be due to the fact that no acting school teaches you how to manage a relationship with a video entity

[6] In that phenomenon called the "pornographication of Western culture" by Jeffrey Escoffier, quoted by Pranav Shah in Salman Akhtar, Rajiv Gulati (editors) (2020). *Eroticism. Developmental, Cultural and Clinical Realms*, Routledge, London, p. 80.

[7] With its multitude of meanings and sub-meanings, of positive and negative polarities, of rational and irrational strata – see Adam Phillips (1995). *On Flirtation*, the chapter "On Flirtation: An Introduction", Faber & Faber, London/ Boston, pp. 17-25).

which is present on stage with you. Generally speaking, we have a pretty limited view of relationships, as we only refer to two human beings talking to each other and developing a common action. This means we lose a lot in other areas. Let us only think of how infinite a relationship with an object on stage can be, or how much eroticism can be found in a hand touching an object, or the eroticism that can be triggered by a bare foot when the actor is aware of his own bare foot.

Flirtation as we know it from our own experiences and those of others is also a matter of detail, a matter of cultivating detail, of cultivating essential tiny things, fundamental trifles.

Is eroticism a cultural matter?

One of the major questions in discussions around stage eroticism is related to the sources of this eroticism. In other words, is corporality the main source of stage eroticism? Is the so-called "physical theatre" more erotic that psychological theatre simply because its main instrument is the body? Our answer to such questions is predominantly "no." It is enough to notice that stage eroticism, when it appears, is not connected to the age of the person on stage or to any potential physical beauty standards. Even more than life, apparently, theatre destroys such biological boundaries or at least makes them secondary.

If corporality is not responsible for eroticism, then its source must be found elsewhere. To us, the actor's personality is the bigger factor in this very delicate matter. Of course, this opens another discussion – about how the actor's personality starts a dialogue with the character's personality and what the result of such a dialogue can be. Another approach talks about the way in which an actor's personality is shaped throughout the years and especially about what makes that personality compatible with the on-stage seduction we are discussing here. The hypothesis we are launching here, based on case studies performed throughout a longer period of time, is that on-stage eroticism is directly linked to how cultured the actor is. In all the cases mentioned above, we are talking about very cultured actors (with regards to general themes and to their own field), people capable of great intellectual refinement, intensely spiritual and well anchored in the culture of their time. The actress Cornelia Gheorghiu, mentioned above, had subscriptions to cultural publications, went to all the major cultural events in Iași in the '70's, '80's, and '90's, and maintained a rigorous theatre-themed correspondence with important figures of culture for decades (George Banu was one of her favourite dialogue partners). Mihaela Arsenescu-Werner was one of Iași's great acting teachers, doing brilliant theatre research. Just looking at her analyses of Ibsen's female characters is enough for us to become aware of the profound cultural background behind them. Elena Ivanca, Ada Lupu, Ofelia Popii, and Claudia

Ieremia are also more than simple stage practitioners – a beautiful demon of theory, originating from their cultural accumulations, accompanies them at all times, permeating not only their personality, but also their acting.

Flirting and the art of seduction are, after all, cultural "operations." They are, of course, also found reflected in lower levels where "rizz", "pick-up lines", or "chatting someone up" are manifested in various other forms and have other (much more concretely physical) goals than the charm of flirting in itself. Even if it sounds somewhat axiomatic, we risk the quite firm conclusion that only actors who are very solidly cultured are capable of on-stage flirting and, implicitly, of generating on-stage eroticism. They are the only ones with whom one can fall in love in the way that Anne Bogart means when talking about love and theatre.

Flirting with the character

There is, however, another kind on on-stage eroticism, as well, one which is not about the audience, but which does not exclude them either – instead, it proposes a very tempting state of witness to the viewer. It is the eroticism between the actor and his character, defined as a public, visible, continuous form of flirtation. Thousands of pages have been written about one's relationship with one's character, there has been talk about melting in the character, but also about a distance from the character. People have lectured about taking on the character, making it an instrument, negotiating with it, composing and decomposing it. As far as we are concerned, we have never encountered this relationship from the perspective of flirtation.

Flirting announces a possible relationship, but maintains us in an ambiguous, temporary area. It is, of course, a relationship, but one that is not fully configured, one composed and decomposed over and over. It is defined by something like the tides, coming and going, trying, conquering and losing territories. Flirtation operates with the potential, with what could be, not with what is. In the theatre, such an ambiguity of the relationship with the character is usually seen as a deficit in going deeper into the role and most actors' ambition is to control the character and "master" it completely. The actor's behaviour towards his character is reminiscent of a decade-old marriage where no one can surprise anyone anymore, where everything is predictable and fixed forever. We thus win certainty and that is necessary on stage; but, on the other hand, we lose the freshness of the relationship, the unpredictable which everything new always brings. As far as I am concerned, as a theatre goer, I have always been interested in the tensions between actor and character, by that aspect which is raw, not yet ripe, not yet mature.

Obviously, leaving this type of freedom with regards to the role to chance can have harmful consequences and can push the actor towards a lack of professionalism. But I think that becoming aware of this flirtation, using it

methodologically and systematically and knowing how to show it could offer great satisfaction for the people both on stage and in the audience. And one of the most interesting effects would be this erotic kind of vibe of searching and trying.

Erotic context and on-stage nudity

Many times, on-stage eroticism derives not from the acting, but from the organisation of the stage. I remember Mihai Măniuțiu's *Macbeth* played at the Iași National Theatre in 2007. The director had created a bathing scene for Lady Macbeth. The scene was simple, but extremely erotically charged at the same time – a white tub, rose petals and a cleverly constructed type of lighting were hiding while offering, operating on a seen/unseen dialectics. Very uncomfortable with the nudity involved in the scene, the actress and teacher Tatiana Ionesi did not surrender to the contextual eroticism; involuntarily, trying to protect herself, she opposed it. The resulting scene was beautiful, but very cold, completely neutral from the erotic viewpoint, a kind of painting which I admired, but did not for a moment inhabit.

Another example of a very powerful erotic context is a scene from Eugen Jebeleanu's play *Teorema* [The Theorem] performed at the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre of Sibiu. Soil covers a dead young woman's body, leaving a breast visible. The beauty of this image is hard to describe, especially as, paradoxically, the whole scene breathes… life. The actress's breast makes us very profoundly revisit the old eros / thanatos formula. More than a breast, it is a statement of life which does not give up and invites us to admire its splendour even in the middle of death.

I have often wondered about the point of on-stage nudity. Fewer and fewer directors aim to obtain an authentic erotic layer – most of them want rather to produce shock waves for the viewer. Let us be honest – in most cases, the effect is embarrassing. We are troubled, yes, but it is because of an inadequacy. In extreme situations, there is something vulgar there, a pornographic-type scene, and then the audience is clearly uncomfortable. Another reason for actors to be undressed is the false impression that a naked body sells more tickets than one which is dressed. I know theatre managers whose posters contain unjustified age limits (16+, 18+) strictly for marketing reasons, not because they really want to protect innocent souls from the "horrors" of the stage.

From the perspective of eroticism, some of the most beautiful nude scenes I have ever seen at the theatre were those of Ofelia Popii in the Silviu Purcărete's *Lulu*. The actress offered her nakedness in a disturbingly natural way, as a deep nature of the character, but her nudity was also a concept-nudity, because Ofelia Popii has the power to generalise. It was not just her nudity, but the nudity of all women, as the character Lulu became the very

essence of femininity. That is exactly the kind of situation which validates Anne Bogart's theory about the audience falling in love. Many years after that play, I still remember the warm, vibrant, sensually cultural intimacy in which this character revealed herself to us in her full eroticism. The character's eroticism became the character's poetry[8].

Ada Lupu's (half-)naked scenes in some of Radu Afrim's productions also provide erotic substance, but in a different way. It is nudity made very poetic, as Ada has the gift of producing a strange and unique lyricism. On stage, her naked or near-naked body stops being matter. You forget that it contains blood, organs, or nerve endings. This naturalistic perspective disappears and makes way for the ineffable and for an amazing floating anatomy. It is the kind of corporality which is perfect for the aesthetic surrealism cultivated by Radu Afrim – it is on the border between reality and dream. Long and slim, the actress's body evokes a dream which powerfully infiltrates the viewer's affective perception. After the play, if you try to remember Ada Lupu's body, what comes to your mind is more like the blurred lines of a silhouette. You feel the kind of ambiguity you experience when you try to narrate a dream. Her body cannot be narrated – it can only be dreamed of. The erotic effect produced by nudity in this case modifies the atmosphere of the play, remaining *on the sky of the stage* long after the actress and her character have left.

Male nudity produces different kinds of eroticism and can also fail miserably, turning into ridiculousness or vulgarity. Again, the context created by the director and actor is the one deciding whether we will watch something profound or something passing, something memorable or something ephemeral. Of course, these are certain questions which, once asked, risk making the topic laughable: Can the male sex organs provide an erotic effect on stage, for the general public, just by being exposed? However, other questions make the topic serious again: What kind of poetry does male corporality carry? Are hair, muscles, and veins able to deliver emotion?[9]

Directorial eroticism

Many years ago, the director Alexa Visarion told me that, in his opinion, one of a director's major qualities was the ability to seduce. Rehearsals for a play are, among other things, seduction exercises or a framework for the

[8] The connection between eroticism and poetry is firmly underlined by Octavio Paz: "The relationship between eroticism and poetry is such that it can be said, without affectation, that the former is a poetry of the body and the latter is eroticism of language. They are in complementary opposition" (O. Paz, *op. cit.*, pp. 2-3).

[9] A series of nuances can be seen in the literature dedicated to dancing, which is much more preoccupied by aspects pertaining to corporality. See Ramsay Burt (2022). *The Male Dancer. Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, third edition, Routledge, London, but also Clare Farmer, Helene Kindred (editors) (2024). *The Female Dancer, a soma-scientific approach*, Routledge, London.

manifestation of a kind of eroticism which is being born (or should be) between the director and the actors and actresses with whom he is working. Obviously, there is nothing sexual in this statement – it is about a kind of atmosphere which is erotically charged by the director in a premeditated way. This atmosphere, carefully maintained within the boundaries of ethics, becomes fertile ground for creation. I had encountered something similar (although not expressed directly) in testimonials by actors of Iași who had worked with Cătălina Buzoianu in the '70's. This director used to live in the theatre, cook in the theatre, and, generally speaking, saw the cast as family, and one of the immediate effects of this attitude was assuming a personalisation of relationships[10]. Another director who is said to have used eroticism during rehearsals was Alexandru Hausvater. On a European level, people still talk about Giorgio Strehler's astounding capacity for seduction. All these examples are, of course, from times when the director's authority figure was the most important one in building the production, but we can also imagine such a climate during rehearsals for a devised performance.

One of the internationally visible present-day directors who admits explicitly that the fundamental actor-director relationship is erotic is Thomas Ostermeier: "In a positive sense, the actor-director relationship is an erotic one. We seduce each other. I seduce the actor so he would open up. The actor seduces me so I would believe him. One is a voyeur, the other is an exhibitionist. I need actors who feel the same erotic thrill. And we don't have to be friends"[11].

Playwright eroticism

Next, I would like to refer to a few types of distinctive eroticism as they are found in the great European playwrights. In the case of Shakespeare, I tend to believe we are dealing with raw eroticism, due not to any subtleties, but to the endless sexual innuendo in Great Will's work. The fact that it was possible to create a Dictionary of Sexual Terms[12] – a few thousand words and phrases – says a lot about the sexual and erotic component of Shakespeare's plays. On the other hand, however, texts such as *Romeo and Juliet* prove he also knew how to develop non-vulgar eroticism. In *Othello*, more than in other text, these two perspectives coexist and merge. The Moor's virility and romanticism form an erotic alloy which is unique in the history of theatre worldwide. *Hamlet*'s erotic complications are also the topic of numerous studies and books. Freud

[10] See the places dedicated to Cătălina Buzoianu in Călin Ciobotari (2010). *Cornelia Gheorghiu, între Ciocârlia și Sarah Bernhardt* [Cornelia Gheorghiu, between The Skylark and Sarah Bernhardt], Editura Junimea, Iași and Călin Ciobotari (2019). *Emil Coșeru, actorul nostru* [Emil Coșeru, our actor], Editura Artes.

[11] Gerhard Jörder (2024). *Backstage Ostermeier*, translation from German by Ozana Oancea, Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu", București.

[12] Gordon Williams (2006). *Shakespeare's Sexual Language. A Glossary*, The Athlone Press.

and Lacan explored the play in order to argue psychoanalytic theories which are still considered valid today. For example, you cannot produce *Hamlet* without asking yourself what kind of eroticism you will take from the text and how you can express it on stage. The Elsinor prince's sex life remains a mystery, however. The eroticism in Shakespeare's work definitely takes into account the eroticism of his time and reflects it according to the theories of reflection Shakespeare formulates. It is a dual eroticism, meant to satisfy the immodest Elizabethan audience, but also the refined royal court. Shakespeare's plays are, after all, like a buffet out of which we each take what we need. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* can generate a porn movie or delicate dreams… It all depends on who is handling the text…

In my opinion, Chekhov is one of the masters of theatre eroticism. His whole theatre work can be read as plays of flirtation. Most of his characters are defined by a kind of uncertainty which is specific to flirtation. Without clear goals, gravitating chaotically around their own destiny, they practice a kind of continuous existential flirtation. Therefore, in their case, flirtation is more than just a transitory attitude – it is an ontology.

As far as actual erotic relationships are concerned, Chekhov's plays are chock-full of love. Unlike Shakespeare, Chekhov always avoids vulgar eroticism, refining and elevating it to an art. He prefers the process of creating eroticism to its consummation, and even when consummation occurs (Nina and Trigorin, Masha and Vershinin, etc.), this occurs far from our sight. Let us only think of the parties in the three sisters' house, the gentle courtship practiced by the officers, the subtlety of the women's responses, the web and flow of the erotic sentiment, the way in which the fire in the third act reflects the inner fires of desire, of waiting, of seeking. Then there is the storm in *Uncle Vanya*'s second act – a terribly discreet storm of failed hormonal tensions, a storm as a debate of repressed sensuality. Ignoring the characters' eroticism means starting out with a severe hermeneutic handicap. Not wondering about Vanya's sex life, about Sonya's late virginity, about Yelena's young body moving under Serebryakov's old hands, about the useless virility of Astrov, who is wandering through the forest, means missing or having more difficult access to the characters' essence. *The Seagull* can definitely be read as an *ars erotica*, a complex study of love, but one which starts from erotic non-encounter and non-fulfilment. In *Platonov*, the main character has to deal simultaneously with no less than four women who love him, while in *Ivanov* we watch, stupefied, the process through which a man ends up no longer able to love anything. In *The Cherry Orchard*, the centre of our attention is a character whose name evokes love (Lyubov) and he is bankrupt with regards to his morals, finances, and soul due to his predisposition for love – he is addicted to the erotic drug and willing to do anything to consume it one more time.

In writing, Chekhov practiced a certain discreet delicacy, although, in his day-to-day life, he and his friend Suvorin made a goal of visiting brothels in all the new towns they went to. He was a handsome man himself, admired and courted by the women around him, so he definitely knew the delights of erotic explorations, which we find throughout his literary work.

But it is not just Chekhov that makes European modern theatre be erotic theatre. He is seconded by playwrights such as Ibsen, Strindberg and Wedekind, as we can read each of their works through a strictly erotic lens. Whether we are talking about Nora, Hedda, the lady from the sea, Julia, Lulu, we are talking about actual case studies of eroticism in action. It is true that modern theatre tends to associate eroticism to the female character, but it is all the more interesting to see how the male characters of these plays are salvaged (or not) from the erotic point of view. And yes, it is truly impossible to understand why we often see productions without any echo of this tremendous, omnipresent eroticism in the source texts.

In the theatre of the absurd, if we look at a mirroring of Beckett's and Ionesco's plays (the two great trends of the genre), we are surprised to see that eroticism is the biggest difference between them. While Beckett's territories are reserved from the erotic point of view, Ionesco's territories are usually watered by obvious sensuality. In the case of Beckett, once corporality has been destroyed (by old age, decomposing, burial), eroticism is diluted. In Ionesco's plays, on the contrary, a certain surplus of vitality (even in the case of elderly characters like the teacher in *The Lesson*) brings erotic vibes with it. A comparative analysis would we worth deepening, especially as it would answer a question such as, "To what extent can we talk about the erotic absurd?"

In the Romanian space, I would indicate two major directions of eroticism. One is given by Caragiale, although the "erotic Caragiale" has been talked about too little and the whole erotic apparatus in his plays is often downplayed due to quick labelling and prejudice deepened in time by superficial readings. However, let us notice that he has no play where flirtation, eroticism, a love relationship (whether guilty or not, vulgar or not) would be absent. The other direction is set by the work of Mihail Sebastian, especially the plays *Jocul de-a vacanța* [Holiday Make-Believe] and *Steaua fără nume* [The Nameless Star], which are real tours de force dedicated to illustrating eroticism production mechanisms. If, in Caragiale's case, we can talk about a Shakespeare-like direction, with that combination of vulgarity and refinement, with Sebastian we are in an obvious Chekhov-style paradigm, with frailty, vulnerability, and bittersweet melancholy. Caragiale shows us a noisy, somewhat exhibitionistic daytime eroticism. Sebastian, on the other hand, creates a whispered, discreet eroticism which blooms at nightfall.

Critique as eroticism

I have often wondered what kind of relationship critique (such a problematic name!) should have with the work which is its subject – in this case, a theatre production. Should it occur on the background of programmatic coldness and intentional frigidity, in the name of objectivity, or, on the contrary, should the critical act be fertilised by desire, impulse, and… erotic tension? I still feel attached to Susan Sontag's early theories from the '60's, where she claimed, with superb radicalism, that interpretation is harmful. Any interpretation, any theoretical staining, she said, harms the work by changing its shape and direction. Sontag proposed, precisely in the name of eroticism of art, that we should only describe the work[13]. An erotic critical act would seek the intimate part of the play and, full of desire, would be delivered as a confession from there, from the primary intimacy of the way in which the play shows itself to us. But revealing any intimacy is abusive… What could be worse than talking about your intimate experiences with others? Another kind of betrayal of the work could appear now – an erotic betrayal. That is why we may have to accept that, in its essence, any critique contains a bit of betrayal, no matter how we define the critical act.

The kind of theatre commentary that George Banu used to practice was also in the area of the erotic. Many decades ago, the famous theatrologist had decided to practice only the so-called "affirmative critique" – the kind of critique which only talks about the positive, the success, the fulfilment of the play and ignores failure and aesthetic precariousness. But this "affirmative" was also based on something more – a formula for becoming friends with the production even from the time when it was being built. Thus, George Banu abandoned the old (and present-day) formula of the exterior commentary and preferred to be inside the topic he was talking about. This change of perspective makes critique erotic, as it becomes personalised and placed in a horizon of intimate knowledge of the work.

Conclusions

This study is only a schematised introduction to an obviously complex topic, which is relevant both from a theoretical perspective and from a practical one, useful to the stage and to the audience. I tend to believe that, by means of a methodical, competent and profound approach of the topic of eroticism in the process of creation, theatre as a performance can reach a new stage of blooming. Whether we are talking about acting, direction, choreography or scenography, the idea of theatre as an erotic art can have unsuspected benefits. Moreover, we could also reflect on the very act of theatre research as a form of

[13] Susan Sontag (2009). *Against Intepretation and Other Essays*, in "Against interpretation", Penguin Books, pp. 3-15.

eroticism dominated by the acts of seeking, meeting and exploring. The topic remains open…

Bibliography

Akhtar, Salman, Gulati, Salman (editors) (2020). *Eroticism. Developmental, Cultural and Clinical Realms*, Routledge.

Bogart, Anne (2001). *A Director Prepares. Seven Essays On Art and Theatre*, Routledge.

Bataille, George (2001). *Eroticism*, translated by Mary Dalwood, with an introduction by Colin MacCabe, Penguin Books.

Burt, Ramsay (2022). *The Male Dancer*. *Bodies, Spectacle, Sexualities*, third edition, Routledge.

Cehov, A.P. (2009). *Logodnica. Nuvele și povestiri* [The Fiancée. Novellas and short stories], translation by Anda Boldur, editor, introduction, chronology and notes, Sorina Bălănescu, Polirom, Iași.

Ciobotari, Călin (2010). *Cornelia Gheorghiu, între Ciocârlia și Sarah Bernhardt* [Cornelia Gheorghiu, between The Skylark and Sarah Bernhardt], Editura Junimea, Iași.

Ciobotari, Călin (2019). *Emil Coșeru, actorul nostru* [Emil Coșeru, our actor], Editura Artes, Iași.

Jörder, Gerhard (2024). *Backstage Ostermeier,* translation from German by Ozana Oancea, Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu", București.

Kindred, Helene (editors) (2024). *The Female Dancer, a soma-scientific approach*, Routledge.

Lupu, Ada (2024). *Radu Afrim, picătura prințului Rupert* [Radu Afrim, prince Rupert's drop], Fundația Culturală „Camil Petrescu", București.

Paz, Octavio (1996). *The Double Flame. Love and Eroticism,* translated from the Spanish by Helen Lane, HarperCollins Publishers.

Phillips, Adam (1995). *On Flirtation*, the chapter "On Flirtation: An Introduction", Faber & Faber, London/ Boston.

Plato (2007). *The Banquet*, translation by Petru Creția, Humanitas, București.

Sontag, Susan (2009). *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, in "Against interpretation", Penguin Books.

Williams, Gordon (2006). *Shakespeare's Sexual Language. A Glossary,* The Athlone Press.