

Introduction

The aim of this book is to investigate the performance history of Henrik Ibsen in the Romanian theatre from the end of the 19th century to the first half of the 20th century.

On the one hand, the quantitative analysis of data on the early Romanian productions of Ibsen's plays between 1894 and 1947 reveals that he was not performed with great frequency in either the major state or independent theatres. Yet, it is equally clear from a qualitative analysis of memoirs, reviews and theatre historical inquiries that his dramaturgy had a significant impact on the development of the staging and acting practices in the newly emergent Romanian theatre.

In other words, at the heart of the early Romanian reception to Ibsen there is a contradiction between the moderate to low number of productions and their obvious consistency. To interrogate and explore how this contradiction created a unique Romanian Ibsen tradition up to 1947, this research employs four distinct viewpoints.

Firstly, this research considers the diversity of influences coming from multiple European theatre cultures and their effect on the dissemination of Ibsen's plays in Romania. For this purpose, I analyse the contribution of touring productions in five languages: French, Italian, German, Hungarian and Yiddish. These tours introduced Ibsen to the Romanian audience in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Their wide variety of interpretative strategies and their geographical spread across the country laid the foundations for the rich aesthetic diversity of early Romanian productions of Ibsen.

Secondly, this research accounts for the way in which the most powerful cultural and political constraints on the field of the Romanian Ibsen productions shaped a landscape of contradictions. Commercialism, protectionism and aesthetics were the strongest forces at work within the unstable administrative, financial and legislative structures. Thus, the constantly changing context was often simultaneously both in favour of and against Ibsen's presence in the repertory. On the one hand, the protectionist and commercialist aims of the theatre legislation had a negative impact on the position of Ibsen as a foreign playwright in the repertory. On the other hand, the aesthetic principles in the legislation worked in Ibsen's favour as they strengthened the position of the canonical playwrights on the Romanian stage. Thus, these institutional constraints on the Romanian theatre field up to 1947 framed the paradoxes encompassing the Romanian Ibsen productions.

Thirdly, this research seeks to explain how the national Ibsen production history within the decentralised Romanian theatre culture supported the interpretative diversity enacted in the mix of foreign and local practices. For this purpose, it focuses on the impact of the Ibsen experiments conducted by the major Romanian actors and directors in three key sites: the National Theatre of Iași, the private theatre companies, and the National Theatre of Bucharest. The thesis groups the early Romanian Ibsenites and attaches each cluster of artists to these three production hubs. Then it charts the artists' knowledge of major tendencies in the European theatre practice, and analyses how they crafted eclectic combinations of local and foreign practices in the local Ibsen productions of each key location.

Fourthly, this research pursues a close-up analysis of the interpretative strategies used in the performance of three popular Ibsen characters on the Romanian stage prior to 1947: Oswald and Mrs Alving from *Ghosts*, and Dr Stockmann from *Enemy of the People*. These case studies, focusing on the interpretative options of six star actors, provide a further examination and illustration of aesthetic diversity. Each of them built their own acting recipes by combining their knowledge of the major European practices of acting, influences from the fluid, decentralised Romanian theatre culture, and their personal experience of performing Ibsen's characters. As no interpretative tradition gained dominance in the productions of Ibsen in Romania prior to 1947 because of the institutional decentralisation and fluidity, these unique aesthetic strategies developed in a very free environment. The star status of these actors supported their aesthetic, creative mixing of a variety of acting genres in the characterisations; their Ibsen experiments contributed to the modernisation of the Romanian repertory and practice of acting.

Finally, this research does not seek to synthesise these viewpoints into a fixed, standardised and essentialist definition of the Romanian Ibsen tradition prior to 1947. Instead, it seeks to explore the multiple interactions between theatre cultures, institutions, artists, and interpretative approaches in performing Ibsen within the constantly changing geo-spatial boundaries of Romania before communism. On the one hand, the research findings reveal that the very fluidity of the Romanian geographical, political and cultural space nourished the assimilation of multiple cultural influences and created a truly European theatrical site of diversity. The linguistic complexity made it easy for the numerous European interpretative strategies of performing Ibsen to interact and mingle in multiple, playful ways over a period of roughly fifty years in Romania. On the other hand, the incessant instability and mobility of the institutional forces of constraint did not support the long-term coagulation of these numerous theatre practices into a dominant trend. Instead, it enhanced the diversity by leading to the emergence of several – albeit short-lived – alternative patterns in the Romanian Ibsen productions. Eventually, their rather quick dissolution indicates that the cosmopolitan Romanian Ibsen tradition before the communist era successfully resisted any definitive categorisation and remained inherently marked by openness, diversity and creative freedom.