

## **I remember my Hamlet.**

Ion Caramitru

A boy was born in 1942. At the end of the Second World War he was three years old, an age when everything seems possible. So, let us imagine first that as the war neared its end, the Americans and British had not yielded to Stalin that half of Europe, which was to become the Communist block. That the napkin on which Churchill wrote to Stalin about Romania, 90% to you – 10% to us, had never existed. That there never had been a Berlin Wall – an Iron Curtain. What a healthy world we might have had – more Utopia come true – women giving birth without pain.

But we cannot live in an imaginary world. The truth is rather different.

The end of the war Yalta, Romania is surrendered to the Soviet Union. December 1947, young King Michael the First of Romania is forced to abdicate and leave the country. The communist government, imposed by Moscow and supported by Soviet tanks, bans the political parties, enthrone the terror of one-party rule and exterminates the pick of Romania's intelligentsia and youth. Communist ideology – scientific socialism and dialectical materialism – sets culture on the road to "social realism". The Orthodox Church becomes an instrument of state power and many other religions are banned, their priests made political prisoners. There is almost no family without a member in jail. The prime question for everyone is: "What was your father? What was your mother?" Before justice, it is defendants who must prove their innocence, not the prosecutors who must prove them guilty. Stalin, the friendly neighbour in the East, and the Romanian Socialist Republic become the dread of 20 million people.

All this in a beautiful and rich country open to the sea, with a centuries old tradition of princes and rulers who made great sacrifices to defend Christianity and support the cultural Renaissance of the West.

This was the background of a young boy entering school, scared of his own presence in a world that looked at his parents with suspicion. But at that time people still cherished the hope that the civilised world outside wouldn't let this happen to them, and confidently awaited their liberation. Some, like outlaws during the centuries of Turkish rule of Romania retreated to the mountains and died to the very last man waiting for radio signals from the sky to announce their salvation. Waiting for the Americans, or the British, or the French, or the Italians, or the Dutch, the Belgians, the Swedish, the Australian, the New Zealanders.....or why not, E. T.?

Meanwhile, in the countryside, collectivisation was under way, the peasants were robbed of their land and livestock, forced to work in collective farms and attend political lectures telling them why they must endure the dictatorship of the proletariat. To add the last straw, thirty years later they were also driven out of their homes, villages being destroyed as part of a madman's perception of a triumphal march towards an ideal communist society.

In the shape of this ideology arose the ultimate symbol of power, the 'Pharaoh's pyramid', a monument to everlasting communist rule – 'The People's House' – in Bucharest, a huge abode for two dwarfs who horrified the world. The champions of the so-called free world were wondering – How was this possible? How is this possible? If the Romanian people do nothing, if they do not rebel, they must like it this way – they have only themselves to blame. This must be a country of cowards, or else the people are insensitive to the terror around them. Looking back on it now, why does it remind me of Gogol, of Dostoevski, of Swift? Why, at the time of lies and compromise, did I feel the need to withdraw into the theatre? Was it because everything seems possible there? Why did Shakespeare write his Hamlet and place it in a country that was not England? This genius of Mankind, was there a terror at home that he was fleeing from?

I recall that several years ago, in an interview, I answered the question "What does the theatre mean to you" with "A chance to survive". I think I was right and for many years I went to my theatre, convinced that I had something important to say. Nowadays I realise that theatre used to be for me and for many like me a holy place, a place to worship, a church where actors and audiences poured in, both trying to hold on to their own identity. It was no longer the classical relationship between the audience and the stage.

During these years our theatre expressed itself most powerfully, it was most effective, not by long speeches, but in its silences. Whoever is acquainted with poetry and loves it well, knows that inference not utterance is the most potent. The beauty of verse is in its pauses. In these spaces actors and audiences co-habited for many years, yearning for better times.

When the time passed for silent communication of shared dissent and action was needed, the people of the theatre were ready to take their place in the fore front of the revolution against communism in Europe.

In Romania the revolution was bloody. Thousands were shot dead or crushed by armoured cars and tanks. Most of these people died after the time the army joined the people in the revolution and after the execution of Ceaușescu. Even today the question of who killed them remains unanswered.

Many words have been uttered about terrorism but who were these terrorists? And why have they not been brought to justice? Only their actions during the revolution have been investigated. But Communism, the cause which legitimised their actions, has never been tried.

This political system, which for 45 years physically and psychologically destroyed an entire nation, remains untouched. Even worse, the Romanian Communist Party is back in the political arena, adopting the more credible name of the Socialist Party of Labour to win votes at future elections. Many stooges of the ancient regime have resurfaced, from the official court poets to the ruthless and corrupt policemen.

For the people of the community of the theatre, for the people of Romania, perhaps the revolution is not yet over.

Let me pause to tell you a little more about myself – you know how actors love to talk about themselves. I have been for 25 years an actor with the most prestigious Romanian company, the Bulandra Theatre in Bucharest. Sometimes I direct plays and for several years I taught at the Theatre Academy. One of my educational principles was and remains that the actor is solely responsible for his own artistic destiny. He can learn about himself only from a deep involvement in real life. And the latest piece of 'real life' we shared was the revolution, which unleashed in each of us unexpected energies and gave new meaning to our lives.

I played an important role in the days of the revolution and the first free elections in my country held on the 20<sup>th</sup> May 1990. For almost five months I was in charge of Romania's cultural affairs and I was one of the five Vice Presidents of the Provisional Parliament. But, because I had not been a member of the Communist Party, the other ten members of the Council of the National Salvation Front, established after the revolution, did not look very kindly on me.

When the National Salvation Front decided to run in the elections as a party, I was offered the Presidency of the new political body. This was for me the moment of truth. We all had promised that the Front would not become a party – from its romantic designation as the National Salvation Front. Four days before the elections of the 20<sup>th</sup> of May, having earlier refused the Presidency of the Front, I also resigned my office of Vice-President of Romania in charge of cultural affairs. And, like the prodigal son returning home, I came back to the theatre.

I took on the leadership of the Bulandra Company and I was elected President of UNITER, the guild for all people working in Romanian Theatre. But still my attention never strayed from the faltering attempts of my country to approach a true democracy.

It looks as if the West gained a Pyrrhic victory, since it now finds itself obliged to maintain the vanquished.

And the vanquished are first of all hungry. Hunger alters the character and cold damages the body. I have an apocalyptic vision of how terrible the revenge of a reactivated communism could be, leaving not even the illusion of democracy. What remains to be done?

All across Europe people must retrieve their identity, return to a normality of existence within the natural boundaries of their won countries. I have the impression that, at least for the time being, the countries of the former Soviet Union, ridden of the nightmare of communism, are trying to come back into a Europe which, pardon my partiality, was mainly concerned with the reunification of Germany. This being achieved, the West would now seem to be directing its efforts towards helping the Soviet bear awaken from its winter hibernation. And what about us?

I remember my Hamlet. What am I going to play now? Because my Hamlet before the Revolution was very strong against the system. The system was changed, Hamlet was the same, staged in the same way. How to do it? – I have to do something. I have the text. I entered the stage and I did nothing except deliver the text. The revolution changed our lives and even the interpretation of the character Hamlet. Before I used to play Hamlet, after, Hamlet started to play me.

We Romanians feel that we have the right to be accepted once again as true Europeans. To become Europeans again we survived an ordeal, which lasted almost half a century. But out from this chorus of sufferings a new breath was born, an unsuspected driving force which came from several generations of Kamikaze people obsessed with passing on their most precious treasure – their spirit and their love of culture.