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## A REVOLUTION FOR THE STAGE – *MAD FOREST* BY CARYL CHURCHILL

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**Abstract:** *The raw material of Caryl Churchill's Mad Forest was extracted from the 1989 Revolution in Romania and chiselled to the essence. The play bridges reality and fiction through a cross-cultural perspective, which implies documentation, collaborative work and emotional detachment. The British playwright used innovative devices and adapted pictorial techniques to turn the Romanian Revolution into a work of art, to preserve what she considered particular and also connect the event to several of the cultural symbols Romania is associated with.*

**Keywords:** *British drama, cross-cultural perspective, dramatic devices, reality and fiction*

### 1. Introduction

Caryl Churchill is among the most staged contemporary playwrights and her plays have stirred the critics' imagination and appetite for exploring a less conventional dramatization of contemporary anxieties and concerns. The echoes of Bertold Brecht's ideas and epic drama entangle with pictorial techniques reminding of cubism, surrealism and abstract expressionism, linguistic adventures (Lane 2011:43) and techniques borrowed from other literary works.

An immediate attribute of her plays would be 'responsiveness' as they are very prompt fictional replicas to striking events, criticising aspects of the contemporary society such as the obsession of power, the effects of colonialism, of technological evolution, including human cloning, of feminism and of ample social movements or revolutions. As David Lane (2011:43) states, "[h]er desire to respond to current affairs is evident even in her first play for the stage *Owners* (1972) which responded to a property market boom and our ruthless desire to secure ownership of material wealth." The roots of *Light Shining in Buckinghamshire* are set in the English civil war and the play dramatizes "the amazed excitement of people taking hold of their own lives" at the time (the preface cited in Gobert 2014:124). *Fan* is another lesson of history set during Thatcher's regime and targeting globalisation.

*Mad Forest* is a play about the 1989 revolution in Romania which Churchill, receptive of the potential of this movement, 'investigated' with a group of students and collaborators as part of a project: choreographer Ian Spink, playwright David Lan, Mark Wing-Davey and his students at London's Central School of Speech and Drama, and students from the Caragiale Institute of Theatre and Cinema (Gobert 2014:152). After the period spent in Romania, Churchill wrote her play in three weeks, succeeding in rendering the "febrile intensity and unvarnished chaos of revolutionary times." (Gobert 2014:153) Scarcely reviewed in Romania – I can mention Roxana Pascariu (2007) for a positive reception of the play –, *Mad Forest* was successfully staged abroad.

Under the guidance of "A Concise History of Romania" by Andrei Oțetea and Andrew MacKenzie, Churchill provides a description of the forest that was a source for the title: a large forest that used to be on the plain where Bucharest now stands, and which "was crossed by muddy streams ... It could only be crossed on foot and was impenetrable for the foreigner who did not know the paths ...." (in Churchill 1991) The structure of the title both on the cover and on the title pages reveals a complex combination of elements: "Mad Forest" metaphorically

encompasses the essence of the whole play; “A Play from Romania” is the genre indication (Genette 1987:33) which also places the action in Romania, therefore in a different cultural context from the author’s. By mentioning the place, Churchill draws attention to her non-belongingness and improbable personal involvement with the event. It is the second title page consisting of the title (*Mad Forest*) and of the quotation from Oțetea and MacKenzie’s history that creates an atmosphere of uncertainty, unknown and opaqueness luring the reader. The title has a metaphoric meaning, suggesting that the play is a journey through the thicket of the forest that stands for the Revolutionary Bucharest/Romania and implying that, written by a foreigner, it may not be entirely understood, which is also upheld by the sense of incompleteness rendered through the gaps.

*Mad Forest* is structured into three parts, which reminds of Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*: family – war/revolution – family. Churchill chooses to contrast two families belonging to different social classes: the Vladus, a working class family, and the Antonescus – a middle class family. On the one hand, the families are integrated within the social and political context and different identities are set against the background of the communist regime, on the other hand the members of these families try to interrelate and thus reset the social-systemic structure. In the latter case, there is a tendency to cross the boundaries of homogeneous social networks (Blau 1977), ignoring both race and class limits. The communist regime appears as a preserver of race homogeneity upheld by the principle of patriotism and nationalism; therefore, racial intersections illustrated through Lucia’s decision to marry an American in the first part and befriend a Hungarian in the last one are monitored and discouraged both at the macro social and political level and at the micro social level by individuals due to anxiety. Similarly, Radu’s parents are reluctant to his decision to marry Lucia’s sister, Florina. The conflict announces a change in the systemic structure, which implies tension, but this tension is projected onto the background of the revolution synthesised in the second part through a pointillist technique with harmonious and dissonant touches. The last part of the play presents Florina and Radu’s wedding and the changes resulting from the revolution.

## 2. Variety, Irregularity and Fragmentariness

Churchill’s devices combine traditional theatrical conventions with innovative techniques on the verge between genres and arts. First, part 1 is structured into unbalanced scenes with guiding titles attempting the initiation into Romanian culture of a British visitor and suggesting language lessons. The titles consist of a sentence in Romanian and its translation into English (“Lucia are patru ouă. Lucia has four eggs.”; “Cine are un chibrit? Who has a match?”; “Ea are o scrisoare din Statele Unite. She has a letter from the United States.”; “Cumpărăm carne. We are buying meat.”, etc.) These simple sentences reflect restrictions to basic elements such as food and light, which in the text are implicitly accompanied by other restrictions on free speech and on interethnic marriages.

Scene 2 of the first part, “Cine are un chibrit? Who has a match?”, presents a fragment of an evening in the Antonescu family focused on the alternation light–darkness as being listened to – not being listened to, or in the light/controlled/seen vs. in the darkness/uncontrolled/unseen. Paradoxically, darkness is illuminating, as it reveals the hidden side of the family when they share their opinions, when they openly speak to each other. When there is light in the room they speak about their job in a neutral and formal tone:

MIHAI: He came today.

FLAVIA: That’s exciting.

RADU: Did he make you change it?

MIHAI: He had a very interesting recommendation. The arch should be this much higher. (...)

*They go on working.*

*The lights go out. They are resigned, almost indifferent.*

*Radu takes a match and lights a candle. They sit in candlelight in silence.*

RADU: I don't see why.  
FLAVIA: We've said no.  
RADU: If I leave it a year or two after the wedding. I /could –  
FLAVIA: No.  
RADU: It's not her fault if her sister –  
MIHAI: The whole family. No. Out of the question.  
*Pause.*  
There is plenty of other girls, Radu.  
*They sit in silence.*  
*The lights come on.*  
*Flavia blows out the candle and snuffs it with her fingers.*  
*They all start reading again.*  
RADU: So is that the third time he's made you change it?  
*Mihai doesn't reply. They go on working.*  
(Churchill 1991:2-3)

Churchill does not follow a pattern in the scenes, but aims at variety and dissonance. The communication in the first scene is nonverbal and is projected on the background of a radio playing Romanian music. The audience is the opponent, like Securitate, unable to hear the talk. Part 4 consisting of Flavia's monologue, the lesson she teaches to her students, shows Flavia speaking loudly and confidently about Ceaușescu. Scene 11 ("Uite! Look! – people chasing a rat"), scene 13 ("Ce oră este? What's the time? – shows Lucia and Ianoși together") and scene 15 ("Pe Irina o doare capul. Irina has a headache. – a row") consist of several stage directions.

These scenes do not succeed each other regularly in part one and three, while the second part is not structured into scenes, yet, they acquire the same poise in the economy of the text, the shorter or elliptical ones compensating through intensity. Besides, they are like "matches struck in the dark" (Woolf 1994:118) or like the "sudden salience on the surface of the psyche" (Bachelard 1994:XV), that is those moments that ensure the specificity of a cultural, economic and political context, apparently unrelated to each other but also shaping the plot and building the characters.

The way in which Churchill constructs the play may suggest associations with pictorial techniques. She told a journalist "[p]erhaps I feel the same about theatrical form as an artist feels about paint" (in Gobert 2014:1), which is a confession guiding readers and critics who explore the landscape (Gobert 2014:1) she created in her plays. They can identify various techniques such as *impasto* used by abstract expressionists and suggesting dramatic intensity, *sfumato* borrowed from Renaissance and shading the borders between light and darkness, between right and wrong, or the pointillist technique. Speaking about *Love and Information*, a play Churchill wrote in 2012, Gobert says (2014:1): "sharply drawn dots – the shortest of the sixty-nine scenes is two words long – collectively constitute an epic canvas that exceeds the sum of its pointillist parts." He mentions that she was called the Picasso of playwrights' craft by Sarah Daniels, a fellow playwright (qtd. in Stephenson and Langridge 1997:6).

*Mad Forest* gets shape through *impasto* and cubist techniques mainly. The scenes are dense enough to acquire thickness and become more realistic, to express the artist's emotion and also to elicit emotional response in the audience/readers. They are like colours associated to create tension and emotion in abstract expressionist paintings. They are such striking deviations from what normality, as smoothness, is expected to be that they provide solid reference points in Churchill's depiction of the pre- and post-revolution contexts.

Variety and fragmentariness are two further features of the scenes which make the landscape even more colourful. Like in a cubist work, the revolution is broken apart, is deconstructed, and the most relevant aspects, in Churchill's opinion, are reassembled in a fragmentary and abstract form in which the system keeps reorganising itself, and subsystems are partly revealed. The play is like a collage of tiny fragments of the characters' life and experience

with the revolution out of which symbolic elements like radio, eggs, foreign cigarettes, rats, light, meat, etc. emerge.

The shift from the micro-universe in the first part to the macro-universe in part two implies a movement from a familiar context, as the characters and the situation are known, to an unfamiliar and uncontrollable one hosting the revolution. All the characters that populate the second part are new and episodic. They provide the audience with stories and impressions about the revolution which draw the chronological line of the events. The focus is on the events in Bucharest and the characters represent people of different social classes, with different jobs and of different ages. There is no dialogue, just disparate sections which enhance the fragmentariness and incompleteness of the text. Both Elaine Aston (2009:144) and Darren Gobert (2014) mention Churchill's use of other people's words and construction of a monologue as a "composite of real shards of quotations" (Gobert 2014:141). Similarly, the second part of *Mad Forest* is a mosaic of "shards of quotations" from the people the playwright and her team interviewed.

The last scene of the play covers the wedding of Radu and Florina after the revolution and brings all the characters of the first part together, including the Angel and the Vampire. The wedding acquires a symbolic dimension as people have got the right to cross boundaries, and restrictions are removed. The play ends with the characters speaking to each other, then overlapping sentences and all the characters speaking at the same time, creating the impression of disorder and chaos. They all word their individual concerns, which is frightening as they seem to lack guidance when the system is in the process of reorganisation. The ideas stated at the end have already been mentioned along the third part of the play, but they are assembled to synthesise the revolution in broken images over which dominate the last words of the Vampire.

IRINA: 3. She says we have no soul.

12. He should have been hung in a cage and stones thrown at him.(...)

MIHAI: 8. Nothing is on a realistic basis.

We have to put the past behind us.(...)

FLAVIA: 2. Isn't history what's in the history book?

14. I want to teach correctly. (...)

FLORINA: 4. Sometimes I miss him. (...)

RADU: 9. Who was shooting on the 22<sup>nd</sup>? That's not a crazy question. (...)

LUCIA: 11. I was so ashamed not to be here. (...)

(Churchill 1991:73-74)

The sequence at the end of the play continues the second part, showing opinions about the revolution and about the subsequent period, echoing fears, concerns and emotions in shorter but similar statements to the ones in the second part. Churchill uses her characters for variation, to encompass as many aspects of the revolution as possible.

### 3. Orchestration of Characters

The two planes of the play, domestic and national, are populated with a great number of characters, sometimes unrelated, yet brought together for the specific contribution to the comprehensive image the playwright aims at. In the first and third parts the two families and a friend are orchestrated in short and tense instants of their lives, which build the system of relations between them and with their society as they perceive it. Though all of them are strong and support the play like pillars, Lucia and Gabriel are emphasised as more daring and nonconformist and as centres around which the others are clustered. The second part reunites unrelated characters that participated in or witnessed the revolution. They are like brushes of colour to create the background and allow the playwright to set a vivid rhythm and rapidly cross the revolution period, to enhance the tension and to drive the reader away from the two families. The lack of control over the events in the families is implied in the second part.

Churchill's characters are roughly built as strong ones in the first part but change into disillusioned and confused ones by the third part. They are revealed through conflicts and decisions which are essential elements in drama, as Ecri (2004:63) states: "The character's decision necessarily sets in motion another decision, from his adversary. And it is these decisions, one resulting from the other, which propel the play to its ultimate destination: the proving of the premise." She also shows a human side in revealing the characters' desires, touching in their simplicity:

IANOȘ: I want to go to Paris.

RADU: Rome. And Pompeii.

LUCIA: A holiday by the sea.

*Pause.*

FLORINA: Sleep late in the morning.

*Pause.*

RADU: Paint what I see in my head.

FLORINA: Go into work tomorrow and everyone's better.

LUCIA: Gabriel walking.

IANOȘ: Rodica talking.

*They laugh.*

FLORINA: New shoes.

(Churchill 1991: 49-50)

These characters act either in harmony or in dissonance and the tension between them is an effect of the communist regime and its restrictions. The shortage of external and quality products is reflected in the first scene. Bogdan ignores Lucia when she produces a packet of American cigarettes while the two girls, Florina and Irina, are happy about it. The scene shows the generation gap, more open youth versus conservatory and scared parents, and reflects their attitude towards the system: the girls are ready to break or bend the rules, while their father remains entangled and paralysed within them.

The context within which the characters act requires a particular kind of personality, therefore certain characters are multifaceted: Flavia avoids speaking about Florina, Lucia's sister, and the wedding in her house with her husband and son when the light is on, as she was afraid they might be listened to. When the light is off, she tells her son she is against the marriage. At school, as a teacher of history, she speaks in laudatory words about the ruler of the country, complying with the imposed rules. A completely different Flavia appears in Part Three when she thinks she may remain without her job because the head of the department does not like her. She raises the problem of the way in which history is perceived, of the fact that it may be interpreted and of the limits she had as a teacher: "All I was trying to do was teach correctly. Isn't history what's in the history book? Let them give me a new book. I'll teach that." (Churchill 1991:51) On the other hand, Lucia decides to marry an American during the communist regime, because she could leave the county, but she returns to Romania after the revolution and wants to marry Ianoș, an older friend of Hungarian origin. The change in Lucia's life reveals her inner conflict anticipated in the first part when she and Ianoș are standing "in silence with their arms round each other" (Churchill 1991:14) and the family's frustration at all the difficulties they had to endure due to her marriage to the American citizen. The two friends, Gabriel and Radu, are daring and disregard the conventions of the regime. After the revolution Gabriel is wounded and disillusioned when he realizes certain things have not changed. At first, he rejects the Patient who keeps asking questions about the revolution and says that "it was a fancy dress party" (Churchill 1991:37), while at the end, having changed, Gabriel thinks the questions are right.

Churchill's characters evolve, they learn from their experiences, analyse the situation and try to make the less harmful decisions. By abandoning the fluidity of the plot in favour of fragmentariness and pointilism, Churchill succeeds in better outlining her characters and in

rendering their complexity: personal desires and dreams, feelings, fears, ambitions, aims, etc. The characters make their decisions in accordance with the social and political context. This apparent flexibility is projected on inner and family conflicts which do not divide them, but strengthen them and make them more supportive, though they suffer.

The last scene is obviously musical and particularly orchestrated like a choir of couplets in the stage directions. Churchill is not very strict with the order of the sentences, yet she suggests a possible order: "Then they start to talk while they dance, sometimes to their partner and sometimes to one of the others, at first a sentence or two and finally all talking at once..." (Churchill 1991:72)

#### 4. Cyclic and Repetitive Structure

The structure of the play is cyclical, reminding of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*: family, revolution, family associated with the alternation light/darkness/light and life/death/life. Similarly, the play symbolically starts with the 'preparations' for Lucia's wedding, which means hope for a better life for her, continues with the revolution, which means chaos and death, and ends with Florina and Radu's wedding suggesting hope again. Each wedding is contaminated with a dark side. Lucia's causes problems to several members of the family: Gabriel is made to "sign something" by the Securitate; Bogdan, her father, has to write a weekly report about his colleagues; and Radu cannot speak to Florina, as his parents are against their relationship and wedding. The latter wedding is projected onto the background of uncertainty and disillusionment, and characters are put together like the shards of a broken vase.

Unlike Woolf, Churchill opted for a disrupted plot, inserting the revolution and the characters of the second part as if it were a separate play. It is a technique she had used in *Top Girls* (1982), in which case the first act, the dinner at the restaurant gathering women from different times and places, seems unreal and unrelated to the rest of the play. Nevertheless, Marlene, the protagonist, bridges the first act to the other two and the coherence lies in what those characters represent for Marlene. *Mad Forest* begins with a tension within the Vladu family and the context is gradually filled in, while *December*, the second part, bridges the other two by spotting aspects of the revolution which make the audience/reader understand the situation in the last part.

Caryl Churchill has a propensity for the supernatural, which she uses in the first and last parts of the play. A priest is talking to an angel whose image was used by the League of the Archangel Michael and is contaminated by the fascist movement. This journey back into the history of the country is a way to warn about the blurred border between guilt and innocence, about compromise and the always present dark side in each person. After the revolution, the comforting angel is replaced with a bloodthirsty vampire reminding of Dracula and implying the existence of a context which could provide him, an opportunist, with plenty of food. Instead of a priest with a guilty consciousness, there is a dog ready to serve the vampire. The image Churchill creates in the third part is even worse and more troublesome than the one in the first part.

The motif of the madman telling the truth is another tool common in literature. In this play the character is a patient who keeps telling and asking strange things about the revolution: "Did we have a revolution or a putsch? Who was shooting on the 21<sup>st</sup>? And who was shooting on the 22<sup>nd</sup>?" (Churchill 1991:26-27) He continues asking Gabriel who tries to answer his questions but he faces some absurd, without being necessarily meaningless, replies:

PATIENT: They changed clothes. /

GABRIEL: Who changed clothes? /

PATIENT: It was a fancy dress party. Weren't you there? Didn't you see them singing and dancing?

(Churchill 1991:27)

The Patient later repeats the questions for Radu but he receives no answer. During the wedding Radu repeats one of the patient's questions, realising it is not meaningless: "Who was shooting on the 22<sup>nd</sup>? That's not a crazy question." (Churchill 1991:73)

Repetition either brings variation, as it happens with the use of the supernatural or the reactions to the Patient's questions, or sets the defining axes of the character's personality but emphasising his/her main concerns. The choir in the end is also a means to draw the main aspects of the protagonists' profile through synthesising statements. For instance, Flavia focuses on the problem she had with her job and the truth in the history book: "Isn't history what's in the history book? I want to teach correctly." (Churchill 1991:73) The Angel repeats several sentences from the dialogue with the priest: "Don't be ashamed. (...) I try to keep clear of the political side." (Churchill 1991:74), etc. This device allows Churchill to summarize the play in less than three pages, a *mise-en-abyme* in a broken glass.

## 5. Conclusion

*Mad Forest* was well received for its authenticity, innovative techniques and topicality, being at the time a way to disseminate the event as well as social, political and cultural aspects related to it. Caryl Churchill used a collaborative and documentary method and her ability to extract the essence of the material and squeeze a revolution into a three-part play. Her method evidently leads to selections, excesses and generalisations which fail to encompass everything that a revolution means but create the necessary intensity. Churchill also scattered the play with ingredients from a fictional past like the Vampire echoing Vlad Țepeș and with other Romanian cultural patterns which have a better resonance for the foreign audience. However, beyond all the conventions which aestheticise reality and ensure the success of a play, *Mad Forest* hosts various and innovative dramatic devices, several derived from painting and music, others setting a new paradigm in redering reality in drama.

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