SAVIANA STĂNESCU AND A POST-COLONIAL READING OF OVID'S EXILE[1]

Rodica Mihăilă
University of Bucharest

Poet, playwright, performer, journalist and teacher, New York-based Saviana Stănescu is one of the most acclaimed representatives of the New Wave of Romanian playwrights who emerged out of Romania after 2000. Known as a poet and journalist, she came to public attention as a playwright in 2000, when her play "The Inflatable Apocalypse" won "The Best Play of the Year" UNITER Award. One year later, she went to New York on a Fulbright grant and took an MA in Performance Studies and an MFA in Dramatic Writing from NYU, where she is currently teaching in the Drama Department.

In less than a decade she has published eight books of drama and poetry, the most recent, *Aliens With Extraordinary Skills* (Samuel French, New York) in 2009; her plays have been included in prestigious anthologies of contemporary drama such as *Plays and Playwrights* 2006 (New York Theater Experience), *Best Plays of 2005* (Smith & Kraus) and *Voices from Undergroundzero. An Anthology of American Plays in German Translation* (Fisher Verlag, 2008); they have been presented internationally in France, Great Britain, Austria, the Check Republic, Macedonia, Montenegro, Switzerland, Germany and Sweden.

As her career is closely linked with the New York theater and she writes mostly in English from the perspective of the new hyphenated American coming from postcommunist Eastern Europe, the rising interest in American ethnic drama has placed her work on the orbit of New York innovative theater and brought her such awards as John Golden Award for Excellence in Playwriting (2004) and New York Innovative Theatre Award (2007). Only in the last three years her New York productions have included *Lenin's Shoe* at the Lark Theatre, *I Want What You Have* at World Financial Center, *Waxing West* (2007 New York Innovative Theatre Award), and *YokastaS Redux* at La MaMa Theatre, *Flagstories* at TBG Theatre (co-written with Arthur Kopit, Theresa Rebeck, Israel Horowitz et als as part of

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Myth America Project), *Suspendida* and *Vicious Dogs on Premises* at the Ontological Theatre, *E-Dating Project* at Lee Strasberg Theatre&Film Institute, *Aliens with Extraordinary Skills* at Julia Miles Theatre.

In a recent interview she explains her American success as being due to the way in which her work meets the expectations of American multiculturalism:

> America is a patchwork society, a society made up of community and identity patches. These last years, after the demise of postmodernism, everything has been centred on socio-politics. This is so because all these various communities want to find a way in which to express their identity. At present, there is an upsurge of the African-American, Asian-American, Latino, and, most recently, Arab-American theatre. And so, all these patches began to get into the mainstream. It is approximately in this area that my writing can be placed, which means I am not alone, yet I am the only author writing about East-European immigrants. As I've said, there is already a certain interest in these areas, and many people already see things in this way, as identity- and community-based patches, and are interested in finding out what's going on within the borders of one or another of these patches.[2] (Plesea)

John Clinton Eisner, producing artistic director at LARK Development Center, sums up Stănescu's contribution to contemporary artistic world:

> Saviana Stănescu is creating some of the most exciting new theatre today. She is an important artist of global stature, whose work and perspectives are particularly resonant for American audiences now… she is making a unique and essential artistic contribution to my organization, the hundreds of artists in our community, and the nation as a whole. …Her plays mix genres, combining dark absurdism in the vein of Beckett and Ionesco with scenes that employ a contemporary, psychology-oriented American sensibility. Her work is both thought-provoking and hysterically funny, with wide audience appeal. (*roMania* 171)

Though her ties with Romania are extremely tight and she has been part of several projects involving the practitioners of the new wave of Romanian playwrights (director of New Drama Program for the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and co-editor with Daniel Gerould of

[2] Transl. from Rom.

roMANIA after 2000 (2007), the first anthology of new Romanian drama published in the United States, including plays by Gianina Cărbunariu, Bogdan Georgescu, Vera Ion, Peca Ştefan and Saviana Stănescu), she admits on her website that she "was born in Bucharest, Romania, on a cold February morning during Ceausescu's dictatorship, and reborn in New York in the hot days of 2001" (http:/saviana.com/bio). The process of reinventing herself in the US is reflected in her work, for the trade-mark of Stănescu's plays is her concern with the new East European/Romanian immigration to the West, especially the US, which she knows now from her own experience. From a feminist demystifying perspective, Stănescu investigates the value-generating territory of "in-betweenness" inhabited by the East-European "other", the intersections of cultures, the crisscrossing of borders between races, ethnicities, gender, religions and languages and the relation between memory and history. In a number of plays such as *Waxing West, Lenin's Shoe, White Embers, Suspendida, Bechnia*, *Aurolac Blues* and *For a Barbarian Woman* she explores interpersonal and global power relations of various kinds—between individuals, between East and West and between superpowers and small countries—by employing what she calls a "post-postcolonial" approach to power-play dynamics.

My essay focuses on Stănescu's recent play *For a Barbarian Woman* (2009), an encounter between the "imperial" Self and the "Barbarian"/postcolonial/postcommunist "Other," where Ovid's exile is set within the force-field of a power discourse that involves two empires, a small country, two historical ages and two love stories, but keeps a fresh eye on the contact zone between cultures and people and anticipates a new understanding of otherness.

Last June, when I was in New York working on a book of interviews on Romanian American Cultural relations, Stănescu brought to my attention the draft of her new play, *For a Barbarian Woman*, which marks the turn taken by her creative career in recent days. Before publication, this draft will pass through a series of workshops and performances, a first one having already taken place in New Haven; nevertheless, even at this stage, the text casts an extremely interesting light on a fresh reading of Ovid's exile, Stănescu's "reinvention of herself", the postcommunist East European immigration and the current dynamics of global power-play, with special reference to Romania and the United States.

For a Barbarian Woman is an extremely ambitious play trying in a post-postmodernist fashion to bridge gaps, or blur the borders between myth and history, mind and body, imaginative and scientific knowledge, the actual and the eternal. It is also a moment of reflection on the condition of exile, the drama of in-betweenness, the reconfiguration of power relations in today's world, the tragic condition of the individual soul crashed by the forces of history, a courageous and risky attempt to diagnose our times and to re-

textualize recent and ancient history by suggesting, in the tradition of Joyce and Pound, the simultaneity of seemingly very different ages and civilizations.

The mechanism of the play which places Ovid's exile in a postcolonial perspective, is based on the simultaneous presentation of two love stories occurring in the same place (Tomis/today's Constanța) on the Black Sea coast, at a distance of 2000 years. One, in the year 9 A.D., is the love story of exiled poet Ovid for a local (Barbarian) woman, and the other, in 2009, is that of an American Army colonel at the NATO base in Constanta for a Romanian interpreter and student of English and Latin.

Mixing fact and fiction, the play documents its historicity by oblique reference to the exile writings of Ovid: his two poetry collections, *Tristia* and *Epistulae ex Ponto*, and more especially, a presumably lost poem for a Barbarian woman, written in the language of the place, which he mentions in his *Epistulae*, but was never found.

The poetic dimension of the play that emphasizes the potential of imaginative, artistic knowledge, and makes possible the presentation of the simultaneity of all history and the escape from history, draws on the tradition of the chorus in ancient drama and that of magic realism in postmodernist writing embodied in the androgynous character of the Black Sea, and the three Muses.

In a reverse of perspectives, Ovid's exile is not viewed in the classical light of the banished poet as victim of the power play at the heart of the Roman Empire and the negative effects of displacement, but in the light of his relationship with the "Barbarians," whom he fears and despises in *Tristia* but begins to understand better in *Epistulae* – a relationship which the play subsumes to the generic relationship between the imperial self and the colonized/Barbarian Other.

Corresponding to Ovid's slightly changed attitude toward the Getae in his *Epistulae* compared to *Tristia*, the process of othering juxtaposes two types of relationship between self and other: a fearful one, based on not knowing the other, one in which the other is subject of what Said described as the construction of the Oriental Other by Western civilization from a position of power, and a second one, implying an ethical relation based on knowing the Other, on responsibility for the Other. In Stănescu's play, this second type of relationship is secured by love.

The "orientalized" construction of the Barbarian Other is a disparaging, hostile image, a "negative inversion" of Roman civilization. This is how Ovid describes the Barbarians in his letter to Augustus Caesar:[3]

[3] All the quotations from the play are taken from the draft e-mailed to me by Saviana Stănescu on 5/16/09.

> We're scarcely protected by the fortress's shelter: and even
> the barbarous crowd inside, mixed with Greeks, inspire fear,
> for the barbarians live amongst us, without discrimination,
> and also occupy more than half the houses.
> Even if you don't fear them, you'd hate the sight
> of their sheepskins and their chests covered by long curly hair.
> Even those who are thought to descend from the Greek colony
> wear Persian trousers instead of their ancestral clothing.
> They hold communication in the local tongue,
> I have to make myself understood through gestures. (20)

The "civilizing" mission of colonization is further circumscribed to the Foucauldian idea that power generates knowledge. Excluded from the position of power, the Other has no access to knowledge. "Who's gonna be better known by posterity – Ovid or Tristia?" asks one of the Muses. Another one answers: "That's stupid. We both know it's gonna be Ovid. Roman civilization takes care of memory slash history" (25). In other words, it's not so much the greatness of Ovid's gift as a poet as the power of the Roman Empire and the Latin language that perpetuates him in history.

In a dream conversation between Ovid and Caesar, the latter speaks about the superiority of Roman civilization and the Latin language as justification for the expansion of the empire:

> It was awful. I was begging him to let me stay there in Rome, to let me create a School of Poetry: Please, let me stay and delight people with my verse and my wit, let me teach them the art of love! But he said: No, poetry is useless. And Love is self-indulgent. War is what we need now. We need to make our empire grow. We need to have everyone speak Latin. The language of culture and civilisation. That's not what you want as a honourable Roman citizen? To teach everyone the wit and beauty of the Latin language? And I said: I do, I want everybody to learn and appreciate the subtleties of Latin. Good, it means you agree to lead our army to victory. Conquer the Barbarians! But Caesar, I whispered, I am not a soldier, I'm a poet. Nonsense, he replied. The Barbarians must learn Latin. You are the only one who can teach them. We'll help you. The soldiers will be there with you to fight, to kill, to conquer, to extract the gold from those Barbarian lands, to get their riches as you will enrich their spirit. It's just a fair-trade. (45)

The exclusion of the Other from the position of power by the "imperial Self" cannot be done without devaluating and ultimately hating

[the other]" (Castoriadis 17). We have here what Castoriadis calls the "fearful side" of the relation to alterity, which generates racism and xenophobia.

In the play, this type of relation is gradually destabilized by the exile experience. Seen through the lenses of cultural relativism, the claimed superiority of Western/Roman civilization falls under scrutiny. Ovid takes pains to explain to Tristia the master-slave relationship, but Tristia, wild and proud, refuses to accept the role assigned to her by Ovid's civilization. She exclaims in protest: "I've never EVER had a master" (22) and then she explains she is no exception among her people: "We borrowed these words from Latin. We didn't have them twenty years ago. Slave. Master. Funny words" (23) – with "twenty years," an obvious allusion to the postcommunist period. So much so about the civilizing mission of Latin.

In the process of constructing the Other, Ovid calls the Barbarian woman Tristia (Sadness), for to him she is whatever he imagines her to be, but when he finally asks her what her real name means in the Getae language, she tells him it means "Joy". The relativity principle brought to attention by the play's epigraph taken from Einstein (motto: "The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift."), is applied here to the fearful side of the relation of alterity in order to destabilize it. In his letter to Augustus, Ovid admits that he may be well taken for a Barbarian by the local people:

> They hold communication in the local tongue,
> I have to make myself understood through gestures.
> Here I am the Barbarian no one comprehends… (20)

Re-considering the power relations between the imperial Self and the oppressed Other, Stănescu offers a fresh insight into Ovid's exile, with Ovid standing for the exiled artist/poet/"visionary" in general.

In response to Ovid's complaint that his exile would reflect negatively on his art: "I need some feedback" (47) or "I do miss my home, my library, my bed." (46), Tristia pleads in favor of the richness of the experience of displacement: "Look at the bright sight: you travelled….you have more things to write about." In the closing scene of the play, with Tristia gone forever, Ovid discovers that she was right. Love has totally transformed the relation between the imperial self and the Barbarian Other. Ovid's belief in Roman/Western culture's superiority and universality is undermined to the extent he wants to write poetry in Tristia's language: "Can you bring her back, Black Sea? I promise… I promise… I will write a poem for her! In the Barbarian language. A poem for the Barbarian Woman. I don't even know her name. Her real name. I called her Tristia but who am I

to give her a name? What name would she give me? I'm too old for her, I could be / her father" (63). And also: "I'm Ovid. The greatest Roman poet. I'm Ovid. Ovid! I wrote the Art of Love! I wrote Metamorphosis! I wrote many books. I am famous. I am famous! Someone must have heard of me. Have you heard of me? Have you? Have you? You must have heard of me… I am famous… Have you heard of me? Answer me! Please, answer me" (63).

The answer of the Muse is "You have work to do. You must write the Poem for the Barbarian Woman" (63). This is what would make him really famous.

Giving an imaginative, post-colonial reading of Ovid's exile, Stănescu can easily superimpose on it the romantic relation between Richard (Rich) Valenti, the NATO American Colonel and Theo, his young Romanian interpreter and major in Latin and English ("Two powerful languages, two languages of power" (18)), in postcommunist Romania, with the declared intention of writing " a more ambitious play, that aims to reflect the tides of history, the relation between great powers and small countries" (Plesea).

In the interview she gave me,[4] Stănescu compared official power discourse in the U.S. and Romania, speaking of the "revelation" of the mechanism of power relations she had when she first arrived in New York:

> It is in America that I understood what discourses of power mean: on the radio, in public speeches, American leaders speak about a people destined to lead. Undoubtedly, each discourse varies depending on political coordinates, but it only varies in relation to how this hegemony is imposed on people, in relation to 'how,' but not to 'why'. (Mihăilă)

She further contrasted America's power discourse with that of Romania, "[whose] history is made up of waves of resistance or semi-resistance to empires such as the Roman, the Ottoman, the Austro-Habsburg, the Fascist, or the Soviet one" (Mihăilă). As she put it: "Official discourse in Romania has always been of the type – 'let's be nice with the West, with the superpowers, so we might gain something, for instance access to the European Union, to NATO, and in this way become a part, no matter how small, of the upper echelon'" (Mihăilă).

In her play, Stănescu addresses the question of power relations by constructing a parallel between Ovid – Tristia and Rich Valenti – Theo. Colonel Valenti, whose Italian name connects him with Ovid and the Roman Empire, and his nick name, Rich, with the "rich" United States, is also a sort of exile, since he has spent several years away from home, on the battlefields

[4] The interview was given in Romanian.

of Afghanistan and Iraq and at the NATO base in Constanța; Theo, in her turn, is in many respects Tristia's counterpart. The parallel is made even more obvious by the fact that Ovid/Rich and Tristia/Theo are characters played by the same actor/actress respectively. In this way, "the imperial Self – the Barbarian Other" relation is transposed to the postcommunist/ postcolonial relation between Western powers and East European, ex-communist countries (the United States – Romania) and to the condition of contemporary exile. Is there an easy answer to the exile's drama of in-betweenness that art alone can express?

Theo's symbolic suicide at the end of the play represents a necessary step to revival. Revival to a new understanding of otherness in a globalized world, where, to quote again from Stănescu's interview: "Dichotomies such as the one between East and West have now a different connotation, and the post-postcolonial dialogue with "the Other" no longer annihilates the socio-cultural borders and particularities. On the contrary, in this dialogue, they are discussed and anticipated" (Mihăilă).

In the play's Epilogue, Black Sea (Pont Euxinos) gives a new definition of "home":

> What's "home" – a word!
> It could be Rome
> It could be Paris or Cancun
> Tokyo, Beirut, Manzoon,
> Tel-Aviv, New York, Bombay,
> Kinshasa, Madrid, Taipei!
> There's nothing to keep you here.
> There's NO poem, can you hear? (66-65)

But the impossibility of fully understanding the Other, the danger of getting all of us turned into "global foreigners" (the title of an anthology Stănescu co-edited) in tomorrow's world, the burden of in-betweenness and the deep complexity of exile raise questions which Saviana Stănescu herself faces in her position of Romanian-American writer who reads in Ovid's exile the power-play of the shaping forces of history that leave their imprint on the writer's soul. Thinking of everything that separates her from her American counterpart, Valenti's daughter, Theo wonders:

> ...His daughter. "She's doing her PhD". Of course. A pretty American girl doing her PhD. Does she know anything about death, suffering, passion, exile? Does she know anything about leaving your country? About leaving your land whose history and secrets you haven't had enough time to discover? Does she understand anything about leaving this Sea, about already missing its smell? She

doesn't. How can she understand Ovid then? Or the Barbarian woman? She can't. Can she, Black Sea, Pontus Euxinus? (62)

Despite Stănescu's enthusiasm for her American home and her redefinition of "home" in a global context, by making of displacement the condition of exile, she seems to acknowledge the state of "in-betweenness" of the displaced writer, the force of one's roots.

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