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The Political Ghosts and Ideological Phantasms of *The Cherry Orchard. A Sequel*

ABSTRACT

Evoking Chekhov's title, the cherry orchard is the primary metaphor in Nic Ularu's *The Cherry Orchard, a Sequel*, a play that premiered at the La MaMa Etc. Theatre in New York on February 21, 2008. The attraction of Ularu's play lies in an ideologically and politically constructed ghost text, populated by the ghost of Leninism brought to the Cherry Orchard at the twilight of tsarist Russia, in short, not only the ghosts of the dead characters emerging from Chekhov's original but also the ghosts of an incipient Communism. If Ularu's play seems at first glance no more than theatrical *bric a brac*, a quaint relic of its great Russian model whose only merit is that of resurrecting ghosts, I will argue that the *Sequel* also foreshadows a new political and social order in the interrupted patrilineal transmission of social and political authority and of the characters' identity – an "afterlife" instance of dramatic perspectives and political ramifications.

KEYWORDS

Nic Ularu; *The Cherry Orchard*; Ghostly Revenants; Communism.

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Emphasized as in Chekhov's title, the cherry orchard is the primary metaphor in Nic Ularu's *The Cherry Orchard, A Sequel*, a play that premiered at the La MaMa Etc. Theatre in New York on February 21, 2008. To a certain extent, then, Ularu's text (unpublished, but available in its stage version) is a predictable manipulation of the characters' actions after the moment when Chekhov's aggressive parvenu Yermolai Alekseyevich Lopakhin takes over the cherry orchard and allows the land to be used for construction while the former owner, the aristocrat Lyubov Andreyevna Ranevskaya, takes the path of self-imposed exile in Paris together with her daughter Anya.

Beyond the palimpsestic references that bridge the two plays and the playful exchanges that acknowledge Chekhov's original, Ularu's *Sequel* reveals an intertext enriched by one of the major characteristics of postmodern theatrical practices: how to rewrite history in a postmodern culture that has dismantled the idea of history mainly through the relativization of the axial events of history in personal experience. In the *Sequel*, the gradual communist takeover that Chekhov could not have anticipated in *The Cherry Orchard* provides the axial historical event that transfers the dynamic of historical moments onto the personal plane. Thus, in the changing political and social climate that Ularu's play proposes, the exploration



of the relation between its characters and the performative present of the communist takeover foreshadows the central ideology of Bolshevism and of a police-state: Stalinist tactics, Party rhetoric, and aberrant politics disguised as class struggle.

Beyond such recognizable aspects foregrounded in a critical discussion, there is the attraction of Ularu's play as an ideologically and politically constructed ghost text, populated by the ghost of Leninism brought to the Cherry Orchard at the twilight of tsarist Russia, in short, not only the ghosts of the dead characters emerging from Chekhov's original but also the ghosts of an incipient Communism.

The framing device of Ularu's play maintains both the well-known topological configuration and protagonists of *The Cherry Orchard*, several of whom appear as ghosts. The interaction between these fantastic characters and the *Sequel's* "real" personages weaves a scenic interrelation of literary, artistic, and mental space, a half and half or mezzo-text not only literally but also in terms of life-death or half-real, half-textual occurrences.

But if Ularu's play seems at first glance no more than theatrical *bric a brac*, a quaint relic of its great Russian model whose only merit is that of resurrecting ghosts, I will argue that the *Sequel* also foreshadows a new political and social order in the interrupted patrilineal transmission of social and political authority and of the characters' identity – an "afterlife" instance of dramatic perspectives and political ramifications. Specifically, Ularu's play features pitiable or decrepit characters forced to confront the hollowness of Bolshevik ideology and the political crimes of a brutal, emerging Soviet order, which is itself shrouded in death after the Fall of the Berlin Wall and the demise of Communism in the countries of the former Eastern bloc. This added perspective that Ularu uses as foundational

approach to blur the lines between literary interpretation and historical or political acts enriches the polyvalent integrity of the play's literary discourse through what Joseph Luzzi calls "the rhetoric of anachronism." According to Luzzi, such a device provides a correction against any attempt to reduce the formal matter of literary discourse to the status of mere reflector or mirror of its contextual referents, that is of the *Sequel* as a mere palimpsest of Chekhov's masterpiece; consequently, Ularu's play is both an aesthetic experience and a historically engaged act, allowing the stage performance to explore the representation of history is in juxtaposition with personal experience and to become a force-field for transparency and metaphoricity through which to understand the cultural and political context of post-history.

After the watershed triggered by Goethe's review of Alessandro Manzoni's verse drama *Adelchi* (1822) that proclaimed poetic anachronism to be a universal literary category, the notion of anachronism received its most notable treatment in Georg Lukacs's *The Historical Novel*. Here Lukacs writes that the historical novel imbues its protagonists with the "necessary anachronism," by which he means that characters think, feel and behave in a manner that reflects the broad historical and sociopolitical contexts framing their lives.

Moving beyond genre considerations in the category of dramatic representation, Ularu employs in his *Sequel* a rhetoric of anachronism which collapses the boundaries between a literary work's internal means of reference (the characters resurrected from Chekhov's classic play) and its external referential compass made possible by Ularu's post-Communist foreknowledge/ awareness of the evils and aberrations of Soviet ideology which the *Sequel* foregrounds in their incipient form. While



conforming to the necessary anachronism dictated by Chekhov's original play, the lives and conversations of characters in the *Sequel* also respond to the sophisticated norms of objective progression and historical awareness. Lopakhin, the greedy arrivist who had purchased Ranevskaya's cherry orchard in Chekhov's play to better his social condition and become rich is now an aging proprietor whose hopes for a better life have failed to materialize. He lives alone, still wallows in his infatuation for Ranevskaya, and continues to hope that she will return to see her aging brother, Gayev, who lives in the old family house with Lopakhin and who goes to the railroad station everyday to be there just in case she happens to return. With them is Dunasha, Ranevskaya's old servant maid who had been impregnated by the caddish Yasha in Chekhov's play. She is now married to Epihodov, Lopakhin's rather dull accountant and clerk, who also fancies himself to be a very talented writer and poet and who seems to be unfazed by Dunyasha's infidelities. Completing this household and breathing fresh awareness of the past into the present, are the ghosts of Firs, the old servant whose character is a stand-in for the oppressed common man of pre-communist Russia (he is unable to forget his obligations and still worries that Gayev does not dress warmly enough) and of Grisha, Ranevskaya's son, who had drowned in adolescence during a foolish contest with the son of the local pharmacist, Pyotr (Petya) Trofimov, and who is now a wet ghost. The pranks of Firs and Grisha light up the *Sequel* and allow the text to transcend the grim reality of a dying world. In Ularu's ingenious revival, Dunyasha's child is said to have drowned not because of Epihodov's inattention but to allow Grisha, the ghost, to have some fun. The same playful ghosts place pots in the path of Epihodov, their favorite target, making his gait look clumsy and

cumbersome, and thus sealing the perception of the character as being dull and slow-witted.

Firs's and Grisha's ludic anachronisms also summon past events and oblige the reader to reminisce the scenes and characters of Chekhov's play. The twosome trigger their own vampiric image by trying to maintain loose control over the house and by playing tricks on its inhabitants, thus suggesting that the past can be very much a feared and tricky presence in the present. In the rhetorical guide that defines the relationship between anachronism and literary practices, these two characters provide a significant measure of what Henri Morier in *Dictionnaire de poetique et de rhetorique* calls regressive anachronism or catachronism, i.e., the type of anachronism that does not "update" the past to the present but rather situates the problems of the present in the movements of history. From the ghosts' conversation we learn of Grisha's father's dissolute life and the excessive spending of the Ranevsky family, especially the eccentric Lyubov Ranevskaya who spends her time in Paris and neglects the family's land and estate.

The conflict of the *Sequel* thus centers on the transition period from the old world of landed gentry to the gradual spread of Bolshevism in Russia – an occurrence marked in the play by the confrontation between Lopakhin and Ranevskaya on the one hand and Petya Trofimov and Comrade Boris on the other. As these two groups belong to easily discernable political sides of the old, tsarist and the new, Bolshevik Russia, respectively, the character of Epihodov suggests the inability of the middle class to comprehend the class struggle and the senseless triviality of a human existence drained of spiritual meaning. Missing from the *Sequel* is Ranevskaya's beautiful daughter, Anya, whose presence is only felt in the play as a wound or an unaccountable blot or



stain on the once elegant Russian gentry: she is said to work as a prostitute in Paris, under the protection of the former servant Yasha, acting as her pimp. The ludic ghosts of Firs and Grisha suggest the ineffectual role of the past to avert or impact the Bolshevik Revolution and Stalinist takeover.

The arrival of Trofimov, the young man who had once loved Raneskaya's daughter Anya and who had also benefited from Lopakhin's generous support while being in school, jolts the household from what Petya calls "being stuck in the past" and steers the interpretation of the *Sequel* toward dramatic commentary on the evils of Soviet Communism. A militant Bolshevik and member of the Red Army, Petya is now anxious to gloss over his past attachment to Raneskaya, and especially his once very public infatuation with beautiful Anya. He also needs to prepare the ground for Comrade Boris to receive the "good references" required for the position of cultural propagandist in the region to which Petya aspires to lead politically. As a final gesture of kindness toward his former benefactor, Petya also wants to warn Lopakhin that he needs to leave immediately because he is in danger of being deported to Siberia or even executed.

These unmistakable allusions to the monstrous Stalinist tactics with which Ularu is all-too-familiar after a lifetime spent in Communist Romania accelerate the spectator's understanding of the past – what must have been the terror of an emerging Bolshevism for the Russian people. Lopakhin's suicide, Ranevskaya's execution-style death and Trofimov's subsequent suicide, all convey in dramatic representation the play's mandate to establish authenticity and veracity by providing an enduring memorial to the tragic events of the traumatic and unforgettable history of a forcibly Stalinized East Central Europe.

By anchoring his *Sequel* into the senseless history of such events so that the

spectator can revisit the past, Ularu's play also turns on a double anachronism: first, the belated return by the author to Chekhov's play that stands as a pretext or vessel for the dramatic re-creation of an incipient Communism; and second, the anachronism that occurs when the spectator dislodges the time and characters from the play's realm into the present bringing forth the clash of mentalities – the brutal reality of an abrupt ideological takeover in Soviet Russia and the lingering memory of enforced Stalinism in East Central Europe – that Thomas Greene identifies as a key effect of literary anachronism.

Trofimov's hatred communicated in such pronouncements as "Lopakhin is dangerous and egotistic...he helped people in order to humiliate them," or his views of Ranevskaya as someone who "acted like royalty and enjoyed a fortune made by her ancestors with their serf's blood! She and her brother never worked in their lives," bring about the infernal experience of Communism and the suffering of survivors from the privileged classes reduced to silence by the suffocating grip of memory.

In delineated ideological patches, Ularu's play engages the audience in the activity of digging out linguistic bones and relics not only so that they can be given a proper burial place but also in order to put in perspective old wounds by forcing the flesh open to dig through all the layers of blood and suffering. In *Sequel*, historical events gush forth from the wounds of communist history and are legitimized as political truths by the very virtue of their horror. Disseminated throughout the play in traumatic moments of compressed cruelty, the shooting of Ranevskaya by Comrade Boris or the sound of the gunshot that announces Trofimov's suicide when forced to commit murder in the name of communist principles, function as indices of the time when



history explodes; they are also historical signals that encompass the congealed eventfulness of history with which spectators are called to interact. By invoking Comrade Boris's cruelty in shooting an old, ailing woman, *Sequel* produces an active form of despair that makes spectators aware of history and aware of themselves. Through dramatic complicity, they perform the Benjaminian "*Jetztzeit*" while simultaneously experiencing the horrors of the traumatic communist era and they also resurrect the ghost of Lenin's fanatic ideology.

It seems as if Ularu's orchard is visited by Lenin's ghost, once again aware that people would never support him and that he must propose a single organ to rule and oversee the creation of Communism: the Party. It is this embarrassing gap between reality (suggested in the old timers of both plays) and aspiration (displayed in the madness of comrade Boris and in Trofimov's feeble attempts to comply) that made Lenin's quasi-religious fidelity to the Party so important and so obligatory – and so haunting in Ularu's *Sequel* as a political ghost to the improvised peculiar system the Soviet Union and the countries of the Eastern Bloc since the days of the 1945 Yalta agreement had to observe with military discipline and obligatory terror.

The healing ritual Ularu proposes consists of retrieving in the characters' words the pretentious, now ghostly, rhetoric of Soviet ideology. When told that the present times are "shitty," Trofimov brings in the slogans proclaiming that "by simply enrolling in the communist party people will become happier and healthier." Echoing the fervor of a Bolshevism spearheaded by the tragically deceived figures of culture who championed the Revolution of 1917, Trofimov asserts that "the artist must use his talent to imagine and depict a glorious future...the concerts and theatre performances

must take place in factories, in fields, or wherever the workers and peasants need culture. Culture will be in their midst." Such "artistic truths" are as much the laughing stock of today's intellectual as the pranks of Grisha, the wet ghost, are to the audience of Ularu's *Sequel*.

Metamorphosed from ghostly Leninism into political *déjà vu*, Trofimov's utter nonsense, much like Comrade Boris's destabilizing rhetoric, suggests the regenerative force of aesthetic/ dramatic memory that assumes the form of a symbolic resistance to historical and sociopolitical context and triggers the play's gesture of intransigence against the menacing events of neo-Stalinism in the present. For Ularu to speak on behalf of the mind of his characters is akin to any of us speaking on behalf of the dead, for neither the fictional nor the deceased can qualify or edit our words. Yet without this rationally impossible link between the living, the dead, and the imaginary, we cannot have the historical novel or play. Nor can we have memory. When Goethe writes that "all poetry essentially deals in anachronisms," he grasps the profound and epistemological stakes inherent in the clash of temporalities that inevitably accompanies figurative modes of expression – modes that, I have endeavored to show, can not only trick time but also aim to resurrect ghosts and ideology from the dominion of death. Such political ghosts and ideological phantasms as those of the *Sequel* produce knowledge about the past in ways that subvert the more rational and empirical elements traditionally associated with disciplines like history and philosophy.

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