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**Journey Across the  
Communist Past of Albania  
through the Lens of American  
Drama on Stage (1960-1990)**

# Journey Across the Communist Past of Albania through the Lens of American Drama on Stage (1960-1990)

The article aims to trace how *Orpheus Descending* written by Tennessee Williams, *The Crucible* written by Arthur Miller and *The Little Foxes* written by Lillian Hellman were received on the Albanian stage from the 1960s to the 1980s. Trying to establish a critical eye on the Albanian audience in relation to the American way of life and capitalism, these plays were performed to strengthen communist propaganda through theatrical performances. The paper will explore the ways how these dramas were twisted and transformed in order to achieve the main goal: raising proper citizens with communist principles. For the purpose of my analysis, I will rely on historical approach and different reception theories.

## KEYWORDS

**drama, American dream, capitalism, propaganda tool, communism, cultural translation, reception**

"After enduring extreme sufferings under the most tyrannical communist rule in all Eastern Europe, and after being isolated and self-isolated from the rest of the world for nearly fifty years, the Albanians feel an urgent need to forget the dreary past, to do away with it as with a nightmare" (Kadija 1994, 1). In the reflection of scholar Refik Kadija on Albania considering the past, it is evident the importance of the historical and political background in the establishment of solid self-confidence as a nation confronting the world. Examining the past and its impact on the present, it is essential to understand and heal the wounds that a totalitarian regime has left to the country. In my attempt to shed light on some untold truths on the traces of American drama on the Albanian stage, I will concentrate on objective facts and analysis of materials remaining from the communist regime which could help in the creation of Albanian cultural consciousness represented in the eyes of a wider audience. Despite the long delay in staging American drama on the Albanian stage compared to the other Balkan countries during the communist regime, Albania followed the same path like them in terms of artistic choices.

In this paper, I will focus on three Albanian productions of American drama, *Orpheus Descending* written by Tennessee Williams, staged in Albania in 1973, *The Crucible* written by Arthur Miller and staged in 1988, and *The Little Foxes* written by Lillian Hellman and staged only in 1989. The current article sheds light on the representation of America during the last century, the twist a political regime makes in the interpretations of the realities as well as the Albanian perceptions behind these images. Through analyzing critical points of view surrounding the performances of American drama on the Albanian stage, I will explore issues of cultural translatability in the target culture. The production of the above-mentioned plays renders a good basis for the analysis of appropriation strategies in cultural translation, raising thought-provoking questions: To what extent the values manifested in the characters of *The Little Foxes*, such as competitiveness, entrepreneurship, individualism, work ethic, greediness, etc., impacted the values of the Albanian audience in times of a falling regime? What were the major transformations in *The Crucible* in terms of cultural translation and why? What did the political anonymous critics try to imply by banning *Orpheus Descending* immediately after its first appearance on the Albanian stage?

For the purpose of my analysis, I will rely on historical and ideological factors that caused the immediate omission of *Orpheus Descending* in 1973 from the Albanian theater repertoire. Regarding

the staging of *The Crucible*, the concept of the narrow neck<sup>1</sup> in Patrice Pavis's Hourglass of Culture mirrors the extremely selective transformative process of the play. And lastly, for the analysis of *The Little Foxes*, I will focus on pre-performance guiding lines on the staging of this play so late, for the first time, after it had already reached all the other countries of the eastern front. Taking into account the definition of paratext introduced by Gerard Genette, I will analyze how pre-performing guiding lines were used to induce relatively transformed meaning in *The Little Foxes* in Albania. As Gerard Genette states in the definition of paratext, "paratext is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side" (Genette 1997, 2). This "undefined zone" has helped the translator and the director of *The Little Foxes* in establishing a critical eye on the source culture transposing it to the target culture.

## 2. HISTORICAL APPROACH: AMERICAN DRAMA ON THE ALBANIAN STAGE UNDER COMMUNISM

In order to better understand the first staging of American drama on the Albanian theater, it is necessary to look at the history, the traditions and the politics, especially during those 50 years of communism. "The creation and the functioning of a professional theater in Albania was in line with the totalitarian regime" (Papagjoni 2011, 378). Theater arousal in Albania came quite late in comparison to its neighbor countries. It was only in 1944 that it officially began to operate as an institution. Clearly, it corresponded with the birth and development of the communist state and it came as a need to propagate the audience with party ideology becoming subject to extreme censorship and control, which often resulted in the decline of quality performance. According to Elin Diamond "performances may be seen as cultural practices that conservatively reestablish or passionately reinvent the ideas, symbols, and gestures that shape social life. Such reinventions are negotiations with regimes of power, be they proscriptive conventions of gender and bodily display or racist conventions sanctioned by state power." (Diamond 1996, 67). Such processes of reinventions and negotiations with the regime of power were happening in the Albanian context of communism in the theatrical representation of American plays.

In the 1950s, theater in Albania was filled by plays written by Soviet

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<sup>1</sup> As Pavis states, "in the upper bowl of the hourglass, there is the foreign culture, which is more or less codified and solidified in diverse anthropological, sociological or artistic modelizations", and "this culture needs to pass through a narrow neck to reach the target culture" (Pavis 1992).

Union authors preaching ideology, fake idealism, leaving aside the rest of the world, especially the western world. During the 1960s, a gradual reduction of theatrical masterpieces was noticed, with national plays being the only repertoire. "A silent conflict was happening between the State and theater artists, represented in the plays of anti-conformist and dissident artists" (Stefanova 2000, 11). The only trace of American drama during this decade, was *A View from the Bridge*, staged by Pirro Mani in Korça Theater in 1962. No evidence of the play was found in the later years until the collapse of communism. During the 1970s, the gloomy and tough nature of party orders led to detachment from almost all world literature masterpieces. Extreme politicization of plots and punishment of the so-called "modernist" artists was constantly happening. After the death of the dictator, Enver Hoxha, in 1985, American drama reappeared with the staging of *Death of a Salesman* in 1986 by the National Theater. The communist party perceived the American Dream as a threat towards Albanian citizens. Was it because the citizens could have been too much attracted to "the American way of life" if they became aware of the vast opportunities and the freedom that this country offers to every single individual? Perhaps, this was the major fear of the communists, the escape of people's attention in search of the pursuit of happiness elsewhere.

### **3. ORPHEUS DESCENDING AND THE DEEP IDEOLOGICAL "FROST" IN 1970S' ALBANIA**

*Orpheus Descending* made its way to the Soviet Union first and then to Bulgaria in the same year, 1961, and finally it reached Albania in 1973 at the National Theater in Tirana, under the direction of Mihail Luarasi. According to the observations of scholar Kornelia Slavova, on the early performances of this play in Bulgaria, "The choice of this particular play was not accidental: the Bulgarian premiere took place right after the 1961 Soviet premiere at the Moscow Theatre" (Slavova 2015, 238). Consequently, the Albanian theater attempted to stage the play, following the example of Soviet Union and Bulgaria, despite the delay. The question that raises here is: Why exactly this play by Tennessee Williams? Williams was not a preferred author of communist propaganda for two reasons: because his creativity diverged from socialist realism and because he was way too much liberal for the communist principles, and yet he "touched" the Albanian stage, but "by stepping on a solid ground", through a play previously considered by the other former communist countries. Nevertheless, based on previous observations by scholar Refik Kadija, "in 1973, the ideological "thaw" was followed by a deep frost, the liberal "intermezzo" was swept over by one of the most hardline conventions of the communist party, the notorious Fourth Plenum of May 1973. This Party Plenum was a serious setback in the history of Albanian culture"

(Kadija 1994, 9). The staging of *Orpheus Descending* corresponds to this historical moment when Albania had already split ties with Soviet Union and had strengthened relations with China. Switching political ties from one communist country to the other had left its footprint even on the cultural development of the country.

Based on post-performing guiding lines, the scenic materialization, created by Ali Oseku, was considered formalist and censured because he was supposedly impoverishing the stage by adding unnecessary elements onto it. According to the anonymous critics, the stage was overloaded with symbols that the censors referred to as unspecified and hermetic (e.g. a symbol of the Ku Klux Klan, black and white symbols, sculptures as self-expression, placing decorations in two floors of the stage). The play was not affirming "the optimism" in Albania by proposing a rather open interpretation. Scholar Josif Papagjoni, in his book *History of Albanian Theater* states: "In June 1973, the IV Official Meeting of Party Members in the Central Committee – for cases of high importance – was gathered to strongly attack all the tendencies of "modernist structure", calling them "foreign influences" and "representation of decadent art". (Papagjoni 2005, 251). Theater-makers were stopped by feelings of fear caused by censure and punishment for freely expressing their artistic creativity. The aggressive methods of socialist realism were created by Enver Hoxha, the dictator himself, in order to avoid deviation from the totalitarian ideology in the future. In his book *Teatri Kombëtar në Udhëkryq*, the director Mihail Luarasi implies that *Orpheus Descending* was his fifth banned staging. According to the director Luarasi, "theater was observed and followed ceaselessly, constantly under the magnifying lens of the totalitarian regime that opened investigations because of "the dangerous" hidden meanings of words used that threatened dictatorship" (Luarasi 2003, 89-90). He also genuinely explains that "the perverted mind of the dictator worked in every way to stop performances of high artistic quality because he knew that powerful anti-dictatorship meanings were hidden behind them" (Luarasi 2003, 90). As a consequence, theater became the most censored form of art in Albania during that historical period of time.

#### **4. RESISTANT PERFORMANCE: STAGING *THE CRUCIBLE* IN ALBANIA IN THE 1980S**

*The Crucible* was first performed on Broadway in January 1953. It was inspired by the social and political climate in the United States during the 1950s. "The central issue of the play is represented by the Salem witch trials that took place in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1692" (Miller 1953, 2). Before reaching the Albanian stage, it became part of several other stages of the Eastern communist front. "It was translated in Russian

in 1955 and staged in 1962 by the Moscow Stanislavsky Theater" (Romijn, Scott-Smith, Segal 2012, 24). "It was recommended by Arthur Miller to Huang Zuolin, director of Shanghai People's Art in 1981" (Wenquan, Li, Qinjuan 2015, 4). I mentioned the two stages of Moscow and Shanghai because of the political influence that they had on the other communist countries following the same ideology. At that moment in time, Albania was in good diplomatic relations with China and it had just interrupted relations with Soviet Union. Despite the political circumstances, Albania was following the same line with them in terms of theatrical propaganda. Consequently, *The Crucible* came in Albania by 1973, translated by Enver Fiço, but it remained on paper for another decade until the late 1980s when it finally became part of the theater repertoire. It came in 1988 in Bylis Theater, located in a small city in Albania called Fier. One question that raises in this case is: Why it was staged so late in comparison to the other major communist countries? What did the Albanian National Theater fear from *The Crucible*? The explanation: Albania was experiencing a sort of "capitalist" hysteria that stopped its connection with the American plays even at the level of theatrical performances. It was a fear, a fear of losing control over the people if exposing them more than it should to the world. It was pure political "dogma" that had frozen the country's inspiration and openness to the world.

Recalling "the narrow neck" mentioned by Patrice Pavis in his *Hourglass of Culture*, I have studied the modifications, twists and adaptations of the translation and the performance in the target language. For the purpose of my analysis, I have created groups of words and phrases that were subject to modifications. For instance, the first group contains religious expressions. *The Crucible* is a play based on the hysteria created by witchcraft disturbing the Christian life of Salem's people recalling the communist hysteria during McCarthyism in the 1950s in the United States. In the Albanian version of the play, many phrases containing religious elements are transposed, like: "While I speak God's law, I will not crack its voice with whimpering" (Miller 1953, 77) which in Albanian was transformed in "Gjersa të jem unë këtu për të vënë në zbatim ligjin e Zotit, nuk do të ketë as më të voglin lëshim nga ana ime" (Fiço 1973, 150). In the target language, this phrase corresponds in meaning with the source language. No major distortion was done. Nevertheless, in the performance of the play, this phrase was omitted. The reason of this omission was done in order to decrease the use of religious expressions. Another use of the religious terms can be observed in words like: "psalm", "prayer" and "Gospel". These three words are translated in the target culture but they are not used during the performance throughout the play. In a careful observation of the performance of *The Crucible* in Albanian, I was able to identify omissions in terms of religious life. The reason for these changes stands in the unfamiliarity of the target culture with terms of the Bible and

Christianity during communism. It is important to mention the absence of religious practices by law in Albania from the 1960s till the beginnings of the 1990s.

Another group of words that was subject to the "narrow neck" and the adaptation in the target language contains "the obscene words". An example is: "I'd not call it sick; the Devil's touch is heavier than sick." (Miller 1953, 17), which in Albanian is translated into: "Nuk e quaj të sëmurë. Mirë të themi, djalli që u ngrin gjakun akull dhe ua bën trutë t'u ziejnë." (Fiço 1973, 24). Based on my observations, words like "hell", "devil", "witchcraft", are present in the translation of the play and they are used more often than the terms specified in the first group. The explanation for this fact stands in the tendency to show the play as a punishment in the eyes of the audience. What the stage directors chose to show was the part of the judgement, the doom, the terror, the court sentences, the horrifying experience of witchcraft hysteria. As a consequence, the terms reflecting faith were drastically reduced in the performance. Major changes are present in the end of the First Act where the translator has found a solution in substituting the last words of the characters: "Betty: I saw Goody Bibber with the Devil!; Abigail: I saw Goody Booth with the Devil!" (Miller 1953, 48). The adaptation in the target language is recreated using a totally different structure, as shown below: "Heill: Me ndihmën e Zotit! Perrisi: O Zot i ushtrive! O Zot i ahmarjes! Na ndriço, tregona ata që ka fshehur satanai midis nesh! Ati ynë që je në qiell. U shenjtëroftë emri yt, ardhhtë mbretëria jote, u bëftë dëshira jote si në qiell ashtu edhe mbi dhe...Amin" (Fiço 1973, 61).

In the Albanian version, the author has tried to adopt the original in a different way, transforming the play totally. He adopted the words of Parris in a prayer to God in search of the truth for the witchcraft that had emerged in Salem. As we can observe, the characters have changed, the phrases have changed, the meaning is totally transformed and the original version is lost. The source culture is shown through a different lens. Another group of adaptations contains the representation of women and the supremacy of men in the source culture considering the time and the space of staging the play. Terms that show violence towards the servants, towards Abigail and Tituba are preserved in the target language transposing the source culture without filtering the essential meaning. Tituba, as the black servant, is performed by a white actress covered in black face. The choice justifies the tendency of propaganda to criticize the American mentality. All these elements are shown as a counter-response to the American society. Another element specified regarding the adaptation of the play is the title of the play "The Crucible" which was adapted as "Shtrigat e Salemit" or "Witches of Salem" in the target language following the translation of Sartre in a French-German adaptation in 1957 "*Les Sorcières de Salem*" (Sartre 1957), and recaptured even by the Albanian translator.



Despite the harsh isolationism of Albania, this play entered the stage late in time compared to the other ex-communist countries bringing partially the American culture approaching it from a critical point of view.

## 5. THE LITTLE FOXES: THE FORGOTTEN PLAY IN ALBANIA BY THE END OF THE 1980S

*The Little Foxes* was first staged in Albania in 1989 with a major delay from its first staging on Broadway in February 1939, running more than thirty performances. Its first appearance on the Albanian stage was rendered in Skampa Theater in the city of Elbasan, directed by Spiro Duni. First reaching Soviet Union in the 1940s, Bulgaria and former Yugoslavia in the 1950s and lastly, Albania in the 1980s. *The Little Foxes* remains a masterpiece or a diamond covered by the dust of years waiting to shine again on the Albanian stage. The play's main character is Regina Hubbard Giddens, who fights for wealth and freedom considering the difficulties during the early 20th-century society where the legal heirs of family wealth were sons instead of daughters. The director, Spiro Duni, in the pre-performance guiding lines specifies that his biggest challenge in staging *The Little Foxes* was finding the best actor to interpret Regina. He considered Regina as "The Lady Macbeth of the XX Century" (Duni 1989, 1). Initially, in the pre-performance guiding lines, it is introduced the author, Lillian Hellman, almost not known to the Albanian audience. The next section of the pre-performance guiding lines gives an insight on her "Language and Style of Writing". Her major themes related to the reality of the United States since the beginning of the last century, criticizing the bourgeois society and the gap that existed between North and South America in terms of class division were purposely mentioned as a counter-response to capitalism. Another part describes the scene, the setting and some details on each character emphasizing their greediness. Special importance was given to the servants, Addie and Cal, trying to show the extreme poverty characterizing society in the United States in the eyes of the Albanian audience.

The title *The Little Foxes* was translated as "Nepërkat" in Albanian, which means "asp serpent", deforming the originality of Hellman". The title makes reference to Chapter 2, Verse 15 in *The Song of Solomon* in the King James' version of the Bible: "Take us the foxes, the little foxes, that spoil the vines: for our vines have tender grapes." Albania is the only country in the world declared atheist by law from the 1960s to the end of the 1980s. The biblical allusions, quotations and connotations could not be mentioned. "Nepërkat" or "asp serpent" represents a very dangerous reptile that can fatally attack humans by poisoning them which could lead to death. This is the literal meaning of the word in Albanian, personified in the character of Regina and her two brothers who are blinded by their feelings of greed.

It is staged as a Machiavellian play with the aim of showing that these characters are ready to do whatever it takes to become powerful and rich. Another example of the avoidance of biblical allusions can be found in former Yugoslavia, more precisely in Slovenia. On April 23rd, 1949 the Sentjakobsko Theatre in Ljubljana presented the play under the direction of Milan Petrovic, which represents the first staging of *The Little Foxes* in former Yugoslavia (Slunjski 2002, 29-43). The word "kobilice" is translated as "grasshopper" in English. Based on a Cambridge Dictionary definition a "grasshopper" is a large insect with long back legs that can jump very high and makes a sharp, high noise using its back legs or wings. In both cases, Albanian and Slovenian, the phrase "the little foxes" was avoided, perhaps to find a better adaptation in the target cultures, diverging the meaning of the source culture used as a biblical allusion.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In Albania, during the Cold War, American drama was mainly staged for propaganda purposes and appropriated for moralizing purposes. The 1950s correspond to the foundation of the Albanian Theater as an institution. After giving a purpose and a direction to the national theater, a relatively small number of performances based on American drama were completed. A major American name presented on the Albanian stage during communism was Arthur Miller with *A View from the Bridge* (1962), and later on with *Death of a Salesman* (1986), *All My Sons* (1987) and *The Crucible* (1989). Tennessee Williams represents another major figure who was unfortunately not welcomed in the theater of propaganda in Albania, even though he has later been awarded a wide reception. His play *Orpheus Descending* (1973) became subject to a strict censure, and was banned after the first performance. Although very close to the collapse of communism, *The Little Foxes* was staged in Albania in 1989 and it was well-accepted. Due to the nature of the Albanian totalitarian regime, these major plays were treated almost the same way, bringing out the same moralizing values to speak louder to the audience for the security and trustworthiness of the totalitarian regime. The last decade represents a more "liberal" period. There were significant modifications in all the plays, as well as disruptive, provocative and stimulating effects that brought substantial change in the Albanian context. Helplessness and despair were a sign of bad political leadership, usually identified with capitalism, in opposition to communism that gave security and trustworthiness to the citizens. There was an excessively enforced socialist optimism and strict control over pre/post-performance reviews by theater critics who acted as inspectors of the ideology.

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