

ION CARAMITRU

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What a beautiful idea, in these times of euroskepticism, to establish an award for the European actor. Symbols are both welcome and necessary, beyond the options that will always give rise to reservations, doubts or enthusiasm. Each year one actor becomes the emblem of all theaters in Europe! Is there a nobler reward? An actor whose talent has left its mark on the Romanian stage, Ion Caramitru, receives it today in a country remindful of his origins.

I became acquainted with his talent when, as a student, I watched him play Hamlet – and what a debut! A vibrant, vigorous Hamlet, a Hamlet of youth, the youth that, in May '68, sought to change the world and instill in it more life, a youth that believed in “socialism with a human face”. The prince played by Caramitru embodied a generational desire to intervene in a history that the students then were not prepared to obey. My eyes were full of tears when, at the end of the show, after a frantic duel rigged by the usurper king, my double expired on the stage. Part of my hope, the hope that animated my family of friends, ceased to live, and the death of the prince whom I loved so much bore out its defeat.

Caramitru would play Hamlet again at a moment when Romania was suffocating under Ceausescu's heavy hand. The older prince had turned into a philosopher who hesitated between the need to fight and a melancholy disposition. He was not a romantic prince, but a playful one, often a jester. A prince infused with the feeling of defeat who, in spite of himself, wanted to struggle on. He was not alone, because he was talking to a piano played by a great Romanian musician. Between words and musical notes, Caramitru's Hamlet, one of adult age and of a starless, hopeless night, embodied deep inquietude. It was the Hamlet of another era, of the iron age! The Romanian audience recognized itself in the blend of skepticism and combative stubbornness to the extent that it regarded the Prince as an alter ego. After Ceausescu's fall, it was a delight for me to invite the show to the Odéon Theater in Paris, where it became a triumph. It was a cry of anguish arriving in Paris as the Iron Curtain was falling down.

Caramitru played many roles of which some remained inseparable from his career, such as the unforgettable Leonce, Büchner's famous character from Liviu Ciulei's show. I still see him coming to the forestage and launching a word, “tomorrow”, which has since echoed in me forever as a whisper of doubt, uncertainty, expectation. “Tomorrow” – so many times have I thought of his Leonce when I uttered it in conversations with friends. What is “tomorrow” made of? An actor has made this question definitive for me, and it has stayed on, like an intimate alert.

Caramitru played Shakespearean jesters (I did not see that). He played in Gorki and Shakespeare's plays. But, not long ago, I watched a performance of Rolf Hochhuth's

The Deputy, directed by a mutual friend, Radu Penciulescu. It was impossible to wipe off the image before my eyes, what appeared to me as the acme of morality, an absolute expression of ethics in the era of Nazi barbarity. We have all gotten old, while he is still rising: a future victim as a character, but also as an ever-younger actor.

It is said that theater does not leave any traces. This is perhaps true for an ordinary, trite sort of theater, because great experiences impregnate the memory of a happy spectator, as I have sometimes been. And how can I deny that, when the voice and the presence of Caramitru have remained in my memory? Actors die only when the witnesses die, then they become “legends” and “live underground”, to cite a famous line from *Electra*.

From the roles he played in films, Caramitru’s *Luchian* is the most haunting: a cursed Romanian painter, a genius artist eaten by tuberculosis, who left masterpieces that bear the traces of his passage through France. But most of all Caramitru revealed himself as a master of poetry: on stage, in memorable performances, he recited from Shakespeare and other great poets, especially Romanians. He recites the poems taking syntactic freedoms, he breaks sentences and lets the words be heard in different ways, he veers into vertiginous changes of voice, he makes the poets’ language irrupt in unexpected splendor.

Ion Caramitru asserted himself as an actor engaged in history, in particular during the events that led to Ceausescu’s flight. During those blazing historic moments, he enlivened the crowd, made decisions, and acted as a leader capable of decisive gestures. Since then, through the functions and tasks he has assumed, such as Minister of Culture and UNITER President, he has associated theater with the civic dimension. That is why he is “more than an actor”, he is an artist and a public figure.

After years of struggle, he has rebuilt the National Theater, thus giving the Romanian capital an exceptional venue that successfully hosted the NETA Festival last year.

The European actor we honor today has stepped beyond the theater stage to get involved on the stage of the world, like Prospero from *The Tempest*, his latest role. As a consummate Shakespearean actor, he has integrated the lesson of the great Elizabethan, who combined theater play and social play, stage performance and political vocation. It is in this sense that Ion Caramitru has built his life and art, for he has always been attentive to human beings, both fictional and real, to dreams, and to action.

* *Georges Banu was born in June 1943 in Buzău, Romania and is a well-renowned theatre personality and critic. He studied at the Academy of Drama and Film in Bucharest, and permanently moved to Paris in 1973. Professor I.E.T. (Institut d'Etudes théâtrales) at the University of Paris III, Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris and at the Theatre Studies Faculty of the University of Louvain la Neuve in Belgium, Banu founded the Experimental Theatre Academy in Paris in 1990, together with Michelle Kokosowski, which he ran until 2001, when the Academy's activities ended. He has made an impact in multiple functions: General Secretary (1985-1992), President (1994-2000), then Honorary President of the International Association of Theatre Critics; he has also received various titles, such as UNITER Member, Doctor Honoris Causa of the IL Caragiale National University of Theatre and Film, Bucharest in 2006, and Doctor Honoris Causa at*

several other European Universities. Georges Banu was awarded various prizes, amongst which he received the award for Best Theatre Book in France three times; he was also awarded the Honorary Award IATC – Romanian section in the Gala UNITER 2012, the Shakespeare Festival Special Prize in 2012 offered by Rotary Craiova and Rotary Probitas Craiova, and was made honorary member of the Romanian Academy in 2013. He is co-director of the Brussels Alternatives Théâtrales magazine and director of the collection "Le temps du Théâtre" published by Actes Sud in France. He is the author of numerous publications devoted to contemporary theatre and the relationship between theatre and painting.