

THE RECEPTION OF AMERICAN THEATER IN ROMANIA. A CASE STUDY OF EUGENE O'NEILL

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ABSTRACT

The paper is part of a doctoral research entitled *The Style in the Language of Theatre : Christopher Marlowe, T.S.Eliot, Eugene O'Neill*, and concentrates on the reception of Eugene O'Neill's plays in Romania. O'Neill was one of the most intellectual and well-read of all American dramatists, and the products of his thoughts and reading found their way into his plays. After emphasising the main characteristics of Eugene O'Neill's plays from a stylistic point of view, the paper presents the marketing efforts of different Romanian bodies and institutions to bring to life these plays. The authors concentrated on the most important theatres of the country and presented information found in traditional and new media for a two month period in 2015 in regard to their communication activities. It is found that there are no signs of a particular concern of the Romanian authorities to resume the interrupted dialogue with the work of a playwright considered difficult to receive by the contemporary public sensitivity. Yet, the advantages of such a revival of interest would be multiple, especially in the area of intensifying the cultural Romanian –American exchanges. From another point of view, communication studies and marketers may create their communication messages taking into consideration stylistic elements in the production of the advertising campaigns.

Keywords: style, stylistics as methodology, theatre, marketing, art theatre

1. Introduction

In his study, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950*, Raymond Williams (1958) insisted on the need of a society to make its own cultural meanings through the creative agency of individual responses, while preventing the crisis of understanding by a commonality of effort and a respect for tradition (Williams, 1960: 63). As a consequence, the role of intellectuals (drama critics, directors, stage designers and actors) would be to commend to public attention only those facts that can be successfully grafted onto the spirit of a particular community, in order to produce significant developments through performance. The role of art in society would therefore be to communicate with the public, constituting itself into a repertoire of shared values and a platform for debate – a role which Eugene O'Neill's plays undoubtedly played at the peak of their reception history in Romania and elsewhere and could still be able to have performances. In terms of dramatic challenge, modernist plays expose "a sense of some originary rupture as the generic source of the theatre, which could only be rectified to the extent that it was taken into account" (Blau, 1990: 9). Similarly, O'Neill's plays can be said to expose their negativity by reflecting a broken world and attempting to understand the cause of this rupture, since "to the degree that it [the rupture] is taken into account, the world is subject to change" (Blau, 1990: 9).

According to Herbert Blau, the function of the theatre in ancient culture was coextensive with that of society, while nowadays the theatre is "a dissociated and eccentric event" (Blau, 1990: 9). According to Bulz (2013) the contemporary lack of substantial staging of O'Neill's plays in Romania can be considered a damaging absence in the country's cultural fabric, while the censorship to which O'Neill's plays have been subjected along the course of history is obviously a form of ideological abuse since "making theatre without regard to a public is not only solipsistic but immoral".

The paper concentrates on the Romanian reception of Eugene O'Neill's plays since his playwrights are not so much represented on the Romanian stages.

The analysis of O'Neill's art will allow us understand the strong and weak points of his plays, to see his peculiarities and understand why the Romanian public has been reluctant to receive his plays. The last part of the paper deals with the reception of O'Neill's plays in Romania, focusing on the main representations in our theatres. We concentrated on the most important theatres in our country and presented information found in media: radio and television, spots, presentations, newspapers and magazines, local or national, banners, billboards, websites, blogs, social media.

2. Study Settings

This paper deals with cultural marketing, the authors' intention is to research Eugene O'Neill's presence on the Romanian stages and it starts from the premise that the American theater is and has been scarcely staged in Romania. The authors' approach aimed to make a step from the academic research in order to see O'Neill's reception in the Romanian society. The aim is to demonstrate that in spite of the complexity, workmanship and the realities that O'Neill's plays captured, they do not adjust to the needs, mentality and taste of the Romanian audience, some theater people being included. To support this argument we also accessed the site of the most important theater festival in Romania – Sibiu International Theatre Festival (<http://www.sibfest.ro/sibiu-international-theatre-festival.html>), as well as the reviews of the plays brought to life at Sibiu.

We have selected the sites of the most representative theatres in Romania in the period January-March 2015; the most important theatrical magazines and journals covering the time span 1970 up to present were also considered. The selection criteria for the online research was represented by several words: "O'Neill", "theatre", "reception", "Romania". It was quite difficult to find a common thread of these sites, as the information presented was scarce supporting our hypothesis. This is partly due to the poor representation of this playwright on the Romanian stages and partly due to the fact that the majority of the websites do not have a proper and updated archive.

3. Style in Drama Description of the methodological procedures followed. Case Study: Eugene O'Neill

Style has been defined in many ways, and new definitions are constantly made. Yet, what is style? The history of the word, as found in dictionaries, will provide no answer to this question. It will, however, give some idea of the ramifications of the term: the Oxford Dictionary records it in twenty-seven different meanings. It is also significant that all these meanings have a common root. Style is primarily a quality of writing; it comes from the Latin *stilus*, the name of the writing-rod, and it is only by metaphor that it came to be applied to other activities.

A glance at some of the classic definitions of style seems at first sight to make confusion worse confounded. But if one looks more closely at these conflicting and overlapping definitions, a certain pattern begins to emerge. The concept of style has many facets and can be approached from a variety of angles. Some of the definitions have little to offer to the twentieth-century reader; when, for example, Swift declares: "[P]roper words in proper places, make the true definition of a style," (<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/165345/Discours-sur-le-style>) he is merely echoing the ideas of traditional rhetoric.

But there are also more original conceptions which seem to foreshadow the main trends of contemporary thinking on the problem. These more modern ideas fall broadly into two groups. According to one school of thought, each writer has his own peculiar form of style which bears the stamp of his personality. Buffon had something slightly different in mind when he coined his famous formula: "Le style, c'est l'homme meme" – "Style, it is the man himself." (Christin, 2001: 76). But he had the merit of crystallizing a view of style which, within certain limits, has proved correct and helpful. Schopenhauer went further when he defined style as "the physiognomy of the mind." Flaubert was even more categorical: "Le style" he proclaimed, in English as well "est à lui tout seul une manière absolue de voir les choses" – "Style is in itself an absolute way of seeing things" (Bartlett, 1968: 389). These ideas were developed by Proust into an ingenious theory. In his view, whatever a great artist writes has his own unmistakable hallmark because he will extract from each object those elements which are congenial to him and have an affinity to his own mind. In this sense, style is inimitable (Ullman, 1957: 2).

The analysis of style in drama is a way of cultivating attentive reading, of increasing fidelity to the author's intention as that is realized in the language. A play is the product of a creative mind viewing experience with the aid of a highly sensitive instrument, the dramatic form. The dramatist, in shaping his selected material into an organized entity, exploits the specific devices that characterize his medium, appropriating some that have been used before, adapting others, creating new ones. In doing so, the playwright discovers and records a meaning that did not previously exist and that exists now only in the delicate balance of his completed product.

O'Neill's plays, with their voluminous and detailed stage directions, sometimes read like novels, yet it was his keen sense and affinity for theatrical effect and character development that made him most comfortable with the dramatic form simultaneously the most familiar and the most challenging to him. The playwright was determined to move beyond the superficialities of the American theatre of his time and to delve more deeply into the realities of human experience and consciousness.

Eugene O'Neill shaped the course of American drama in its most significant development period, from about 1915 to about 1930. Harold Bloom ended a survey of a group of distinguished critical essays on O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* with "the prophecy that O'Neill, and *Long Day's Journey* in particular, need a different kind of literary criticism of drama than anything we now have, a criticism that might be able to deal more adequately with O'Neill's eloquence of gestures and groupings, which seems to me so much more intense than his more limited rhetorical eloquence" (Bloom, 1987:vii). His theatrical innovations were admired, but their initial enthusiastic reception proved in time detrimental to his reputation. No dramatist has followed O'Neill directly in his use of such daring devices as the masks in *Long Day's Journey into Night* or the drums in *The Emperor Jones*. In other ways, however, he has been followed. His innovative use of an exterior-interior setting for *Desire under the Elms*, a scheme for achieving an uninterrupted flow of action, is now more and more called for by playwrights. O'Neill was also a pioneer in the use of sound and light as integral parts of his plays.

Any play, formally considered, is made up of its dramatic structure or organization and its language, both stage directions and dialogue. Considered either as a dramatic architect or as a writer of dramatic prose, O'Neill is remarkable for his range, his daring, and his originality. Looked at casually, his plays seem to represent a bewildering display of artistic techniques, as he constantly varies both their form and their language. On closer inspection, however, there is going on a continuous evolution which is to culminate in plays that are remarkable for the compressed unity and explosive power of their structure and for the appropriateness and the verisimilitude of their language. The art of O'Neill's plays lies in the playwright's mastery of language. To fully appreciate his plays, a reader must notice the special quality of their dialogue, remembering that in the theatre the spoken and not the written word serves as a medium of exchange. O'Neill "develops an idiosyncratic language pattern for each character, thus differentiating them and giving each an identity. He then proceeds to vary and occasionally break these patterns so each speaks with several different conflicting voices. Each appears many-faceted and yet, at any given moment, still himself, distinct from any other figure on the stage" (Chothia, 1979: 146).

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, considered O'Neill's masterpiece, the Tyrone family speak precisely and yet easily, their moods modifying their syntax. When they are angry, their heated argument is expressed with force. When they relent, their words are softer. The play's speeches consistently reveal character, define relationships, provide background information, highlight key issues and focus the dramatic moment. But in addition to performing these basic functions of realistic dialogue, O'Neill's dramatic language for the first time extends its

range to include any number of memorable lines, such as: "None of us can help the things life has done to us" (p. 61) "Then Mother of God, why do you feel so lonely?" (p. 95); "I would have been much more successful as a seagull or a fish" (p.150) When creating his characters, O'Neill is conscious of the effect of their speech. In the stage directions, the playwright notes not only costume and appearance, but bearing and quality of voice. Tyrone "is sixty-five but looks ten years younger ... his bearing ... has a soldierly quality of head up, chest out, stomach in, shoulders squared ... a big, finely shaped head ... His voice is remarkably fine, resonant and flexible ... There is a lot of solid earthy peasant in him" (pp.11-2) In *Long Day's Journey into Night* O'Neill's reliance on the expressive power of his dialogue is great. There are only five characters in the cast, there is no chorus, nor are there any changes in the setting. There is a most effective return to the repetitive sound effect. All the four Tyrone stand out as fully individualized human beings, bound together by a common fate, by an inescapable love-hate relationship.

Communication studies and marketers are provided with another way to create their communication messages taking into consideration stylistic elements in the production of the advertising campaigns (Kobernick, 1989). Stylistic analysis is generally concerned with the features that make a text unique. Advertising is an art of language using various types of devices and, therefore, the advertisements have achieved amazing effects on persuading consumers to buy the products. At the same time, it has also formed its special style and the language used in is different from other styles. Its function is to "attract attention, arouse interest, stimulate desire, create conviction and get action" (Lunde, 1974). By the use of stylistic devices, the producer can better communicate with the consumers and make the product more popular among them in order to achieve the goal of ever-lasting purchase and popularity.

4. Marketing and Theatre. Attempts to Revive the Interest in Eugene O'Neill's Plays

What does marketing have to do next to theatre? There is a consensus among experts about the fact that marketing belongs to economic science disciplines. But over the last decades marketing has taken off in other areas - beyond the actual border of the economic activity- such as education, health and culture. In these areas marketing has a twofold purpose: economic and social, still focusing on the social side.

Commercial theatre is prospering across Europe and Romania, too, while public theatre has suffered under changing patterns of cultural consumption as well as sharp reductions in government subsidies for the arts. Therefore, under the demands of a growing competitive market, cultural institutions need to work in order to establish a striking profile to attract possible partners, with advantages for both parts. Marketing has a crucial role in this case with specific techniques that gradually acquire critical relevance and prepare institutions to adjust and adapt to this new reality (Morais, 2012:181). According to Moldoveanu and Franc (1997: 20), cultural services are activities provided for consumers of culture, with or without their direct participation in order to fulfil certain needs and produce the expected satisfaction from them.

Cultural services are a distinct category of services and they cover a wide range of activities, classified by their content, means of expression etc. Naturally the theatre holds an important, yet interesting place among others like film, dance, art galleries and exhibitions, private collections, folk art, publishing houses, exhibitions and book fairs, public readings services, art photography etc. all falling under the same umbrella of cultural services (Moldoveanu and Franc, 1997: 50).

Still, is theatre profitable nowadays? In countries where the key words are difficulties, crises, money, you might be tempted to simply answer 'no'. Nevertheless, it could be 'yes', too. In order to illustrate that, one word has the answer: Sibiu - a place where the world cultural games are made these days. Inspired marketing is 'responsible' for that together with determination, support, initiative and ingenuity. Sibiu is a city that has achieved a 12% budget for culture which makes it the largest budget in the world for culture.

It is a former European cultural capital city that shelters for ten days every year the gathering of the most important bands and filmmakers from all over the world. Theatre, dance, music, prose and poetry, street performances, in a word, performance. 35,000 visitors per day, 60,000 during the weekend, 66 venues, with 70 countries participating, 350 events. (<http://www.sibfest.ro/general/fact-and-figures>).

The third festival in the world after the Edinburgh, Scotland and Avignon, France rose as one day in a year. In 2015, Sibiu will witness the 18th edition of the International Festival. Constantin Chiriac is and has been from the very beginning, the person behind this cultural, social, marketing mechanism who initiated and made it grow.

How was it possible? "The important thing is to develop and create chances and opportunities and that is what we are doing" he says (<http://www.agerpres.ro/cultura/2014/12/14/gala-oamenii-timpului-interviu-constantin-chiriac-locul-in-care-m-am-nascut-centrul-lumii-pentru-mine-14-10-37>). He also appreciated that

Sibiu has become a cultural tourism destination while they are now trying to add the business tourism feature to this destination that will bring along a lasting and sustainable development to the city.

Changes in consumer's behaviour always connected to various devices and media channels require unprecedented changes in communication industry. Marketers now adapt to the dynamics of the messages generated by the explosion of communication channels. Online, video, mobile, social media, communities, user generated content, word of mouth, real time marketing are not some abstract concepts but realities of daily life of every marketer. This was exactly the successful recipe used by the team behind this Romanian international festival: the use of traditional and new media: radio and television interviews <http://yorick.ro/constantin-chiriac-am-castigat-un-mare-festival-m-a-costat-viata-timp/>, spots, presentations, newspapers and magazines, be they local or national, banners, billboards, websites, blogs, social media: <http://www.sibfest.ro/>, <https://www.facebook.com/FITSibiu>; <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/27/sibiu-international-theatre-festival-romania>; <http://www.manafu.ro/tag/teatru/>.

People understand that investing in a brand will enhance long term winning.

In what Eugene O'Neill is concerned, there are several directions of perception of this dramatist's work – by criticism, translations, performances – as different “readings” of O'Neill's work, thus emphasizing the specificity of the process of perception that determines both the critical reactions or the translation options and the approaches of directors to address a piece in a certain way. We are going to refer to the enactment of O'Neill's plays as he is the only contemporary dramatist capitalizing ancient myths to express the dramatic fact of contemporary life. Through him, the tragic vein represented by Sophocles, Aeschylus, Euripides, Shakespeare or Racine extends naturally in actuality proving the existence of modern man's tragic potential. This is why his plays managed to overcome the barriers of censorship over various Romanian ages, the continuity of O'Neill's presence in Romanian theatres demonstrating the mutual cultural Romanian-American interest.

The very first staging of O'Neill's plays in Romania was held in Cluj in 1939 with the masterpiece *Beyond the Horizon*. Then, there was the early 40's performance of *Mourning Becomes Electra* which recorded an awesome success. Anna Christie was staged at the Teatrul Mic (The Little Theatre) in 1943. *Desire under the Elms* followed in Bucharest at Teatrul Nostru (Our Theatre) in the same year.

After the “silence” of the fifties, the interest in the plays of O'Neill is reinforced by staging the scenic realism during the sixties and seventies, when directors such as Liviu Ciulei and Al. Finți (Bucharest), Soroana Coroamă (Iași) or Lily Teodorescu (Cluj) mounted excellent performances with great play by O'Neill: *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

There followed weak attempts at modernization in the 80's and 90's of the last century, when O'Neill's plays seem to not launch special challenges either for the directors of the former political regime or for the post-revolutionary ones. The staging after 2000 when the revival of O'Neill seemed real thanks to director Alexa Visarion's initiative to constitute a Romanian-American theatre company within the National Theatre. The Romanian-American Theatre “Eugene O'Neill” founded by the members of the Cultural Association “Dialog” at the International Symposium “Eugene O'Neill” was held at the National Theatre in Bucharest in 2003, commemorating the 50th anniversary of the playwright's death. Nevertheless, this initiative was of short duration, as the staging of Anna Christie and *A Touch of the Poet* did not receive the adequate support from the theatre director, Dinu Săraru. Thus, at the beginning of the new millennium, the interest in the work of this American playwright walks pretty much into obscurity. Consequently, we can say that even if there is O'Neill theatre in Bucharest not so many plays by O'Neill are staged.

Cristian Munteanu, a famous radio theatre director, staged for the radio *A Long Day's Journey into Night*, Anna Christie, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *Bound East for Cardiff*. In all, the stylistic fingerprint of the director is unmistakable. It is translated into a special feeling of theatrical construction, in which the radio plays an essential part. It addresses only one sense, the hearing, recreating a whole universe. There are unwritten rules of this genre, the radio theatre, yet none of them cannot substitute the interior discipline of the artists which requires the solidity of stylistic option and thus the capacity to reinterpret a text.

5. Conclusion

For the Europeans at large, O'Neill remains the American father of modern drama, much indebted to the culture of the older continent. However, for the British at least, O'Neill's works opened up new artistic possibilities as they inspired their own playwrights to create excruciatingly sincere drama that shook the foundations of society.

The reception of Eugene O'Neill's dramatic creation in Romania was a complex phenomenon that manifested in a variety of forms: criticism-studies, articles, reviews which appeared in cultural magazines, monographs,

forewords, afterwards volumes, literary dictionaries, almanacs and other valuable works of literary criticism and literary history.

The performances of his plays have achieved a remarkable record across Europe over a period of nearly six decades; there were developed numerous exhaustive anthologies which strive often manage to provide clarification on the essence of O'Neill's genius presenting this giant of contemporary theatre in a more accurate and truthful light.

There may be a revival of interest for the classic American theater, and especially for O'Neill's plays. This possible return may happen due to some independent cultural initiatives which require a sustained lobbying, individual dedication and efficient cooperation. Unfortunately, for the moment we cannot speak of a particular concern of the Romanian authorities to resume the interrupted dialogue with the work of a playwright considered difficult to receive by the contemporary public sensitivity. Yet, the advantages of such a revival of interest would be multiple, especially in the area of intensifying the cultural Romanian –American exchanges.

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