

# THE STRUCTURE OF THE DRAMATIC DISCOURSE AND ITS RELATION TO MEMORY IN AMALIA TAKES A DEEP BREATH<sup>1</sup> BY ALINA NELEGA

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## Abstract

*The present paper aims at identifying the dramatic instruments which Alina Nelega used in her best known play – “Amalia Takes a Deep Breath” – in order to make her artistic message heard and discovered by the Romanian and foreign theatre audience<sup>2</sup>.*

*We have approached Alina Nelega’s play through a semiotic perspective, conceiving it as a set of signs and codes that may be identified both at literary level (the play seen as a dramatic text) and at the level of stage representation (the play seen as stage-acting), with the result that the reader and the theatre amateur are invited to interpret them in accordance with his/her horizon of expectation<sup>3</sup>.*

*On a first level of interpretation, we have analysed the structure of the dramatic discourse: the succession of episodes that compose the play, the dramatic tension created within them, the use of rhetorical instruments and the theatrical dimension which the text reveals through its ‘openness’<sup>4</sup> towards the audience.*

*On a secondary level, we appreciate that the play illustrates one of the main features of drama and theatre: its capacity ‘to translate’ individual memory by making it audible to the others (including to other generations and geographical areas) with the result that it becomes known and (re)interpreted and finally accepted as a collective experience about that community’s own past. In our opinion, this is the most important message which Alina Nelega’s play tries to express - respectively that Amalia’s dramatic destiny (destroyed by the oppressive totalitarian factors of the communist regime) is an active remembering about the collective experience of our people who experienced totalitarianism and a matter that comes to justify the identity issues with which the Romanian society is confronting today.*

*However, ‘Amalia Takes a Deep Breath’ is not a lesson about the past, it is not a text that is meant to teach, but rather an attempt to awaken the others’ awareness as regards collective memory and an attempt to cure historical traumas through art.*

**Keywords:** *post-communist Romanian feminine drama, the translation of memory through and into drama and theatre, stage-audience communication, monologue, author-reader communication.*

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. An outline of the writer’s activity

Alina Nelega is one of the most important Romanian playwrights that made her voice distinctively heard after 1989, at a time when the eclectic landscape of post-totalitarian literature had to re-invent itself by creating a new canon and, thus, a new set of aesthetic values.

The fame that the author currently enjoys is due to the prizes<sup>5</sup> she won and to the efforts she made for the development of drama in Romania.

Alina Nelega has been a very active presence in Romanian literature since 1992. She has published prose<sup>6</sup> and theatre<sup>7</sup> with the result that dramatic discourse has become her favourite form of expression

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<sup>1</sup> The play written by Alina Nelega was published by LiterNet Publishing House in 2005; it was represented on stage for the first time at *Teatrul Act*, in Bucharest, in 2007. The stage director was Mariana Cămărășan and the actress who interpreted the role of Amalia at the time was Cristina Casian.

<sup>2</sup> In the present paper, by audience we mean both the readers of plays and theatre goers.

<sup>3</sup> See Hans Robert Jauss, *Experiență estetică și hermeneutică literară*, (București: Editura Univers, 1983); Ormond Rush, *The Reception of Doctrine: An Appropriation of Hans Robert Jauss’ Reception*, (Roma: Editrice Pontifica Università Gregoriana, 1997) 39, who defines the *horizon of expectation* and its role as an attempt: “<<to examine the text in its original historical context – by examining the dynamic of its original production and reception (*the text within history*)>>, <</.../ to trace a history of the text – by examining the text’s reception by communities of readers in different historical periods (*the text throughout history*)>> and <</.../ to examine the text in relation to general history – by examining the way a text, in its social function, not only arises out of, and is received from within a historical context, but can also have determining impact on that wider, general history (*the text and history*)>>”

<sup>4</sup> We use the term *openness* to refer to the use of monologue as a form of communication between the author and the main character, on the one hand, with the reader/audience, on the other hand.

<sup>5</sup> The play [www.nonstop.ro](http://www.nonstop.ro) received the UNITER prize for the best Romanian play of 2000, while the play *In traffic* obtained the UNITER prize for the best Romanian play of 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Alina Nelega published short stories and the novel: *thel@stwitch [ultim@vrăjitoare]*.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from the plays mentioned in footnote 1, Alina Nelega published a volume of *Theatre and Short Stories [Teatru și povestiri]*, (București: Unitext Publishing House, 2003), as well as the volume: *Kamikaze. Monologues and Monodramas [Kamikaze. Monoloage și monodrame]*, (București: Cartea Românească, 2007).

and has made her internationally<sup>8</sup> famous; as the author noticed - the oscillation between prose and theatre was solved by itself in time for the writer understood later on that everything she would write “seemed to turn into theatre”<sup>9</sup>.

In her attempt to attain originality and to discover her voice as a drama writer, Alina Nelega experienced different forms of dramatic discourse in a constant search for original and challenging dramatic topics, as well as for identifying the right tone in her style.

The passion for theatre made Alina Nelega support its development by organizing a drama writing contest (Dramafest) and by getting actively involved in the setting up of theatre journals (Postscenium and ultimaT).

### 1.2. Critical approach

In deciphering the significances and levels of significance of the present play, we adopted a semiotic<sup>10</sup> analytical perspective, in an attempt to identify the message of the play, which may be dealt with from a variety of points of view: from aesthetical to cultural, educational and political ones.

As regards the analysis of the dramatic discourse, the first thing that we have underlined in this paper is the simplicity of form – which is obvious in the reduction to the essential of stage participation in dramatic action and the minimum number of component elements that are included in the dramatic discourse: there are no details offered as regards the set; the vestimentary code is also oversimplified. In fact, the simplicity of form and its capacity to represent and signify is one of the basic characteristics of theatre. According to Keir Elam, simplified form is illustrative for the very nature of theatre: “It is an essential feature of the semiotic economy of the theatrical performance that it employs a limited repertory of sign-vehicles in order to generate a potentially unlimited range of cultural units, and this extremely powerful generative capacity on the part of the theatrical sign-vehicle is due in part to its connotative breadth.”<sup>11</sup>

In our approach to the present play, we took as a starting point the largely shared perception that theatre is a collective art thanks to its reliance upon an ever-changing repetitive public representation and perception of the play, in which the individual is permanently linked to the others: “Theatre appears to be a privileged art of capital importance, because more than any other art, it shows how the individual psyche invests itself within a collective relationship. The spectator is never alone; as his or her eye takes in what is presented on the stage, it also takes in the other spectators, just as indeed they observe him or her.”<sup>12</sup>

In order to analyse the component parts of the text, we paid particular attention to the succession of scenes, the stage indications (the character’s dressing code), the functions of monologue and the types of texts whereby Amalia’s life story is revealed (the prayer, the letter and the poem).

## 2. Content

In post-communist Romania, choosing to write a literary text that deals with the ‘decay’ of the human being (from a mental and physical point of view) and the dissolution of one’s values (moral and cultural ones) due to the suppression of the totalitarian society is a cultural act that anyone would expect to happen.

The play *Amalia Takes a Deep Breath* depicts the traumatic experience of living in the totalitarian and post-totalitarian Romanian society, which leaves few chances of survival to the weak and vulnerable ones.

In her confrontation with an oppressive society, Amalia’s destiny is broken with the result that her mental and physical state gradually deteriorates until it is annihilated through suicide.

The text – written as a monologue – reiterates through the voice of the character the experiences of her past until she identifies herself with her present situation in the post-totalitarian society.

The use of the monologue in this play makes room for another form of dialogue, i.e. ‘the dialogue with the public’ (from here and everywhere). The main function of the monologue is its capacity to investigate and reveal personal past to the collectivity. Dialogue, which is more frequently used in theatre, modifies the dramatic perspective since it comprises the replies of the characters and it enlarges the distance between the first level of significance (the verbal and visual one) and the level of interpretation as an effect of the multiplicity of points of view that exist over the topic. In other words, with monologue the communication channel poses fewer obstacles to the sent message in comparison with dialogue:

“The monologue, which does not depend structurally on a reply from an interlocutor, establishes a direct relationship between the speaker and the it of the world of which he speaks. As a ‘projection’ of the exclamatory form (TODOROV, 1967, 277), the monologue communicates directly with all the members of the audience; in theatre, the whole stage becomes the monologist’s discursive partner. In fact, the monologue addresses the spectator directly as an accomplice and a watcher-hearer.”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Her plays have been translated into English, German, French and Russian and are frequently interpreted both in Romania and abroad.

<sup>9</sup> Alina Nelega, *Îmi venea ușor să scriu teatru*, in “Observatorul cultural”, 130 (August 2002); *original text: ...de la un timp, tot ce scriam se transforma in teatru.*”

<sup>10</sup> Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, (Taylor & Francis: 2002): “Semiotics can best be defined as a science dedicated to the study of the production of meaning in society. [...] Its objects are thus at once the different sign-systems and codes at work in society and the actual messages and texts produced thereby.” (p.1)

<sup>11</sup> Keir Elam, *op.cit.*, p. 10.

<sup>12</sup> Manfred Pfister, *The Theory and Analysis of Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 2000), p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Patrice Pavis, *Dictionary of the Theatre. Terms, Concepts and Analysis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press Inc., 1998), 219.

The use of the monologue is a complex discourse instrument for, as Glennis Byron noticed, it creates links between all the subjects and elements included within it: “speaker, audience, occasion, revelation of character, interplay between speaker and audience, dramatic action and action which takes place in the present.”<sup>14</sup>

The use of monologue brings another advantage: it gives a sense of universality to the story presented on stage. We read/hear/watch the story of a single character; however, this story originates in the collective past of all those who lived during the first decade of the communist regime, which were extremely oppressive. Thus, the monologue becomes the channel wherein the audience gets connected to an individual perspective over past and is thus linked to the roots of its collective memory. Individual memory becomes, through theatre, the story of the entire collectivity.

The monologue comprises 8 episodes from different stages of the character’s life: her childhood, adolescence, maturity and old age. The monologue mainly relies on:

- direct utterances in the form of prayer (which reveal information about the character’s family and history);
- imaginary utterances addressed to the former family members (which reveal the tension between them caused by the harsh political context);
- direct utterances presented in the form of pathetic letters addressed to the authority representatives;
- the insertion of poetical fragments that depict a grey, gloomy-like atmosphere and reveal the character’s loss of hope and alienation;
- the frequent use of exclamations and of the vocative.

The text starts abruptly and it places the reader/spectator right within the oppressive atmosphere characteristic of the so-called “obsessive decade” (the 1950’s).

The first scene of the play, written as a ‘prayer’, records the first traumas that Amalia underwent in her childhood: poverty, famine, sexual abuse and her parents’ and grandparents’ political persecution. Everything is narrated with the words of a child who does not understand the complexity of the post-war context she was living in. Her prayer reveals the naïve perception over the experienced tragic family events: the death of her grandpa and mother, the episode of

poverty and famine, as well as the first lessons her mother gave to be able to survive: to learn how to breathe in order to make life tolerable:

“And, after a while, we started to take breathing exercises with mum. And she taught me how I could also become an angel, like she did. You can do that if you know how to breathe deeply, deeply enough. Thus, you breathe deeper and deeper, you flicker your arms, just like this – and, after a while, you start ascending gently above the ground. Then, you breathe deeper and deeper and you find yourself floating even more smoothly, higher and higher until you are no longer seen in the distance – and you never come to touch the ground once more. This is actually what happened when mum found out about papa’s passing away.”<sup>15</sup> (my translation)

The second episode is a nostalgic intermezzo which functions as a meditation about the disappearance into nothingness of all things and beings; it is the first feeling of alienation that Amalia experiences:

“Where do all the things that no longer exist disappear? Where does the tea that we have drunk go, what about year 1960, the colourful spelling book, the song that I’ve just sung, Mișa, the teddy bear that I dropped in Moșu’s grave and that nobody wanted to fetch, where’s Moșu – where’s Vitea, where’s Paris that city about which maman and papa used to talk about, saying that we are going to go there and settle down there all of us...?”<sup>16</sup>

The third episode marks the beginning of Amalia’s personal decay. The third episode presents in the form of a ‘letter of complaint’ the tragic separation of the 16-year old girl from her grandma (Babushka), her brothers (Lulu and Vitea) and her pet (a pig confiscated by the authorities in a period of poverty and famine). The letter is written in the hospital and it concludes with the words:

“And this is how I remained alone, Comrade Commander. For Vitea left, as you told me, to dance for the Beloved Commander, Lulu, as you know, is in the reform school because this tramp and rogue is no good at all. Babushka is with Moșu and with maman and papa. And Fani...”<sup>17</sup>

The third episode represents the beginning of Amalia’s lonely fight for survival: her attempt to overcome previous abuses and to find happiness in a marriage which proves hopeless from its very beginning is followed by her moral decay. The sudden transformation of Amalia from the candid little girl

<sup>14</sup> Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue* (Routledge, 2003), 8.

<sup>15</sup> Alina Nelega, *Amalia respiră adânc* (București: Editura LiterNet, 2005), 5; *the original fragment*: „Și, după un timp, am început să facem exerciții de respirație cu maman. Și ea mă învăța cum să ajung și eu înger, ca ea. Dacă știi să respiri adânc, destul de adânc. Respiri tot mai adânc, dai din mâini, uite-așa – și, după un timp, te înalți ușor, ușor de la pământ. Respiri tot mai adânc și te trezești că plutești lin, tot mai lin, tot mai sus, până când te pierzi în zare – și nu mai atingi pământul niciodată. Așa cum a făcut ea, când a aflat de papa.”

<sup>16</sup> Alina Nelega, *op.cit.*, p. 10; *the original fragment*: “Unde se duc toate lucrurile care nu mai sunt? Unde merge ceaiul pe care l-am băut, anul 1960, abecedarul cu poze colorate, cântecul pe care l-am cântat chiar acum, Mișa, ursulețul pe care l-am scăpat în groapa lui Moșu și n-a vrut nimeni să se ducă după el, Moșu unde-i – unde-i Vitea, unde-i Parisul, orașul ăla despre care tot vorbeau maman cu papa, că o să mergem acolo, că o să ne mutăm cu toții acolo...?”

<sup>17</sup> Alina Nelega, *op.cit.*, p. 17; *original text*: “Și așa am rămas singură, Tovarășe Comandant. Că Vitea a plecat, așa cum mi-ai spus, să danseze pentru Iubitul Conducător, Lulu, cum știți e la școala de corecție pentru minori că e vai de capul lui de vagabond și golan. Babushka e cu Moșu și cu mama și cu papa. Iar Fani...”

she used to be to the hardly recognizable immoral woman that she has become is a detail that shocks the audience. The unexpected process of moral decay that she gets entangled in is in fact illustrative of the moral decay that the oppressed population undergoes in any totalitarian society that is deprived of rights and subjected to various forms of grievance and aggression. Psychologically, the victim (collectivity) comes to look for and desire self-destruction.

The accelerated decline that Amalia's life follows is described in scenes 3-8 without pathetic hues, but rather with courage and a sort of candour that the character seems never to lose in spite of the hard times that she experiences.

The text is vivid and dynamic as the episodes which compose the main character's life follow each other quickly until they complete the full picture of the character's broken destiny.

The poetical insertions included in the text enhance the dramatic effect of the character's monologue through the images of despair and the mixed feelings of alienation and fear that they suggest. The fragment below is from a poem that is written in a half pathetic, half bitter style in order to recreate the atmosphere of terror that dominated the first decades of communism. The text shocks because of the contrast between the words of thanking that temporise the poetical discourse and the opposite state of facts (Amalia's dramatic life experience):

„Thank you./For the happy childhood – thank you./For the quiet sleep,/without dreams,/ untroubled by the subteran cries/of political prisoners,/thanks you./

Because you have brought electricity throughout the country/and have taught me how to read,/in the deafening light of the bulb,/deviding intor syllables/from/Steaua Roșie [The Red Star],/Scânteia [The Sparkle],/Steagul roșu [The Red Flag],/Communist ideas,/thank you.”<sup>18</sup>

## References

- Glennis Byron, *Dramatic Monologue*, (Routledge: 2003);
- Hans Robert Jauss, *Experiență estetică și hermeneutică literară*, (București: Editura Univers, 1983);
- Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (Routledge, 2002);
- Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1999);
- Alina Nelega, *Amalia respiră adânc*, (București: Editura LiterNet, 2005);

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<sup>18</sup> P.20, *Mulțumesc./Pentru copilăria fericită – mulțumesc./Pentru somnul liniștit, fără vise,/netulburat de strigătele subterane/ale deșinuiților politici,/mulțumesc.*

*Pentru că ai electrificat țara/și m-ai învățat să citesc,  
în lumina asurzitoare a becului,/silabisind/din/Steaua Roșie,/Scânteia,/Steagul roșu,/Convingeri  
comuniste,/mulțumesc.”*

<sup>19</sup> “A fost odată,/o iarnă,/când era foarte frig/și trebuia /să alegem: ori mâncam, ori muream./Nu mi-a plăcut să-mi mănânc inima,/a fost nevoie să mă silească,/dar am descoperit,/după prima mușcătură,/că era destul de gustoasă,/așa că, până la urmă,/nici n-a fost chiar așa de greu:/era fragedă/și foarte caldă.”

<sup>20</sup> Jeanette R. Malkin, *Memory-Theatre and Postmodern Drama*, (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1999), 3: “Theatre is the art of repetition, of memorized and reiterated texts and gestures. A temporal art, an art-through-time, theatre also depends on the memorized attentiveness of its audience with whose memory (and memories) it is always in dialogue. For Aristotle, the pleasure of art, of mimesis, is lodged in our ability to recognize in symbolic representations something that we know in ‘real life’. We remember and relearn the world through art. For Stanislavsky, there is no acting without the activation of memories from experience.”

The fragment below is illustrative for the self-sacrifice that the human being chooses as a form of survival by spiritual and body self-mutilation:

“Once upon a time there was/a winter/when it was very cold and we had to choose: we ate or we died./I didn’t like to eat my heart,/they had to force me to do it,/but I discovered,/after the first bite,/that it was tasty enough,/so, in the end,/it wasn’t that hard to do it:/it was tender/and very warm.”<sup>19</sup>

## 3. Conclusions

Memory<sup>20</sup> - understood as the right to remember and as an instrument for discovering one's collective identity, as well as for curing the destructive effect of past traumas - is an essential part of the message which Alina Nelega intended to create in her play.

The destiny of Amalia is illustrative not only for the Romanians on whom mental and physical torture was inflicted during communist times, but also for the destiny of any nation/person that is deprived of fundamental rights and freedoms.

The play is an invitation to collective remembering and meditation with the final goal of understanding what and why it happened during the previous political regime in Romania. Like in psycho drama, the one involved in the dramatic discourse and the ones invited to read/visualise it are able to discover, analyse and understand the conflictual experiences that their society members (parents, grandparents, etc.) confronted with.

The text neither tries to convince, nor does it try to prove or to teach anything. It flows naturally like memory which rebuilds with each line in the play a universe that we can never forget once we get into contact with it.

- Alina Nelega, Theatre and Short Stories [Teatru și povestiri] (Bucuresti: Unitext Publishing House, 2003);
- Alina Nelega, Kamikaze. Monologues and Monodramas [Kamikaze. Monoloage și monodrame] (București: Cartea Românească, 2007);
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