

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE ON THE STAGE OF THE IAȘI NATIONAL THEATRE IN 2016

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Abstract:

Originally written by Henrik Ibsen in 1882, An Enemy of the People was adapted in 1950 by the American playwright Arthur Miller, and this adaptation was the one taken into consideration by the director Claudiu Goga when staging the play at the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași in 2016. In this paper, we aim to analyze the reception of the play in Iași by also pointing out the differences between Henrik Ibsen’s original, Arthur Miller’s adaptation and Claudiu Goga’s staging and showing that any adaptation of a text leads in fact to a new piece of work. Goga’s staging enjoyed favorable reviews, probably also due to the possible identification of the audience with the social-political realities in Romania.

Rezumat:

Scrisă inițial de Henrik Ibsen în 1882, piesa Un dușman al poporului a fost adaptată în 1950 de dramaturgul american Arthur Miller, iar această adaptare a fost cea luată în considerare de regizorul Claudiu Goga, când a pus în scenă piesa la Teatrul Național „Vasile Alecsandri” din Iași, în 2016. În această lucrare, ne propunem să analizăm receptarea piesei în Iași, subliniind, de asemenea, diferențele dintre versiunea originală a lui Henrik Ibsen, adaptarea lui Arthur Miller și punerea în scenă a lui Claudiu Goga și arătând că orice adaptare a unui text duce de fapt la o nouă operă. Punerea în scenă a lui Goga s-a bucurat de recenzii favorabile, probabil și datorită posibilei identificări a publicului cu realitățile social-politice din România.

Keywords: Henrik Ibsen, *An Enemy of the People*, reception, adaptation, Arthur Miller, “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași

Introduction

Henrik Ibsen’s plays still seem quite popular in Romania nowadays. If we were to refer, for instance, to recent stagings in Iași, the first Romanian city which had a national theatre, we could mention a staging of *The Lady from the Sea* (2014) at the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre, two productions made by the Odeon Theatre (*Me. A Doll’s House*) and the Comedy Theatre (*Ibsen Incorporated*) from Bucharest within the International Theatre Festival for Young Audience in Iași in 2015 and last but not least, *An Enemy of the People* staged in 2016, even if the version considered by the director Claudiu Goga was Arthur Miller’s 1950 adaptation.

In the preface to his adaptation, the American playwright Arthur Miller confessed, “I decided to work on *An Enemy of the People* because I had a private wish to demonstrate that Ibsen is really pertinent today, that he is not ‘old-fashioned’ [...] And I wished also to buttress the idea that the dramatic writer has, and must again demonstrate, the right to entertain with his brains as well as his heart. It is necessary that the public understand again that the stage is the place for ideas, for philosophies, for the most intense discussion of man’s fate. One of the masters of such a discussion is Henrik Ibsen, and I have presumed to point this out once again.”¹

Directing from the ‘Outside’

The director of the 2016 performance in Iași was Claudiu Goga, currently a director at the “Sică Alexandrescu” Theater in Brașov, in the center of Romania. Claudiu Goga is a director known for his references to social problems, an artist who tries to take an attitude through his art against the daily injustices and against the overthrow of the value system that he notices in the surrounding society. *An Enemy of the People* is a play about principles, dignity and duty or their lack, and about manipulation at different levels (authorities, the press, common citizens).

¹ Arthur Miller, “Adapting Ibsen’s Play,” in Arthur Miller, *Adaptation of An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, Editor Geoff Barton (Harlow: Longman, 1993), VII.

This play is Goga’s sixth production in Iași, after titles such as Eugène Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros* and Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*. In an interview given to the theater critic Doru Mareș, Goga said, “with every text I am interested in telling a story. A story that also has to be the author’s, not one parallel to the text. I mean, the story I’m creating is the one in the text and the one in the depth of the text. I like to create the performances starting from the text, to which I add new different layers, as many as possible. Thus, every spectator - depending on his or her culture (both general and theatrical), on his or her intelligence - will be able to understand them or not, but I try that at least one level, that of the story, should be accessible to anyone”² [our translation].

Regarding the stagings in Iași, Goga was of the opinion that “the role of a director coming from the outside is to highlight the good aspects [...] I would not be here if I did not feel comfortable... I think that the theater in Iași, beyond its troupe, also means the public in Iași, or, from this point of view, I feel like it is quite a conservative audience. It sounds harsh, but that is what I feel [...] [But] no matter how conservative a public may be, you may bring down the house if the performance is good, if the actors and the director believe in it”³ [our translation].

The conservative audience believes, according to the director, in certain values, “which continue to be in the pipeline [...] A true update demands a much subtler and a more difficult thing to do: to emphasize the themes and meanings of the text in such a way that they appear verisimilar to the contemporary human being and touch his or her soul and mind. No matter if they concern universal themes such as death, love, or social and economic issues. You have to help the public to make analogies very easily, to find that things that happened to people centuries before can happen to him or her as well. If you accomplish that, the costumes and the setting matter less”⁴ [our translation]. And perhaps this is one reason why the characters’ costumes in the present staging are gray, and the setting is quite

² Doru Mareș, „Cred că un regizor trebuie să fie un om puternic,” in *Teatrul azi* 1-2 (2010), <http://www.claudiugoga.ro/teatrul-azi-cred-ca-un-regizor-trebuie-sa-fie-un-om-puternic.html>.

³ Călin Ciobotari, „Un timp ideal pentru artă înseamnă moartea artei,” in *ArtAct Magazine* 110 (2011), <http://www.claudiugoga.ro/artact-magazine-un-timp-ideal-pentru-arta-inseamna-moartea-artei.html>.

⁴ Ibid.

simple and also gray in color. Moreover, this color renders a feeling of coldness. “There is a strange contrast between the characters’ inner tensions and the glacial appearance of the geometric setting, between the incandescence of certain beliefs and the straight lines that dominate the scene [...] the ‘predominant’ gray prevails, so intensely and overwhelmingly that the blue and red colors of a ball seem purely chromatic explosions”⁵ [our translation].

Beside the simple furniture, half transparent walls are used so that it should be easier to notice what happens behind them (e.g. Petra or Mrs. Stockmann eavesdropping at times or characters entering the scene). The video projections help moreover the audience to know the precise moment when the action takes place as in a documentary (e.g. “the same day, after 70 minutes”, or “the next day, at 9:06 am”). Suggestive objects are also being projected (e.g. a typing machine, a broken window). Goga considers that “Every text shows and imposes its own approach boundaries. Everything depends on the director’s culture, intention and real interest. The chosen form depends on the troupe, on himself or herself, on the translation [...] The game is lost from the very beginning if it is more important to put yourself, the director, in the center and not the author [...] I am interested in the story being richer in meaning than it would be at a first reading of the text by a potential spectator. The great quality of a director is to dig into the text and to reveal as many meanings as possible”⁶ [our translation].

Goga versus Miller versus Ibsen

The 2016 staging of *An Enemy of the People* in Iași had two parts with a break after Arthur Miller’s Act 2 scene 1. As compared to Ibsen, who divided his play into five acts with no scenes, Miller’s adaptation consists of three acts out of which the first two include two scenes each. While with Miller, the action takes place in a Norwegian town, Ibsen is more specific with the location, namely a coastal town in southern Norway. “I believed

⁵ Călin Ciobotari, „Cronica lui Călin: un spectacol de care aveam nevoie...,” April 23, 2016, <http://www.jurnalvirtual.ro/2016/04/23/cronica-lui-calin-un-spectacol-de-care-aveam-nevoie%E2%80%A6/>.

⁶ Monica Andronescu, „Nu cred în teatrul care nu emoționează,” in *Yorick - Revistă săptămânală de teatru*, 176 (2012), <http://www.claudiuogoga.ro/nu-cred-in-teatrul-care-nu-emoționeaza.html>.

this play could be alive for us because its central theme is, in my opinion, the central theme of our social life today. Simply, it is the question of whether the democratic guarantees protecting political minorities ought to be set aside in time of crisis. More personally, it is the question of whether one's vision of the truth ought to be a source of guilt at a time when the mass of men condemn it as a dangerous and devilish lie."⁷ Later in the preface, Miller explains that "I have taken as justification for removing those examples which no longer prove the theme – examples I believe Ibsen would have removed were he alive today"⁸. Instead, Miller chooses some words and expressions which were just starting to be used in Norway in the second half of the 19th century or were even not used at all at that time: "Peter: you blindly, spitefully, stubbornly go ahead trying to cut off our most important industry?"⁹, "The corporation built Kirsten Springs out of its own money. If the people want them changed, the people naturally must *pay the bill*"¹⁰, "our *Health Institute*"¹¹ etc.

From the very beginning, the audience in Iași is being reminded different contexts in which the title expression "an enemy of the people" was previously used, from Roman times, to the French revolution in 1793 and including the communist period or contemporary references to Julian Assange, the WikiLeaks founder. This is done through video projections, and the audience may read the facts while the actors enter the stage. After these projections, a window descends so as to separate the audience from the actors. The German director Thomas Ostermeier considers that in Ibsen's plays, "it is as if there were two dramas happening: the drama which took place 5, 10, 15 years before the play starts and the drama in the second half of the play. And to create this passage, this sequence at the beginning of the play until the drama can really happen, to make this interesting – this is the true challenge for everybody directing Ibsen's plays."¹² And Goga successfully succeeds in finding a solution to this challenge.

⁷ Miller, "Adapting Ibsen's Play", VII.

⁸ Ibid., IX.

⁹ Arthur Miller, *Adaptation of An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, editor Geoff Barton (Harlow: Longman, 1993), 39.

¹⁰ Ibid., 52.

¹¹ Ibid., 65.

¹² Thomas Ostermeier, "Reading and Staging Ibsen," in *Ibsen Studies*, 10:2 (2010): 73-74.

Ibsen's world is updated on stage to the present times through the actors' behavior, habits, gender relations, clothing or language (the use of some contemporary Romanian expressions). Thus, Doctor Stockmann's boys play with a basketball, the characters drink beer from beer cans or coffee from cardboard glasses, they eat pizza, hug one another, use recording cameras or a speaking-tube to make themselves heard, while Petra seems to ride a motorcycle given the helmet she wears. The actress "Andreea Boboc (Petra) manages to give consistency to a character that initially seemed to be an inconsistent projection of the father, a rather superficial young woman than a being in herself. But the gradual experience accumulations are rendered with nuances, without forcing Petra to grow up in a direction that would have canceled her authenticity but individualizing her"¹³ [our translation]. Miller refers to Petra as "Ibsen's clear-eyed hope for the future - and probably ours. She is forthright, determined, and knows the meaning of work, which to her is the creation of good on the earth."¹⁴

The gray color of the clothes and furniture could also refer to the somber surrounding reality or to the fact that it is easier to control a society when it is standardized. This could be a reminiscence of the communist period Romania underwent from 1947 to 1989. Moreover, the audience cannot but shudder when Doctor Stockmann tells his brother on the stage, "People are fed up with corruption, Peter! Corruption kills!" This statement was largely used in Romania in the past years, initially in the context of a nightclub fire in Bucharest in October 2015, which led to the death of 64 people attending a concert in a location which did not have fire authorization. The same words were used when discovering in 2016 that disinfectants supplied to hospitals by the medical company Hexi Pharma were diluted, which led to hospitalized people getting infected with bacteria. The reference to bacteria is also present in Miller's adaptation, when Mrs. Stockmann says for instance, "you don't understand, Father. Nobody can actually see bacteria, but that doesn't mean they're not there"¹⁵. Besides,

¹³ Nicoleta Munteanu, „Când toți suntem oameni cumsecade sau *Un dușman al poporului*, în regia lui Claudiu Goga (TNI),” in *Cronici de teatru*, April 22, 2016, <https://alecart.ro/cand-toti-suntem-oameni-cumsecade-sau-un-dusman-al-poporului-in-regia-lui-claudiu-goga-tni/>.

¹⁴ Miller, *An Enemy*, 12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

Miller himself lets Doctor Stockmann use such words as ‘corruption’ or ‘to blackmail’: “The people are going to get the full stink of this *corruption*”¹⁶, “the children are poisoned, the people are poisoned! If the only way I can be a friend of the people is to take charge of that *corruption*, then I am an enemy!”¹⁷, “He actually tried to *blackmail* me”¹⁸ (to Hovstad, referring to Peter) or “You are looking for someone to *blackmail* into paying your printing bill”¹⁹ (to Hovstad and Aslaksen).

When Mrs. Stockmann says about the mayor, “He has no scruples!”, the audience cannot but think of the present political class in Romania, lacking scruples. The reference to politicians is also made by Miller: “Doctor Stockmann: When they started the damned thing I told them not to build it down there! But who am I, a mere scientist, to tell politicians where to build a health institute²⁰” or “Horster: the ship will sail. But I won’t be aboard [...] I’ll get another ship. It’s just that the owner, Mr. Vik, happens to belong to the same party as the Mayor, and I suppose when you belong to a party, and the party takes a certain position...”²¹

After the theatrical break, Act II, scene 2 from Miller’s adaptation is staged with the help of live projections to render the public meeting where Doctor Stockmann is not allowed to read his report and of projections of quotations from the play. In Goga’s staging Doctor Stockmann, the one who has the proof that the water of the baths (Kirsten springs in Miller’s adaptation) was infested and who demanded that they be repaired, is shot at the end after telling Mrs. Stockmann that they were all alone. Afterwards the baths are repaired in a period of two years despite the high costs. The ending is thus similar to the ending of the play *The Visit* by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, previously staged by Goga in Iași. It is therefore more than obvious that corruption does kill. The above-mentioned fire in Bucharest killed people because of corruption, people got infected and some of them died because of hospital bacteria caused again by corruption. On the other hand, Miller’s version ends with Doctor Stockmann’s words addressed to his

¹⁶ Ibid., 39.

¹⁷ Ibid., 96.

¹⁸ Ibid., 43.

¹⁹ Ibid., 93.

²⁰ Ibid., 18.

²¹ Ibid., 80.

family and Horster: “You are fighting for the truth, and that’s why you’re alone. And that makes you strong. We’re the strongest people in the world [...] and the strong must learn to be lonely!”²²

At the public meeting organized at Captain Horster’s house, the only person who seems to oppose the majority besides the captain, is the drunken man. The drunken man is a well-known figure to the Romanian audience from the play “A Lost Letter”, written by Ibsen’s contemporary, the Romanian playwright Ion Luca Caragiale. According to Miller, “Captain Horster is one of the longest silent roles in dramatic literature, but he is not to be thought of as characterless therefor. It is not a bad thing to have a courageous, quiet man for a friend, even if it has gone out of fashion.”²³

As far as the actors from Iași are concerned, Goga’s Doctor Stockmann, Constantin Pușcașu, is the embodiment of resistance despite his apparently fragile character. “It is not a principle he embodies, but feelings within a consciousness, for he knows what is at stake, he knows what he can lose, he discovers the consequences of his decision and assumes them. With every interaction with the others, he’s getting more and more lonely and burdened. In his desperate gestures, in his increasingly bent body, in his tired movements, Constantin Pușcașu renders verticality”²⁴ [our translation]. On the other hand, the Mayor Peter Stockmann, interpreted by the experimented actor Teodor Corban, is an unscrupulous person, a manipulator. “A very good interpretation, an extraordinary movement and voice mastery, a minimum of gestures, because Peter is above all the embodiment of a mechanism that has borrowed a human face”²⁵ [our translation]. For Teodor Corban, the professional year 2014-2015 had been an exceptional one, also given his nomination at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2015, for his role in the film *Aferim*. “The actor plays his role with genuineness; everything that Corban does, seems so simple and natural that you simply forget that you are at the theater”²⁶ [our translation].

²² Ibid., 98.

²³ Ibid., 12.

²⁴ Munteanu, „Când toți suntem...”.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Călin Ciobotari, “Cronica lui Călin...”.

Another key character, Morten Kiil, "the Badger" ("People call me 'badger' and that's an animal that roots out things"²⁷), interpreted by Adi Carauleanu, makes the audience laugh more than once due to his replies, gestures and his chuckling. However, the character remains an embodiment of slyness and contempt, with a grotesque note attached to it. With Miller he is present on stage from the very beginning of the play, eating with Billing, and then having a short conversation with his daughter, Catherine Stockmann. "He is the archetype of the little twinkle-eyed man who sneaks into so much of Ibsen's work. He will chuckle you right over the precipice. He is the dealer, the man with the rat's finely tuned brain. But he is sometimes likable because he is without morals and announces the fact by laughing."²⁸

Miller makes use of much longer stage directions than Ibsen in order to introduce the characters, for instance the American playwright writes about Peter Stockmann, "he is a bachelor, nearing sixty. He has always been one of those men who make it their life work to stand in the center of the ship to keep it from overturning. He probably envies the family life and warmth of this house, but when he comes he never wants to admit he came and often sits with his coat on"²⁹. What is mentioned in the original is that "PETER STOCKMANN comes in. He wears an overcoat and his official hat, and carries a stick."³⁰ Thus, Miller uses a very direct style, without leaving the audience ask questions as with Ibsen, who is a representative of the theater of ideas.

The premiere of the play *An Enemy of the People* took place on 21 April 2016, after previous successes of the director Claudiu Goga on the stage of the "Vasile Alecsandri Theatre" in Iași. Goga also authors the translation of Miller's version, adapted for the theatre. With a view to Ibsen's adaptation, Miller confessed, "I set out to transform his language into contemporary English. Working from a pidgin-English, word-for-word rendering of the Norwegian, done by Mr. Lars Nordenson, I was able to

²⁷ Miller, *An Enemy*, 86.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

³⁰ Henrik Ibsen, *En folkefiende*, translated into English by R. Farquharson Sharp. The Project Gutenberg EBook of *An Enemy of the People*, by Henrik Ibsen, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2446/2446-h/2446-h.htm>.

gather the meaning of each speech and scene without the obstruction of any kind of English construction [...] There were no English sentences to correct and rewrite, only the bare literalness of the original. This version of the play, then, is really in the nature of a new translation into spoken English.”³¹ More precisely American English spelling and colloquial speech. Miller’s adaptation uses a more pragmatic language: for instance when Peter refers to Tom, he says, “he gets his salary from the springs³²” versus Ibsen’s “he is the Medical Officer to the Baths”³³.

In general, Miller’s adaptation is quite faithful to Ibsen’s play (in terms of background and characters), but with a stress on democratic ideas (Peter: “I think the democratic thing to do is to elect a chairman”³⁴, “After all, we are a democratic country”³⁵, “Has any one of us the right, the ‘democratic right...’”³⁶) and on the fact that the majority is not necessarily right: “Doctor Stockmann: I tell you now that the majority is always wrong [...] Was the majority right when they stood by while Jesus was crucified? *Silence*. Was the majority right when they refused to believe that the earth moved around the sun and let Galileo be driven to his knees like a dog? [...] The majority is never right until it *does* right.”³⁷ Moreover, the staging stresses the illusion of a democratic society in which one’s interest is all that matters. This aspect is quite familiar to the Romanian audience. Arthur Miller had written in the preface to his adaptation, “I have attempted to make *An Enemy of the People* as alive to Americans as it undoubtedly was to Norwegians, while keeping it intact”³⁸. And Goga attempted to make it alive to Romanians. Doctor Stockmann stands up to “a whole system touched by a disease that does not have a single face, a single form of manifestation, but multiple faces, each one more smiling and seductive than the other. Against the common sense, the public interest, the obvious necessity, you cannot be a winner. And the public good has on its side both the raw force and the word carefully chosen

³¹ Miller, “Adapting Ibsen’s Play”, IX-X.

³² Miller, *An Enemy*, 5.

³³ Ibsen, *En folkefiende*.

³⁴ Miller, *An Enemy*, 63.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

³⁸ Miller, “Adapting Ibsen’s Play”, VII.

as well as the empty form and the power of the demos. The word and the stone, and at the end the gun”³⁹ [our translation].

Miller himself admits that “although as little as possible of the original construction has been changed and the play is exactly as it was, scene for scene, I have made each act seem of one piece, instead of separate scenes [...] Structurally the largest change is in the third act – Ibsen’s fifth. In the original the actual dramatic end comes a little past the middle of the act, but it is followed by a wind-up that keeps winding endlessly to the curtain [...] in this act, I have brought out the meaning of the play in terms of dramatic action, action which was already there and didn’t need to be newly invented, but which was separated by tendentious speeches spoken into the blue.”⁴⁰

With a view to the director Claudiu Goga, he is well-known for his work with the actors: when working with the actors, “I try to explain as much as I can, as well nuanced as possible. I am always open; I always leave an invitation for their proposals, which may be related to both interpretation and construction. I try to adapt to each individual actor [...] I am alive, the actor is alive, and the possibilities of a creative negotiation are created between us [...] the rehearsals for the performances in the province take less time. The people are more serious, the theater program is clearer [...] This feeling of success or failure much derives from the way in which you, the director, feel that the relationship with the actors works”⁴¹ [our translation].

Conclusions

Although it is generally believed that a contemporary text is better enjoyed by the audience, the performance in Iași, based on a text from 1882, revisited in 1950, gathered favorable reviews. Even if “there are thousands of ways of interpreting a character”⁴² [our translation], the success of the staging is largely due to the fact that the audience can recognize their own world on the stage, can identify with the social-political reality in Romania, can understand what is being performed. The staging of *An Enemy of the People* at the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași seems to want to

³⁹ Munteanu, „Când toți suntem...”.

⁴⁰ Miller, “Adapting Ibsen’s Play”, X.

⁴¹ Călin Ciobotari, “Un timp ideal...”.

⁴² Thomas Ostermeier, *Teatrul și frica*, translated by Vlad Russo (București: Nemira, 2016), 32.

make the audience become more active from a civic point of view since it is, as the critic Călin Ciobotari also notices, “one of the rare moments when our audience, whom I have come to know fairly well, understood that this time they did not come to the theater to laugh or feel good, but to witness an impeccable lesson of morality, dignity and ‘burnt offering’ in the name of a conviction, of a personal truth”⁴³ [our translation].

Ciobotari simply calls it “a performance that we needed”⁴⁴ [our translation], while the critic Nicoleta Munteanu refers to it as “a powerful, carefully adapted performance [...] a not-at-all comfortable play at a moment in which nothing seems to really change around us”⁴⁵ [our translation]. The director Claudiu Goga seems to have a good relationship both with the playwright, by finding an equilibrium between Miller’s adaptation and the contemporary world, and with the cast that he chooses to render Ibsen’s well-defined characters. On the other hand, the audience seems really interested in this text adaptation related to justice, corruption, manipulation, the consequences the fear of poverty may have on a certain part of the population. We cannot but agree with Miller when writing that “Any act of adaptation is bound to be an act of creation. The adaptor is faced with continuous decisions about choices of vocabulary, reordering dialogue and scenes, what to cut and what to keep. In making such decisions, the adaptor creates a new text, however subtly different from the original version.”⁴⁶

⁴³ Călin Ciobotari, „Cronica lui Călin...”.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Munteanu, „Când toți suntem...”.

⁴⁶ Geoff Barton (editor), “Introduction” to *An Enemy of the People* by Henrik Ibsen, adapted by Arthur Miller (Harlow: Longman, 1993), XV.

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