

ASU presents Romanian avant-garde puppetry, drama

September 23, 2010

The Book of Apolodor Puppet Show
September 25, 2010
7 p.m.

Paris Bucharest Express
September 26, 2010
7 p.m.

For many families living in Romania under communist rule after World War II, a disguised, underground cultural life was their primary escape. This weekend, Phoenix area Americans can experience the liberating message when theater becomes political tribune in two productions at ASU Tempe campus: "Book of Apolodor" is a puppet show based on the stories of Romanian Surrealist poet, Gellu Naum; "Paris Bucharest Express" is a dramatic play adapted from poetry and writings of the Romanian avant-garde.

"Apolodor" will be performed by Romanian actors in English. "Bucharest Express" will be performed by members of the French troupe, La Compagnie Cie de L'Echo, in French with English subtitles.

The productions are the product of collaboration between ASU Romanian Studies professor Ileana Orlich and Mona Marian, the director of the Puck Puppet Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, Romania and the Theatre Denis in Hyeres, France. They met ten years ago in Bucharest while Orlich was conducting ASU's summer Study Abroad program in Romania and Central Europe.

Since then they have collaborated on several theatrical productions based on writings of the Romanian avant-garde. Marian said, "The subject of these performances is not unfamiliar to American culture. The plays show that Romania, France and the United States are connected, through the avant-garde, across continents."

Romania's avant-garde was a group of artists and writers who were very influential to the broader European avant-garde movement at the beginning of the 20th century. Prominent Romanians included playwright Eugene Ionescu, composer George Enescu, writer Urmuz, Gellu Naum and author-performer Tristan Tzara.

The intellectual vigor of this group created a flourishing cultural climate in Romania prior to WWII. Its members were instrumental in creating the Dadaism and Surrealism movements in visual art and literature.

However, at that time Paris was regarded as the intellectual nexus of Europe, so most members of the Romanian avant-garde relocated to France. Then with the advent of WWII and Romania's subsequent alliance with Nazi Germany, they were rendered permanently exiled.

At the end of the war when the totalitarian regimes in Romania switched from fascist to communist, the country's cultural climate deteriorated. During the most oppressive phases of communist rule, all intellectual ties to the West were severed and Romania's avant-garde heritage was erased from national awareness. Yet even under conditions of censorship and heavy political propaganda, underground artistic expression survived through cultural subterfuge.

For example, Gellu Naum turned from writing Surrealist poetry to writing children's books. Two of them featured the central character, Apolodor, a small singing penguin who performed with a Bucharest circus. Seemingly innocent tales about Apolodor's imaginary travels, the books were widely published in Romania and the stories even read over national radio.

Orlich remembers her family gathering around the radio to listen to the stories of Apolodor. It was obvious that Apolodor's adventures were masked narratives through which Naum conveyed themes of exile, journey and initiation using a hero who was exotic and unknown, and therefore not viewed as a political threat.

When Marian discovered Romania's avant-garde heritage through her personal studies, she said "Their poetry connected with my feelings and imagination in a way that was both beautiful and chilling." She resolved to one day perform their writings. When she met Orlich, their mutual passion for the Romanian avant-garde led to an easy partnership, with Orlich translating and adapting avant-garde literature to the stage, and Marian directing their productions.

Marian hopes American audiences will come away from her productions with a better appreciation of the pivotal role that the Romanian avant-garde played in bridging the more well-known avant-garde movements in Russia and the rest of Europe. "People don't know that many of the names they hear, that they think are French, are actually Romanian," she said.

The two events are sponsored by the Romanian Studies Program in the School of International Letters and Cultures, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Additional support has been provided by the ASU Institute for Humanities Research, the Center for Jewish Studies, the Central European Collaborative, the Romanian Consulate in Los Angeles, and the Honorary Consulate General of Romania in Arizona.

"The Book of Apolodor" puppet show will be presented at 7 p.m., Sept. 25; for more information, visit <http://asu.edu/clas/silc/events/apolodor.htm>.

"Paris Bucharest Express" will be presented at 7 p.m., Sept. 26; for more information, visit <http://asu.edu/clas/silc/events/bucharest.htm>.

Both productions will be held at the ASU Tempe Campus Recital Hall, which is on the fifth floor of the Music Building. The Music Building is located at 50 E. Gammage Parkway in Tempe. Both events are free.

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