

## George Zaharescu, portrait of a master of the Romanian school lyrical theatre directing

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**Abstract:** *George Zaharescu (1928-2007), stage director, opera and operetta director, lyrical theatre creator, co-founded the Iaşi Opera House in 1956, along with Dimitrie Tăbăcaru. He worked as a lecturer at the University of Arts in Iaşi, teaching „Opera”. In 1975 he took over the Bucharest Operetta management for more than 15 years and managed to highlight the most productive theatrical team of the Operetta genre in Romania at that time, through 50 titles presented and over 8000 representations. After retiring from the Operetta’s leadership in 1990, he was dedicated to creating new lyrical artists’ classes at the National Music University in Bucharest until 2004 when he yielded the opera class to his disciple, director Daniel Prallea - Blaga.*

*Key-words: stage director, opera, operetta, lyrical theatre, directorial innovation, musical performance creator.*

### 1. Introduction

George Zaharescu, the director, the manager and the professor is one of the most important personalities that marked the lyrical performance in Romania in the second half of the 20th century. His contribution is impressive and should be evoked in the most representative data.

Since the beginning of his career, one of the greatest merits is to have been the co-founder of Iaşi Opera House. He started directing there, designing and initiating specific activities to the new lyrical theater from Iaşi.

In 1956, “the party and state leadership” decided to set up the Romanian Opera House in Iaşi, which was to function in the same building as the National Theater in Iaşi.

The director George Zaharescu was a newly graduate of the Bucharest Conservatory. Together with his fellow director Dimitrie Tăbăcaru (both disciples of

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Panait Victor Cottescu) and director Ioan Goia, the director George Zaharescu has been involved in setting up the new institution.

It all started between four bare walls, on a table and borrowed chairs. [...] non-stop working hours [...] There were tens of lists: nails, keys, canvas, timber, tools, musical instruments, hundreds of candidates from all over the country were heard, (with the special support of the musicologists George Pascu and Mihai Cozmei), we ate standing, slept on folding beds, covered with coats and so many more things that we used to do between rehearsals. It was like a front before a battle. And we were all young and eager to succeed in proving, among other things, to even the most skeptical people that the magnificent dome of the Iași National “will not collapse due to the extensive sounds of the orchestra”, as some benevolent have said. (p. 242)

In his book, *The Terrible Children of the Operetta and Their Great Love*, Maestro Zaharescu tells us from his personal experience, giving us a fundamental lesson, through the power of personal example, about the direction of the musical theater. On the stage of the Romanian Opera in Iași he has both opera performances and operetta with “ease and fantasy”. (Mihai Cosma, 2001: 182).

In Iași, he also activated as “Opera” lecturer .

In the 1975-1976 seasons, he took over the management of the Bucharest Operetta. In our opinion, after Ion Dacian, he was the best director. His contribution was not just administrative, but really creative.

He conceived and designed a repertoire that underpinned the development and artistic evolution of the most important lyrical artists of the operetta over 15 years. Over time, the director-manager formed a crew (artistic-technical-administrative) and adopted the ideal of updating the operetta show.

Through his directorial and managerial work, George Zaharescu categorically influenced the evolution of the opera genre in Romania, outlining the most important operetta crew in our country.

On the occasion of the direction’s takeover from the musicologist Petre Codreanu, George Zaharescu highlighted the achievements of the Bucharest Operetta so far, “which included 50 titles presented and more than eight thousand performances<sup>2</sup> on the basis of which he began his directorial mandate and his stage director activity (as he forced it to be written on the poster) and continued until after the 1989 movement.

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<sup>2</sup> Vartolomei, Luminița. *Teatrul din umbra muzicii*. Ed. Muzicală, p.38.

Due to the political pressures of the new trade union people, George Zaharescu resigned, remaining still a director. "As a manager you cannot thank everyone" the maestro explained the causes of his resignation.

Returning to the era of taking over the direction of the Bucharest Operetta, the director George Zaharescu established professional ethics and eradicated the gossip and the "snitching" (not in the secret security sense but only in the typical theatrical sense).

At the heart of his vision was the thought of "ringing the curtain up" (George Zaharescu).

## 2. Discussion

We will try to analyse the general characteristics of his directorial vision and the options he has pursued throughout his career. In the soloists' game he looked for the **natural**, along with the **plastic of the game**, in the overall and the masses scenes.

At the time, George Zaharescu tried to get out of the gender's conventionality through new proposals. The pomp merged with the picturesque. The comic, with the modern ballet (very modern at that time).

From the time of our college years, we remember his advice to imagine the scene as a plastic art painting and creating compositional balance, unity and idea, as the painter on his canvas. I had the chance to watch him at work in his last show (unfortunately, the last great Operetta show so far), *Hello Dolly*.

In his work with the soloists, the director George Zaharescu aimed thoroughly with the characters' description, demanding **accuracy** of the actor's performance and evolutions of the parts **rigorously** built.

In the libretto he kept the original intrigues, but consistently appealed to text modernization both for the purpose of underlining comic data and for an updated literary language. Until him, the spoken texts but also the sang ones had pre-war resonances.

In approaching the libretto, the director George Zaharescu sought to speculate **humor** by resorting to adaptations. The enrichment of the librettos, as requested by the director, led to novelty in all means of expression, starting with directorial interpretation. From him we have learned that work on the libretto is not detached from the rest of the regional effort. Through updating the text, George Zaharescu sought to emphasize the universality of some conflicts or situations.

Anachronistic data from librettos (like the phone or horns in *Lysistrata*) were speculated in their comical potential. The director George Zaharescu was concerned with deciphering the meanings of the musical score, revealed by the science of the scenic composition. He did not choose neither the traditional nor the radically innovative ways. Regarding his "path", George Zaharescu analysed "nature and the specificity of the works", and they imposed its "paths of achievement".

George Zaharescu used all the means of contemporary theater to treat opera genre, watching scenic scenes complementary to musical data.

He avoided using simple equivalents to view the score, looked for aesthetic and ideological convergences with the musical score. Here is what George Zaharescu said in the 1970s and 1980s:

... in our epoch there cannot be a classical work montage (opera or operetta) in forms of theatrical expression characteristic of the pre-war years in the name of tradition, but not "to turn down" such a work in the name of "innovation" either, motivating that we live in the "imponderability" century. (*The Terrible Kids ...* p. 244).

The lesson about the relationship between tradition and innovation that we received from George Zaharescu had as a starting point the changes in the public's consciousness. These changes influence taste, aesthetic perception and differ from generation to generation. According to his vision, the problem of the creator of the show, when it comes to classical works, is the avoidance of copying, the avoidance of faithful reconstruction, the humble and obedient respect, but also the restraint to modernize only from the ambition of "innovation".

George Zaharescu did not appeal to exterior effects that belonged to the western ones, such as "tights, target boots, motorcycles, chains, machine guns, prostitutes, bars".

In George Zaharescu's conception, the director's ability was to seek ways "to connect to human issues and to adapt the means of expression to the emotion of the audience you are addressing".

George Zaharescu supported "preserving the spirit of the directed work". Innovation, as a directorial process, that "what, how much and how", was considered by him to be a result of the culture of the director, the creator of the show. In order for the musical director to be "up to date", Maestro George Zaharescu advised us, he must "pay special attention to working with the actor, avoiding the main shortcomings of the lyrical theater: the dependence on the technical data (vocal, n.n.), the part recital and the absence of the partner." (p. 246).

The director George Zaharescu was characterized by the practical and organizational spirit. At the beginning of the work with the interpreters, he used to concisely "theoretize" the dramatic parts clarification held by the characters, the "causality" of their actions, then they were looking for actual means of scenic realization. He characterized actors (lyric artists) as being more tied to "floor" exercise (in theater slang - the stage floor), and less tied to "conferences".

The work style of director George Zaharescu focused on practical work, which, in his opinion, achieved time economy as well. The result is that the actors re-entrap the character-specific states and not the various states of self in general. In his didactic-pedagogical work he was concerned with the expressive expression of the technique accumulations of singing, speech, and scenic movement".

In order to give the continuity of the action and to bind closed conventional numbers, director George Zaharescu has (often) turned to stop-frames, scenic "paintings" with living characters. The stop-frames were intense, wide-ranging visual compositions in order to support directorial ideas and not to self be for the sake of bodily plasticity.

This was also meant to mask down the actor's play, when the director thought some performers could not convince him enough. It was a typical way of directorial "help" that we practiced in our turn.

Another important and permanently coordinate in the staging of maestro George Zaharescu was the discovery of artistic resources. Both the two vocals as well as the acting ones are linked by the scenic play typical to the lyrical genre and mutual valorisation. The essential attributes of his directorial vision were the **unity in conception, the continuity in action, the natural and the originality in the lyric actor's play.**

In relation to the stage painting, director George Zaharescu has requested and imposed the verification of the possibilities of movement, of unhindered access, of wide movement of the crew considering, beside the soloist ensemble, the wide, typical compositions in any other genre (choir, ballet and, less in Maestro George Zaharescu, the walk-on), but also the many changes in paintings, the same characteristic of the genre (e.g. *My fair Lady* contains 17 paintings).

He asked the scenic artist for plastic scrubbed compositions by the anecdotal which still dominated the genre's plastics even in the second half of the 20th century, and demanded that the costumes emphasize the representative data for character description with impact on contemporary audience.

In terms of lighting, he avoided the artificial, technicist spectacularity, emphasizing the functionality of light and revealing the characters' lives.

Generally, the series of light phases was based on alternating high-low light intensities, with the subtle marking of some "spot" points of interest but not

ostentatious. "The movement" of the light was discreet, restrained, and subtle. Another cardinal direction of his directorial vision was to almost always distribute characters of the same age of the ones to be interpreted.

The creation through this type of distribution, of cinematographic inspiration, "sets the tone" of the originality, natural and freshness, so necessary to counteract the lyrical, operetistic contingency of the genre. In case the characters were not "at hand", the director George Zaharescu asked the lyric artists to compensate by **artistic effect**, with a neat scenic play, figures maintained through diet and sports. He asked some singers to lose weight if they want to enter or maintain in young parts. He knew how to "exploit" artistic-comic and the interventions of more voluminous artists.

Another directorial demand for lyric artists was that they don't limit themselves to certain jobs, but to broaden their acting talents on a wide range of human experiences. Thus, it once again required the overcoming of gender conventions with the intention of "bringing fresh air" to the operetta theater.

He taught the singers to aspire, even to become largely **total performers**. He also asked the dancers to sing, to eliminate the discrepancy between the "muteness" of the ballet dancers, who still act together with the singers. He asked the performers of the operetta not to parody the genre, but to reveal its most dramatic accents and to maintain the balance between comic and lyrical elements. He asked and determined the band to come to the complex ability to impress the audience, in the same show, from laughter to tears and back to laughter. Maestro Zaharescu's directorial style was characterized by unity and individuality.

He emphasized the individuality of each title, so the enactments did not resemble each other, although they were designed by the same director. Another feature of the style was the discursive continuity, by this understanding the tendency to give up the singer, the actor, the chorus, the dancer "majors" and educate them in a total artist's practice. This also strengthens the homogeneity of the lyrical crew.

The director George Zaharescu constantly appealed to the choreographers' craftsmanship, working with the soloists and the choir, asking them to join this kind of directorial vision. He did not accept that the intervention or choreographic contribution was reduced only to the ballet compartment. Two of the closest choreographers he involved in the general stage movement were Mihaela Atanasiu (also called "Pupi") and Victor Vlase. In the depiction of the walk-on compartment, the maestro George Zaharescu narrowly reduced or even eliminated both the number of the walk-ons (statists) and the number and magnitude of purely "walked-on" interventions, replacing them with musically qualified members of the choir and ballet. Thus, without letting go of the genre's greatness, it left room for

the soloist's evolution, while creating plausibility through the natural, normal and especially musical presence of the corists in action, instead of a more disordered or less involved walk-on in musical theater. In his vision on the supporting parts, he has imposed its demand that the artists involved in smaller parts should be professional, and treat with the utmost seriousness even the flashiest appearances. Thus the foreground parts were supported and emphasized. In dealing with comic parts, the director George Zaharescu has used *commedia dell'arte* means, altering the vulgar or too "thickened" accents.

To fill in the portrait of director George Zaharescu, it is worth mentioning the 10-year teaching activity at UNMB. Besides the successive promotions of lyrical artists educated in the opera subject, the maestro had disciples in the musical theater directing subject: Ioana Stoianov, assistant director at Tel-Aviv Opera; conf. univ. PhD. Claudia Pop and lect.univ.PhD. Alexandru Petrescu, both directors at the Faculty of Music in Braşov; Isabella Tănase, director at the Lyric Theater in Craiova; Doru Marin, director at the Romanian Athenaeum.

We quote from page 65 of the PhD. thesis dedicated to the Iaşi Opera, signed by Vasilica Stoiciu Frunză, a conversation with the choir master Ion Pavalache, Iaşi, June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2006: "... Zaharescu, being very talented at drawing, drew and sometimes sketched the entire decorations, and the stage painters enriched them ... The decorations had a more modern hue...". [...]

A director was Tăbăcaru, a perfect artist, a pity that he did not become an actor, when he acted, he took the public's breath away. He had the gift of ridding himself of everything that was around him and of entering into the skin, in the body and soul of the character, feminine or masculine. The stagings took a very long time, for 3-5 months, and the performance of the soloists became convincing... [...] Zaharescu was the personified order. Besides drawing very well and always sketching all the graphic, often giving stage designers the things they already thought of, from a spaciousness point of view, he was extremely convincing with prepared arguments. [...] In the conservatory, Tăbăcaru's great talent was noted, and Jean Rânzescu hired him as his assistant at the Bucharest Opera. He was tempted by the director job at a newly-created Opera. And Zaharescu was also an excellent director. Before them, there was Ionescu Arbore and he was already in Cluj. Both of them were recommended, they became good friends and got up together several works - they made a very good team. Tăbăcaru passed away too early, he still had a lot to prove, and Zaharescu now leads the directing class in Bucharest. They both had the opportunity to travel to Moscow or to Leningrad, London or Metropolitan, and that brought many professional valences that complemented their personality.

### 3. Conclusions

The power of example inherited from director George Zaharescu remains a fundamental lesson about directing in the musical theater. George Zaharescu pursued throughout his directorial creation the complementarity of the scenic scenes with the musical score. He dealt with human issues by adapting the means of theatrical expression to the audience of his times. He considered innovation as a directorial process, a result of the lyrical performance creator's professional culture.

His characters were thoroughly characterized; the actors guided by his rule had the freedom creating, without giving up the exactness of execution, or the evolutionary rigor of the distributed roles.

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