

Amphitryon – *A Story About Desires And Individuality*

**Performance review, *Amphitryon*, directed by Silviu Purcărete,
Cluj-Napoca National Theatre, May 2023**

Amphitryon, a French comedy, consisting of a prologue and 3 acts, was written by Molière in 1668 (and translated into Romanian by Victor Eftimiu and Petru Manoliu in verse). Since then, the name Amphitryon has come to be used in the sense of “good, generous host”; in Spanish the word used for “host” is “anfitrión” and in Portuguese, “anfitrião”. The play is based on the story of the Greek mythological character Amphitryon brought on the stage of the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre in an intriguing manner: Jupiter (played by Ionuț Caras), the supreme god, used to satisfy his erotic desires by any means, takes the form of Amphitryon (Matei Rotaru) in order to seduce his beautiful wife, Alcmena (Sânziana Tarța). What is going to happen when not even the gods can control their animalistic desires? What are we, if not beings condemned to reason?

The director introduces us to the working process of the show, confessing on the Cluj-Napoca National Theatre’s website: “the show is a scenic sketch of the play, even an unfinished sketch which, of course, was generated by this team, because everything started from them”. He also presents the motivation for choosing this text, starting from an existentialist thought, which he materializes on stage: “The question is: who am I and who is the other? How am I different from the others? What makes me unique to



a partner? But these are questions to which we cannot give exact answers. They are easy subjects for meditation. Easy because they are put in terms of comedy.” Thus, what is meant to be a comedy of manners ends up being a meditation on individuality and the ephemeral human condition. At the same time, a commentary with feminist overtones is created, regarding the physical and emotional abuse to which Jupiter and Amphytrion subject Alcmena (who becomes the representation of the Universal Woman, a Woman viewed throughout the centuries as a national asset or as a simple possession of men). A cloud of scandal surrounded Molière’s play at the time of its writing: some critical voices claimed that the play was a satire on the love affairs of Louis XIV of France (portrayed here as Jupiter). Thus, the play also acquires a political layer and the reason why director Silviu Purcărete chooses to stage it in 2023 is therefore even more interesting.



Fig. 1: Jupiter, Alcmena and the chorus, in *Amphytrion*, TNC, 2023

In *Amphytrion*, the different modes of the comic intersect harmoniously with the moral implications that often emerge from the subtext. The play (and naturally, the performance) is about seduction, adultery, jealousy as well as

about passion, pride and loyalty. The struggle between the desires of the all-powerful gods and the weaknesses of ordinary mortals is debated through two almost mirror-image love relationships, Amphitryon with Alcmene and Sosie with Cleantis. Some characters (such as Sosie and Mercury) speak in sync precisely to highlight this duality.

The show strictly respects the original text: the characters speak in rhyme, consistent with the style of Molière's time, not altering it with modern/everyday insertions, familiar to today's audience. As it is known, in the Baroque era, the dynamics of music caused the sound intensity to change unexpectedly (that's why in this show the characters start singing certain sequences, almost like in a musical). Vasile Şirli composed the music, hinting at the 17th century sound universe, and Incze G. Katalin was in charge of the musical training of the actors, who had to get very familiar with this baroque style of interpretation.



Fig. 2: Jupiter (Ionuț Caras), Alcmene (Sânziana Tarța) and the chorus, in *Amphitryon*, TNC, 2023

This decision is appreciated by those spectators who are familiar with the cultural environment of the 17th century and can thus appreciate a style used less and less in contemporary theater, but it is also viewed with skepticism by those who wanted to see a simple comedy, in which to find a comic mirror of themselves, and which turns out, unfortunately, to get them tired of trying to keep up with the versification and musical hybridity of the dialogue.

The specific baroque taste (for colossal and grandiose, irregularity and excess of complicated ornaments) in counterpoint with a very simplified, abstract contemporary taste, is highlighted by the creators of the show through the large number of actors present in the stage space during several scenes – but wearing casual, contemporary costumes – , through the imposing set elements and costumes – which appear only in the banquet scenes, hidden most of the time in a secret backstage and revealed in the last part of the performance – , through the oscillating lights (whether obscure, in shape of some small lamps, whether falling from the top of the stage, to the bottom, nicely complimenting the bodies of the actors – but leaving thus a large background of black monochromatism, very modern from a visual point of view), and by using the red curtain as a game tool and also as a convention for changing the space in which the characters are (both physically and mentally) playing thus both with the baroque richness of the material and its wide symbolic, that challenges the audience to imagine the façade of Amphitryon's house, while not seeing any realistic detail hinting at it. The scenography is signed by Dragoș Buhagiar and includes for the interior of the house, a vintage brown sofa, a sophisticated dressing table with a sink, an oversized painting depicting Amphitryon, two leather armchairs and several wooden chairs (intended for the choir).

So, the element of the chorus appears, made up of eleven ambiguous and diverse characters (who may simultaneously represent both servile members of Amphitryon's suite and instances of the theatrical world: actors in simple black moving costumes, who at a given moment perform push-ups while the dialogue unfolds unhindered in front of them). The characters actively intervene, complementing the music and emphasizing the words of the protagonists, at key moments.

Unlike the members of the chorus, the audience members constitute the role of mute spectators, who take part closely in the whole masquerade illustrated by Molière, but who never intervene. Their faces are illuminated by the gas lamps of the male characters roaming both the stage and the aisle between the seats, to accentuate the dramatic effect, but also the idea of traveling and dynamism.

The performance starts from absolute darkness, accompanied only by sounds of crickets (the clear suggestion of night). The characters' faces are gradually revealed by some small lamps that look like fireflies. Each head that pops up represents a pair of eyes (to see everything that characters can't), a pair of ears (because we all know walls have ears) and a conscience (more or less tainted until the end). Sosie addresses the personification of night: "Stop, stop! Stay still, bewitched night!", words that already suggest the presence of the supernatural in the collective mind and the characters' faith in a force superior to them. Once we enter the stage space, we notice that Mercury has a cold light upon his face instead of a warm one, like the other characters (the distinction between the two plans of existence, between mortals and immortals).

Mercury slaps Sosie, but from a distance, without actually touching him, which may of course suggest the superiority, but it may also be a directorial choice, thinking to the fact that throughout the performance, theatrical conventions are highlighted and directly played upon, in an almost Brechtian manner.

Silviu Purcărete decides that the character of Mercury should not resemble that of Sosie (as expected, considering the identity theft planned by Mercury), and uses no masks either, thus creating a comical, absurd situation (Sosie: "to the gesture, to the face, to body, it's like me", when it's actually clear that one of them is slimmer and another is fuller, one has longer hair, another shorter...).

The darkness lasts the whole Prologue and first Act, and then there is the first change of convention, the one that facilitates the transition from a fantastic, fuzzy space (somewhere deserted, at night) to a real, palpable one (in Thebes, inside Amphitryon's and Alcmena's house). The second Act begins with a static, pictorial image, depicting a reclining figure, Alcmena, dressed in a negligée, sensually seated on a couch, as if taken from a Renaissance

painting (see the painting *Venus of Urbino/Reclining Venus*). The director describes himself in an interview, revealing the nature of his work and the motivation for choosing to represent this symbol: “I’m a slave to the eye and I’m not specifically looking to create amazing visual images, but I can’t stop myself from taking care of what the eye can see either” (*De la vorbe la cântec*, George Banu, trad. Ștefana Pop-Curșeu).



Fig. 3: Alcmene (Sânziana Tarța) and Amphitryon (Matei Rotaru), in *Amphitryon*, TNC, 2023

The “noble” characters (the two husbands) wear a specific, slightly clownish make-up (white face, bright pink cheeks and eyelids). After the real Amphitryon’s monologue, a contrasting and unexpected element appears: a party with all the above, with a long, festive table (set in the theater’s backstage) and plenty of food. Meanwhile, the woman is crouched on the floor, suffering the baneful consequences of the actions of the male characters; we also notice that she is pregnant. The ending is a “happy” one, depicting Jupiter and Mercury floating above the stage with help from a “flying” device used in the circus world; the two admit their plan and return the “borrowed” identities to the rightful owners.



Fig. 4: Final Banquet and Alcmene, the victim, in *Amphitryon*, TNC, 2023

In conclusion I would say that the fact that the director decided to approach the 17th century text, combining classical elements with modern details, baroque pieces with house/techno music, military costumes with colorful dresses with sequins (deliberately creating a suite of anachronisms, such as the presence of an electric toothbrush in our mythological characters' bathroom), is challenging for the audience, who has to constantly pay attention to the versified text and to the correspondences triggered by the stage. Spectators need just not to be too comfortable in their prejudices and accept the offered unexpected conventions.

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