

Aspects from the common history of theatre and radio

IOANA SOREANU*

“George Enescu” National University of the Arts Iași
ROMANIA

Abstract: The present research started from one of the questions found in the conference’s introduction: does doctoral research in the Arts field represent a form of culture (as well)? The inquiry is a welcomed challenge, especially when taking into consideration the subject of my own research: “The theatre person and the Radio. Landmarks and coordinates of a common history”. The aim of this paper is to bring to light, as well as enhance the aforementioned common history – one that became part of Iași’s cultural heritage through the connection between theatre people, the forms of expression characteristic to theatre, and radio programmes. This strong bond is part of our cultural history, both on a national, as well as on a local level, since theatre people contributed to the development of a “theatre without seats or a curtain” or a “theatre without a stage”, as they call the radio theatre. Cultural history shapes the way a community evolves, as well as its aspirations. Ignoring this past would result in a society without cultural landmarks – thus, without a chance to progress. In conclusion, the answer to the aforementioned question posed by the theme of this conference is, without doubt, an affirmative.

Keywords: radio, culture, theatre.

Introduction

This text is part of a bigger paper we are working on, called *Omul de teatru și Radioul. Reper și coordonate ale unei istorii comune* [Theatre people and the radio. Landmarks and coordinates of a common history], and its goal is to highlight and capitalise on this history which is part of the cultural baggage of Iași city, due to the connection that has always existed between theatre people and the modes of expression characteristic to theatre on the one hand and radio programmes on the other hand. This strong connection is part of the local cultural history, as theatre people contributed to the evolution of the “theatre without seats or curtains”¹ or “theatre without a stage”², as radio theatre is also called.

* iantonica@yahoo.com

¹ Mihai Zirra (2009). *Am ales Teatrul Radiofonic* [I have chosen radio theatre], Editura Casa Radio, București, p. 46.

² Ion Moldovan (2023). *Alexandrina Halic – Lumea magică a teatrului radiofonic* [Alexandrina Halic – The magical world of radio theatre], Editura Ecou Transilvan, Cluj-Napoca, p. 121.

One of the missions of public radio is to educate and this process cannot occur outside of the cultural field. Cultural programmes of public radio stations also have this connotation, which can be considered as a main one. Cultural programmes cannot be conceived without theatre people and the modes of expression specific to this art. Radio theatre, children's radio theatre, stories, poetry recitals are instruments promoting national and universal literature. Of course, means of communication have changed with digitalisation and with the changes in the audience's listening habits. Theatre and radio people have adjusted (or should adjust) their style, repertoire choices, and work process to these new demands, because public radio cannot fulfil its educational mission without a numerous audience for its cultural programmes. Even though there is a certain financial comfort insured by the state budget, drawing consistent listeners guarantees that the information will reach a numerous, heterogeneous audience. This mention is necessary in order to fight the perception that public radio can circumvent audience polls and their results, the argument being that it also needs to broadcast programmes meant for a smaller audience and that cultural shows are considered "niche." Artistic director Mihnea Chelaru from the National Radio Theatre Department of the Romanian Radio Broadcast Society (RRBS) has achieved a metamorphosis of radio drama which has kept it among the audience's preferences. Mihnea Chelaru graduated from the "I. L. Caragiale" National Theatre and Cinema University of Bucharest, specialising in film direction, and borrows cinema techniques for radio theatre productions. Recordings made outdoors, with an authentic sound background, transport the listener more easily and effectively in the space and atmosphere of the script.

Radio theatre

Nowadays, the listeners' activities are very different and their lifestyle is much faster than a few years ago. Their time for listening to the radio is limited and fragmented. That is why scripts need to be relatively short and productions should take no more than 60 minutes. In the case of classical theatre, since one cannot interfere with the text, plays can be offered for listeners online. Radio Romania has such a website, called eTeatru.ro, where we can find and listen to Romanian and international plays, classic and modern texts, old and new recordings, and great performers from all the times that theatre and radio have collaborated.

The great number of radio theatre plays which have been taken from Radio Romania without permission and shared online and the thousands of views these plays get answer the question about the public interest for this form of theatre – for this mode of expression assimilated by the radio. The comments are full of praise. While piracy is illegal, this situation can still offer a great measuring instrument in this case. The radio company can fight this

phenomenon by making its official website secure and offering these theatre productions to listeners with much better conditions.

Radio is a perfect promoter of culture by broadcasting theatre shows, cultural news, and entertainment programmes. The connection between radio and theatre, made by their common modes of expression, but also by theatre people also working with the radio, is well documented.

This relationship has worked both ways right from the beginning. Like I said, theatre has provided the means of expression for radio to exist and to appeal to as many listeners as possible. At the same time, theatre has provided the people who know how to use these means of expression – those who have the best skills for it: actors, directors, theatre theoreticians.

On the other hand, the art of acting and the theatre production are ephemeral. Remarkable performances remain in the memory of those who have been in the audience of exceptional theatre productions. These moments are mentioned in reviews, interviews, and books. Those emotions and voices could be saved from oblivion only by descriptions, if “...this miracle which is the radio”³ had not come along “to save the memory of great theatre actors who now only ‘live’ in our memories”⁴. This is a “generous gesture” made by the radio to artists and to many generations of listeners, as it maintains, in sound format, memorable performances of national and universal literature. The public radio sound archive, also called the “gold archive,” preserves a real “national treasure”⁵. The Secretary General of the RRBS, Dragoș Șeuleanu, has underlined the important contribution that this media institution whose President and Director General he was between 2001 and 2005 has brought to the enrichment, promotion, and preservation of culture: “The Romanian Radio Society is not only the preserver of its own past – and, we may add, a true school for the major culture creators and consumers of Romania – but also the treasurer of a significant part of national culture.”⁶

For the radio, offering access to this history of theatre and literature is fulfilling its educational goal. In my opinion, bringing to light the precious past that theatre and radio share (sometimes so much, that we cannot tell them apart) is an academic and cultural endeavour of public interest. When we are talking about a smaller community, such as a city, the purpose of the (regional or local) radio is even more important. Preserving the local cultural values and putting them at the public’s disposal is an honouring and essential task. To a small extent, the actors or directors of Iași have sometimes been invited to

³ Ion Moldovan, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁴ *Ibidem.*

⁵ *Ibidem.*

⁶*** (1998). *Orele culturii. Antologie de conferințe din Arhiva Societății Române de Radiodifuziune* [Hours of Culture. Antology of lectures from the archive of the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Society], Vol. I, 1931-1935, Editura Casa Radio, București, p. 7.

record theatre, poetry, or humorous shows in the Bucharest studios of the Public Radio Company. The radio theatre director Mihai Zirra remembers that, right after theatres in various cities were founded, the Public Radio found different ways of promoting their productions by using its own means of expressions, such as news reports. Then, teams from Radio Romania went to those theatres and recorded performances which were later broadcast. “My collaboration with actors in various cities started right after those theatres were founded and continued as they evolved. First, we made news reports accompanied by examples of scenes recorded during shows or rehearsals; then, gradually, we recorded whole radio theatre shows with the cast of that theatre, based on scripts sent by us. Therefore, our recordings gradually broadcast, for the first time, the voices of actors who had less of a chance of making themselves known this way, because they were not working in Bucharest. So we started by connecting and then spending quite long periods of time with theatres from Iași, Cluj, Craiova, Turda, Sibiu, Brașov, Ploiești, Petroșani, Reșița, Bacău, Piatra Neamț, Tg. Mureș, Brăila, Galați, Constanța, Pitești, Baia Mare, Arad, Oradea, Timișoara, Bârlad.”⁷ Much later, in 2012, director Mihai Lungeanu initiated a project for promoting theatre news from several cities – Iași, Cluj, Timișoara, Târgu Mureș and Craiova – on the occasion of the Caragiale Centennial. The recordings were made in the local studios of Radio Romania. “Within the aforementioned project, initiated, coordinated and executed in order to be able to offer exceptional performances by important actors of national theatres to posterity, we have had the honour and joy of collaborating with a few extraordinary, iconic names of the ‘Vasile Alecsandri’ National Theatre of Iași. I will mention Mr. Dionise Vitcu, Petre Ciubotaru, Ms. Mihaela Arsenescu-Werner, Mr. Constantin Popa, Mr. Emil Coșeru, and they need no introduction. I am just glad we made this happen. At the same time, the technical team of the Local Studio, all very professional, generous and helpful people, have helped us continuously and so we managed to record everything we needed, even though circumstances forced us to do it all very quickly.”⁸ Theatre and radio together once again found a way to preserve and capitalise on the work of our most important playwright – an act of culture.

Another important role of the public radio is entertainment. Entertainment has always taken up a lot of space in radio programmes. The famous show called *Happy Hour*, later called *Radio Magazine*, then *Satire and Humour*, *Happy Waves* and then *Happy Hour* again is one of the listeners’ favourites. The one who had the idea of creating this show was the actor Ion Manu from the National Theatre of Bucharest, director Sanda Manu’s father.⁹

⁷ Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 93.

⁸ Ioana Soreanu (2024). *Interview with Mihai Lungeanu*, in “Dacia Literară”, Nr. 1 (172).

⁹ Octavian Iordăchescu (2007). *Ion Vodă cel... cumplit!* [Ion Vodă the... Terrible!], Editura Casa Radio, București, p. 94.

Next to great entertainment authors, these shows contained dramatisations of texts by classical authors: Caragiale, Muşatescu, Alecsandri, Chekhov, Ilf and Petrov, Mark Twain. The actors invited there were also important ones. Director Ion Vova remembers that there was no great comedy actor that was not part of his programmes: Birlic, Giugaru, Beligan, Dem Rădulescu, Mircea Crişan, Stroe, Zizi Şerban, Nataşa Alexandru, Florica Damian, Florin Piersic, Ştefan Bănică Senior, Fory Etterle, Marin Moraru, Colea Răutu. Their success was so huge that the show travelled to several cities in the country, with great actors of the time, either with the technical team of Radio Romania or with teams from the studio radios, as director Ion Vova remembers: “Sometimes we used the technical stuff we found in various places, in the local radios. For instance, from Craiova, we went to Băileşti with the people from that local station. We did the same in Iaşi...”¹⁰

These projects initiated by the Public Radio offered actors a second stage and the chance to remain in the auditory memory of the theatre and radio audiences and, at the same time, they gave the people not living in Bucharest the chance to listen to great voices and performances from Bucharest theatres. Moreover, due to the radio, people from cities who did not (and maybe still do not) have a theatre have access to this art, to plays, to literature, to culture.

The Regional or Local Radio Studio of Iaşi has offered a second stage to actors of Iaşi and of other theatres of Moldavia and has, up to a point, archived plays, poetry recitals, shows, stories, interviews, and theatre reviews in a sound archive which is just as valuable as the one in Bucharest. If voices of great actors of Iaşi can be heard now, helping us to better understand their appeal to the audience, that is due to the radio. This media has preserved, in an audio format, the cultural history of Iaşi, which is essential for our understanding of the importance of the city from this perspective. This same archive, whether in the form of writing or sound, lets us know what the cultural anchors and cultural potential of Iaşi are.

Sadly, the past few years have brought a lower number of recordings of radio theatre, poetry recitals, and children’s stories in Radio Iaşi. The presence of theatre people is sporadic and only found in shows where they are invited for dialogue. Actors are no longer even asked to do ads, because it is cheaper to use the voices of radio people. On the other hand, the National Radio Theatre, which has been an independent department since 1 November 1996, continues the activity started on 18 February 1929 with *What the village knows* by Ion Valjan. Mihai Zirra speaks about the great number of theatre plays recorded and broadcast here, much higher than the number of any other theatre: “...in the theatre, I would work on 8-9 plays a year, while in radio theatre, I would direct 40 plays a year.”¹¹ Mihai Zirra became an artistic director of radio

¹⁰ Octavian Iordăchescu, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

¹¹ Mihai Zirra, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

theatre during the autumn of 1944. Throughout his career as a studio or artistic director there are 500 plays that he has interpreted, adapted or staged for the radio theatre.¹² The National Radio Theatre still has funds for production. For the Iași Studio, such funds are non-existent. The recording of the only production in 2023 was possible due to sponsorship. In 2024, no such projects were developed.

If the doctoral research I am performing highlights and capitalises on this common cultural history, providing testimonials of theatre and radio people and proving documents, then it acquires the value of a cultural act.

And, since the best way to support a theory is the power of example, I will bring as argument a written document accompanied by its sound version, which I discovered this autumn, while doing research in the Romanian Radio Broadcast Society archive. Very carefully organised by people who are dedicated to preserving the history of radio, in files containing the numbers corresponding to documents stored in a few rooms on different floors, the RRBS archive is a huge and priceless source of information. I have chosen an example which, to me, is relevant for this demonstration. It is a radio theatre play broadcast on 13 December 1976. The script is signed by the writer and theatre and film critic Ștefan Oprea and is called *Theatre biographies: the history of the 'Vasile Alecsandri' National Theatre of Iași*. It is an evocative text written for the anniversary of 160 years of theatre in the Romanian language, so it shows the deepest roots of Romanian theatre. By an “imaginary play with time”¹³, the author allows himself to be carried by the “legend” to another December, that of 1816, in the house of Commander Constantin Ghica. “It is hot in the hall, and the viewers are noisy, unaware that they are part of a historic act. They joke and laugh, and some are worried about their offspring, who are already in their ‘dressing rooms’ getting ready to confront not only that evening’s audience, but also the whole future of Romanian theatre.”¹⁴ Full of emotion, but keen on fulfilling his journalistic duty, the author “interviews” Gheorghe Asachi. “Here is Mr Gheorghe Asachi. He is a slightly emotional young man, sombre, almost severe. I’d like to approach him, but I lack the courage. This is maybe my most difficult interview – an interview with shadows.”¹⁵ The story flows on, mentioning, one by one, other characters with essential roles in the appearance and evolution of Romanian theatre and of the National Theatre of Iași: Vasile Alecsandri, Costache Negruzzi, Mihail Kogălniceanu, Mihail Sadoveanu, Mihai Codreanu, Ionel Teodoreanu, Iorgu

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹³ Ștefan Oprea (1976). *Biografiile teatrale: Istoria teatrului Național „Vasile Alecsandri” din Iași* [Theatre biographies: the history of the „Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre of Iași], Archive of the RRBS, p. 4.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 2.

Iordan, George Topârceanu. He evokes the actors and directors who served the theatre of Iași and the essential role played by this theatre in Romanian culture. The text is accompanied by fragments of productions of the National Theatre of Iași which have been preserved in the radio sound archive: *Baba Hîrca* (written, produced and played by Matei Millo), with Miluță Gheorghiu, Ștefan Dăncinescu in *Căruța cu paiate* [A Cart Full of Clowns], by Mircea Ștefănescu, of course, *Chirița în Iași* [Chirița in Iași] and *Chirița în provincie* [Chirița Out of Town], again, with Miluță Gheorghiu, *Povestea Unirii* [The Story of the Union], by Tudor Șoimaru, *Barbu Lăutaru*, played by Constantin Sava, Margareta Baciuc in *Mutter Courage*, or Teofil Vâlcu as Cațavencu in *O scrisoare pierdută* [The Lost Letter]. The script also contains testimonials about theatre given by the actors Any Braeschi, Constantin Sava, Ion Lascăr, Ștefan Dăncinescu, and Teofil Vâlcu. The whole history of the theatre of Iași from 1816 to 1976 is evoked here and the script mentions the involvement of theatre people in key political moments, when they staged productions that would stimulate the aspirations of the Romanian people of those times. I will mention here the 1859 Union. In my opinion, Ștefan Oprea's script has all the characteristics of a theatre drama documentary. This text highlights the historical relationship between theatre and the social, cultural and political life of Iași. Radio keeps the text and the recording which were so valuable back then, when it was broadcast, and are also valuable now, when the listeners can go along with the author to imagine the atmosphere of the time when the first manifestations of theatre in Romanian appeared and the way they evolved all the way to 1976. This is an important part of the history of the "Vasile Alecsandri" National Theatre and of the culture of Iași, captured in this script discovered during the research for my doctoral paper. This is how I expect my paper to fulfil one of its goals.

Conclusions

The past few years have proved that, without human and financial resources, the connection between theatre and radio runs the risk of breaking. It is unimaginable for periods or events of the past to be missing from the national history books. It is just as inconceivable for the radio to no longer be able to ensure the permanent presence of theatre and actors in the public memory, if recordings of radio theatre or cultural shows are discontinued. This danger needs to be denounced as being of public interest. This is another goal of the doctoral research called *Omul de teatru și Radioul. Repere și coordonate ale unei istorii comune* [Theatre people and the radio. Landmarks and coordinates of a common history], which aims to serve the cultural act of Iași.

Dragoș Șeuleanu, the Secretary General of the RRBS, mentioned above, says that "the future is possible when you have a past and you know how to

capitalise on it.”¹⁶ The history of culture shapes a community’s aspirations and development. Ignoring this past leads to a society with no cultural landmarks and, therefore, no chances for evolution.

Bibliography

Iordăchescu, Octavian (2007). *Ion Vodă cel... cumplit!* [Ion Vodă the... Terrible!], Editura Casa Radio, București.

Moldovan, Ion (2023). *Alexandrina Halic – Lumea magică a teatrului radiofonic* [Alexandrina Halic – The magical world of radio theatre], Editura Ecou Transilvan, Cluj-Napoca.

Antologie (1998). *Orele culturii. Antologie de conferințe din Arhiva Societății Române de Radiodifuziune* [Hours of Culture. Antology of lectures from the archive of the Romanian Radio Broadcasting Society], Vol. I, 1931-1935, Editura Casa Radio, București.

Zirra, Mihai (2009). *Am ales Teatrul Radiofonic* [I have chosen radio theatre], Editura Casa Radio, București.

Arhiva Societății Române de Radiodifuziune (f.a.). *Arhivă Instituțională*.

Arhiva de Sunet a Societății Române de Radiodifuziune (f.a.). *Arhivă Instituțională*.

Webography

<https://www.radio-arhive.ro/>

¹⁶ *** *Orele culturii. Antologie de conferințe din Arhiva Societății Române de Radiodifuziune*, op. cit., p. 9.