

RSAA JOURNAL

Special Guest: **Domnica Radulescu** ***Dream in a Suitcase, or How Theater Saved My Life***



Domnica Radulescu immigrated to the United States in 1983 after she escaped from her native Romania into Italy. Presently she is the Edwin A. Morris Professor of French and Italian literature at Washington and Lee University. She is the author of two best-selling novels: *Black Sea Twilight*

(Doubleday 2010 & 2011) and *Train to Trieste* (Knopf 2008 & 2009). *Train to Trieste* has been published in twelve languages and is the winner of the 2009 Library of Virginia Fiction Award. Radulescu's play *The Town with Very Nice People. A Strident Operetta* has been chosen as a runner up for the 2013 Jane Chambers Playwriting award and her most recent play *Exile Is My Home. An Immigrant Fairytale* has received Honorable Mention at the Jane Chambers Playwriting award given by the Association of Theater in Higher Education. Her play *The Virgins of Seville* has been translated into Spanish and presented as a staged reading at the University of Alicante in May 2014. Her play *Naturalized Woman* was presented at the Thespis Theater Festival in New York City in 2012 and at Nora's Playhouse in 2010.

She has authored, edited and co-edited numerous scholarly books on theater, exile and representations of women. Her latest scholarly book titled *Theater of War and Exile from Eastern Europe and Israel* is forthcoming from McFarland Publishing.

Radulescu received the 2011 Outstanding Faculty Award from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia. She is also a Fulbright scholar and is presently

completing her third novel titled *Country of Red Azaleas*.

Dream in a Suitcase, or How Theater Saved My Life

Keynote Address, Women and Theater Program,
July 23rd, 2014

Bucharest, Romania 1983. During the day I attend my courses in English Literature at the University. At night I go to the theater: *The Master and Marguerita, Iphigenia, The Tempest, Caligula*, or just a good old Romanian comedy of mistaken identities and purloined letters. After the theater I go to the theater. I go to the theater in the Attic of the Headquarters of the Communist Youth. The theater is called the Attic. On the first floor the halls are studded with large portraits of the Communist Gods: Marx, Engels, Lenin and the Romanian Dictator with his touched up lips that make him look like a dreamy pig. I rush up the stairs all the way to the top of the building and open the door to the Attic. No portraits of any of the Gods here. Only the spirit of Jerzy Grotowski, the brooding theater director and my theater comrades practicing their different parts in the hallway or in the theater. I realize that once I enter this space I start breathing at a steady pace. I get into my practice clothes which are also our costumes for everything. At first I didn't like the gray and black costumes, the wood and canvas gray stools that serve as set for every show depending on how we set them up or stack them up or line them up.



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At first I thought: “hell, isn’t everything gray enough in this stupid country, aren’t our clothes drab enough, and our food lousy enough?” But the director told us we needed to learn to create something out of nothing in theater: that was the great secret. It was in the acting, in the mind-body wholeness, the breathing, the authentic gesture, the truthful voice that the colors emerged. That made sense to me. Particularly since we had plenty of nothing in our country, we might as well make it into something. Once during a theater exercise my arms lifted up like wings of their own will guided from a point in the center of my being just as he had taught us. The exercise worked. I was an eager bird ready for takeoff. That was when the colors emerged too. I was mauve and vermilion, the colors of my favorite candy that was sold in the corner shop when I was a little girl. I was all candy, I wanted to eat myself. Now I love the gray of our costumes and furniture, there is gray and there is gray. This gray turns into myriads of colors and makes you fly. The other gray outside these doors brings you down into a pile of shit. A group of the women actors and I are working on a surprise show of Beckett’s *Happy Days* that one of us found in a recent Romanian translation. The woman with the most years of experience in the theater is the director of the surprise show. We divide Winnie’s monologue into four parts that represent her different sides and voices. We free her from her suffocating mound of earth trapping her to her waist and then to her neck. We take liberties, we can do whatever we want in this gray Attic space. Here we live in a free country. I am the poetic Winnie, the one who burns love letters and

fantasizes about going up in flames herself one day in a spontaneous combustion. I mutter my lines all throughout the day: on the crowded smelly trolley busses, in line for our monthly ration of bread, or on my way home as the steps of the secret police man who has been following me for a few months hit the pavement like a bad omen behind me. Every time the director of the theater makes the schedule for the week he says with a mischievous smile: “we have to leave this block of time for the girls’ rehearsal.” He asks the guys to help us with the lights. We are in the clouds with our *Happy Days*. When I get home really late after rehearsals, my father is waiting for me in his trench coat smoking one cigarette after another, ready to call the police, thinking I’ve been kidnapped by the secret police, or cut to pieces by a serial killer, run over by a car or taken advantage of by an evil boy. I tell him “Dad, I’ve just been at the theater, we are practicing a women’s show.” “There must be boys in it too,” he says. “No, there aren’t, just girls.”

After everybody calms down we plan for my escape to Italy. If my passport arrives and when it arrives, I have to buy my plane ticket right away, “because the bastards might change their mind and take it away, and then you’ll never leave, and you’ll be stuck in this hell hole forever” says my father. He is the one with the positive thinking in our family, my mother just writes poetry about death and the meaninglessness of life. If and when my passport arrives I have to get my plane ticket right away, meet with such and such a person as soon as I get to Rome, in case I can’t find her, call this other such and



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such a person. Go to such and such organization for political refugees and ask for asylum. I'm not really listening, Winnie has taken possession of me and is combusting in mauve and vermilion. Why am I planning my escape just now when I got this fabulous role and the show will premiere in a month? Our director will be blown away by our modernist women's show and next I'll play Gertrude in *Hamlet*.

Miracle of all miracles, my passport arrives. We make more plans late at night with the curtains pulled and talking in whispers in case they are tapping our house. I get the passport, I pack my suitcase. I go to rehearsals. Winnie is all over the city uttering her happy sad vermillion lines, opening her umbrella on a sunny day, putting on makeup before going to sleep, trying to breathe in a regular rhythm. And sometimes she sings just for the sheer joy of singing. I don't tell any of my theater friends that I'm leaving the country. If I did, you never know, one might be an informer and then I'll never leave. The opening night comes and goes, and two more performances and then I'll be gone. Forever. Full house and I'm burning the stage with Winnie's burning lines and am floating above the ground like a mythic bird. Now I know what they meant with that Phoenix bird: that's what I want to be, a birds that puts herself on fire and molds herself back to life out of her goddam ashes. I know I want to do this for the rest of my life. But the suitcase for my big escape is waiting to be packed. My mother and I pack at night, with curtains pulled, "cause you never know," they might be watching us. Clothes for all weather, the volume of short stories I wrote, a volume of Romanian poetry, two black and

white pictures from the opening night of *Happy Days*, a handful of family pictures, my grandmother's silk kimono with the multicolored peacock on the back that was my Winnie costume and a fancy silk paisley dress in case I go to the theater, out there, in the unknown where I'm about to plunge. "Yes, mama I'm sure there will be a Shakespeare play in the refugee camp in Rome." "You never know," my mother says as she is carefully packing the dress. It turns out that in Rome, I will see not Shakespeare, but Pirandello and Machiavelli. I will wear the silk paisley dress that my mother had packed for me.

At the airport it all goes fast with the exception of the episode with the border police woman that seems to take forever. She checks my luggage and asks questions about each single item in the carefully packed suitcase: "What are you doing with a winter coat in the summer?" "I'm going on a trip in the Alps." "What are these typed pages doing here?" "They are school work for when I come back." "Where are you going to stay while abroad?" "At youth hostels." "Are you carrying any foreign currency?" "Only the allowed sum of 50 dollars." I have planned it all and anticipated all the questions. This is my hardest exam ever. Only I haven't anticipated the knot of fear in my chest and my mind racing: "What if she stops me, what if she stops me, and I'll never leave again?" Then I think to myself: "So what if she stops me, what the fuck, I'll just go back to the theater. They'll be happy to see me back." And the knot of grief in my chest is chocking me as I see my mother and father wait behind the line to see me go and my mind is racing:

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“For the last time, for the last time, for the last time.” The customs police woman looks at the pictures of me as Winnie and laughs mockingly. She leafs through the typed volume of short stories and talks to her colleague that is standing a few steps behind her. I pray to Winnie to send me a good thought from her house of happy days. Tonight is the fourth performance and I will not be there to play my beloved role. What will they think? They’ll wait, then call me, then panic, then try to find a replacement. I don’t have an understudy so one of the other girls will have to take my part. They’ll think I’m sick, dead or just not to be trusted. The customs woman looks at me, talks to the other customs police, looks at me again and says “Go.” I stand and stare at her. My mother with oceans of tears in her eyes, behind the line says: “Go.” I stand there. Then Winnie says “Go, go for Godot’s sake!” I walk towards the plane at a steady pace without looking back at my suitcase or at my parents, not knowing if my luggage even made it on board the plane. I don’t care about the suitcase. I am my one and only suitcase.

I am now the same age that Winnie was/is when I played her thirty years ago. I knew then that we’ll grow old together. Throughout the thirty years of my American adventure, dream, sometimes nightmare, Winnie in the Attic has often guided me towards new discoveries, has given me comfort and strength in trying times. She has showed me the way towards the formidable and magnificent women of Ancient Greece: Clytemnestra, Medea, Andromache, or the whimsical and cunning women of the Italian

Renaissance: Isabella, Flaminia, Vittoria, Lucrezia, Vincenza. Caterina, Colombina, Veronica. I got on the wagon with their commedia troupes for a while and discovered the little known secret that they are largely responsible for the beginnings of modern Western theater, for the sophisticated art of stage improvisation and collaborative theater creation. They were the first devisers. The bold and sassy theater women artists of five hundred years ago travelling across European countries with their children and theater properties, managing the troupes of actors, their finances and traveling schedules, acting in public plazas, improvising in verse, creating unprecedented female characters enchanted me and brought laughter into my life. I carry all of them with me wherever I go, both the ancient and the Renaissance ones: the angry and melancholy lovers, grieving mothers, vengeful wives, the mischievous daughters, the treacherous widows, the lustful concubines, they are always crowded in my carryon luggage ready to burst out of it upon arrival in different cities of the world: Seville Spain, Vilnius Lithuania, Bucharest Romania or Scottsdale Arizona. Sometimes they complain about the long trip and the security checks at the airport which, they point out to me, are quite similar to the security check I went through decades ago when I escaped my Communist dictatorship. But they are always ready to bewitch me with their well-crafted roles. When I’m desperate about the state of the world and wonder whether anything I do will ever make a difference, they tell me: “don’t worry about it, just

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“don’t worry about it, just do it!” When I’m sad and confused about where I belong, where is my home, or when I miss everything they tell me: “Go to the theater and see a play, preferably one with smart women characters.” When I’m angry at discrimination, violence and religious fanaticism in the adoptive country where I came running away from dictatorship, they tell me: “Go do some theater, one of your weird immigrant plays and don’t forget to give us a part in them.” The dark and suicidal ones: Jocasta, Ophelia, Phaedra, Silvia Plath, Sarah Kane tell me whenever I stop making sense of life and the world around me: “Stop it with the dark thoughts, suicide isn’t all that glamorous you know, just go to the theater.” When I am weighed down with worry about my children, the Medeas, the Phedras, the Isabellas, they all tell me: “You’ve raised them,

they’re grown up, just love them and let go, they’ll figure it out. And don’t eat them all right! And by the way, good job with the single mother thing. We too were single mothers, our brutes of husbands were good at making wars and chasing other women but really lousy at home.” Above all though, Winnie thrones amidst the ashes of burnt love letters and sometimes she thanks me for having freed her from her gruesome tomb with my Romanian Attic student production of thirty years ago. Then she says: “This too will have been a happy day!” Then I open my magic suitcase, put on the silk paisley dress that my mother had packed for me and I go to the theater.



Pictures: Domnica Radulescu during her book tour for the launching of the Lithuanian translation of *Train to Trieste*. Lithuania, 2014.
(author’s pictures)

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