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REIMAGINING ORWELL: A NEW STAGE ADAPTATION OF *ANIMAL FARM* FOR A YOUNG AUDIENCE AT "LUCEAFĂRUL" THEATRE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH, IAȘI

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Abstract

This paper examines the latest dramatization of George Orwell's allegorical novella *Animal Farm* (1945), a production of the "Luceafărul" Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași, written and directed by Victor Olăhuț, marking both the 75th anniversary of the theatre and the 80th anniversary of Orwell's political dystopia, a surprising choice considering the text's historical and political weight. The paper will discuss *Ferma animalelor. O fabulă* (*Animal Farm. A Fable*, in the original English version) as a creative reinterpretation, a reimagining of the text in order to make it relevant and understandable for a younger demographic and the accompanying adults. The focus in this case study will be on the adapter/director's creative choices, especially those reflected in the character portrayal and the rewriting of the political fable's themes for a younger audience, as well as the creative team's artistic vision reflected in the visual and experiential composition of the performance, highlighting how the production engaged with Orwell's critique of authoritarianism considering its educational implications (as suggested by the adapter/director in his "Director's Note"), and the broader significance of staging *Animal Farm* as a production for a (very) young audience in a post-communist country and in a very complicated geopolitical context.

Keywords: *stage adaptation; creative reinterpretation; Animal Farm; George Orwell; children's theatre; Victor Olăhuț.*

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INTRODUCTION

Eighty years ago, right after the end of World War Two, George Orwell managed to see *Animal Farm* in print, in spite of concerns about the timeliness of a thinly veiled criticism of Stalinist Russia, a country that had been an ally of Britain in World War II. Since then, the text has made its way in school curricula in many countries for its literary qualities and its timeless political relevance, as well as in adaptations for the screen or for the stage. The way Orwell addressed his concerns about totalitarianism, power struggle, exploitation, ideological warfare, control, manipulation and disinformation in allegorical form still speaks to us eighty years on, making his text as thought-provoking and relevant as ever. Now and again, the text is adapted for the stage, in different theatrical modes, with or without animal costumes, with puppets, or as a musical. It is what Victor Olăhuț set out to do in his adaptation of *Animal Farm* for the "Luceafărul" Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași, an experiment aiming to achieve two equally important goals: adapt the text for children and their accompanying adults, and anchor the adaptation in a Romanian social and political context by adding allusions to Romania's communist and post-communist history. This dramatization of Orwell's novella was not without its challenges, which will be addressed in the following pages through a cultural studies approach to adaptation in which adaptation –as both process and product– is analysed in the wider context of cultural production. The discussion will examine how cultural contexts, socio-political dynamics, cultural values, and artistic practices inform adaptations.

Dramatizing a narrative text such as a novel or novella presupposes an important change from the telling to the showing narrative mode, enabling viewers to become immersed in the story differently than when reading the text on the page, in one's own rhythm and with enough time for reflection and reconsideration, returning to certain passages of the text, rereading and reflecting on them. The story moves, as Linda Hutcheon points out, "from the imagination to the realm of direct perception" (23) as the actions and the characters are rendered, at least in stage performances and film adaptations, both visually and aurally, and the words on the page become a perceivable reality to which we immediately respond.

Understanding how theatre works, and especially how the language of theatre should be used for a specific audience is essential when a narrative text is dramatized. Any process of adaptation is a creative one, presupposing an initial interpretation and revaluation of the text to be adapted and then a reconfiguration of that literary text during the process of remediation, which involves a multitude of interpretative and creative decisions and choices. Although, in the words of Casie Hermansson, "[a]ny comparative work–the case –study approach most obviously–can be seen as fidelity criticism in essence, even when evaluative criteria may be entirely absent from the analysis" (148), the concept of *fidelity* becomes irrelevant when the focus shifts from privileging the literary text to focusing on how the adaptation transposes that text using genre and medium-specific means creatively, sometimes appropriating the source material extensively or suggesting alternative interpretations, according to the adapter's and director's vision, perhaps reflecting a "cultural relocation or updating … the movement into a new generic mode or context" (Sanders 2). Adaptations need to balance their allegiance to the source and to their own audience, making interpretative and creative choices that reflect a contemporary *Weltschauung* and cultural sensibility.

In the present study, the stage adaptation of Orwell's *Animal Farm* at the "Luceafărul" Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași (2025) will be assessed *as* an adaptation, a derivative work that openly states its source by using Orwell's title, adapter/director Victor Olăhuț promising a contemporary Romanian interpretation of the Orwellian text, stating that it felt like an appropriate choice at a time when the "mirage of totalitarian regimes is seducing the masses again, [and] leaders with autocratic tendencies are elected in democratic countries" ("Director's Note").[1] The focus of this analysis will be on the creative ways in which the stage production interprets the novella, rewriting it with the tools of the audio-visual medium of the theatre for an audience that, given the specificity of the theatre that commissioned the adaptation, is young and presumably unable to grasp the complexity of the Orwellian allegorical satire. Child-friendly adaptations of *Animal Farm* are nothing new. Dramatizations for children can be purchased for school productions, and film adaptations, including the famous

[1] All subsequent translations of passages in Romanian, including lines from the production *Ferma animalelor- O fabulă*, are mine.

1954 British animated film, the less successful 1999 film for television, and the forthcoming Nicholas Stollar animated film, reflect a continuing interest in adapting Orwell's text for young viewers.

Olăhuț's production will also be discussed within a larger cultural and historical context in which the old and the new engage in a much-needed dialogue. My evaluative comments will therefore focus on the adapter's ability to add something to the conversation about human experience that *Animal Farm* started 80 years ago, at the end of a terrible world conflagration, and on whether the artistic quality of the production places it in the contemporary canon of Romanian children's theatre. Fidelity to the source text will be regarded only as a working criterion in the subtext, and not a metrics in the evaluation of the play.

GEORGE ORWELL'S *ANIMAL FARM* (1945)

Animal Farm, like Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, was not written for children, yet both allegorical satires have often been offered to children in some form or another, assuming that the trimming and the pruning involved in the process of adaptation would smooth out the ideological creases and disillusioned perspective on human nature that both texts present. Ron Bateman writes that Orwell was quite committed to fighting the misconception that the book was intended for young audiences: "It is well-known that Orwell visited bookshops to surreptitiously move his book out of the children's section" (Bateman).

Orwell wrote about a historical and political reality that he knew intimately and deemed too important to let initial publication rejections, including one from T.S. Eliot, at Faber and Faber, discourage him. He was exposing the ills and excesses of Stalin's Communist regime at a time when Russia (Britain's ally in World War II) had already suffered too much during the war (Bloom 14; Peters 90), or its politics was, according to Eliot, too "Trotskyte" (Hall 221). For Stuart Hall, Orwell was a disappointed socialist, or "an *individualist*" who "hated to be told what to do ... or [to be] made to toe around the party-line" (218), even an "anti-Communist" opposing any form of totalitarianism and who had become aware, by the end of the war, of "the growing convergence between the fascist and the Stalinist dictatorships" (220). Masha Karp, documenting the genesis of *Animal Farm* and Orwell's politics in the mid-1940s, writes that Orwell was torn between "condemn[ing] Stalin and his

associates for their barbaric and undemocratic methods" and the moral obligation to warn those still lured by the Soviet political model that it had already failed (210). Orwell himself explained that

> It was of the utmost importance to me that people in western Europe should see the Soviet régime for what it really was. Since 1930 I had seen little evidence that the USSR was progressing towards anything that one could truly call Socialism. On the contrary, I was struck by clear signs of its transformation into a hierarchical society, in which the rulers have no more reason to give up their power than any other ruling class. ("Preface to the Ukrainian Edition")

However, beyond the allegorical layers of the novella, the key players and events in Soviet Russia are used metaphorically to address issues that go beyond any specific political system, including various manifestations of totalitarianism and class oppression. It is what gives Orwell's satire its timeless relevance, confirmed by the survival of the text in the Western world in various guises eighty years on, including stage productions in the last decade that anchor the story in a contemporary political and social context.[2] Class oppression, exploitation, manipulation, propaganda, power struggles and class tensions, the desire for freedom and equality remain as pertinent as ever.

The story could be summarised as follows: a group of farm animals living on an English farm run by Mr Jones – a cruel and neglectful drunk symbolising the corrupt and negligent ruling class (the Russian Tsar, to be more precise) decide to rebel against their master after being inspired by the speech of an old boar, Old Major (a Lenin-type character). Two of Old Major's closest collaborators, Snowball and Napoleon (Leon Trotsky and Joseph Stalin, respectively), take over after the old boar's death and lead the other animals into

[2] See, for instance, the 2018 *Animal Farm* production at the Toronto-based Soulpepper Theatre, based on the adaptation by Anthony MacMahon and directed by Ravi Jain – a play that says more about Canadian contemporary issues such as politics, immigration (even Trump's wall), the media, or technology than of Orwell's critique of Stalinism, or the 2025 Stratford East Theatre (London) production, under the direction of Amy Leach and adapted by Tatty Henessy – an updating of the novella to speak loudly of inequality and class struggle (hence the industrial setting), or the 2025 "Teatrul Mic" București production, adapted and directed by Andrei Huțuleac, imagined as a play within a play which forces the audience to remember Romania's own communist dictatorship, placed in the larger context of the Cold War and its present consequences.

a fight that they win, forcing Mr Jones to leave and seizing full control of Manor Farm, renaming it Animal Farm. The smarter and self-educated pigs soon pen down and post the seven principles of "Animalism," an ideology based on the ideas of equality and freedom (especially freedom from human oppression). In the words of Paul Kirschner, "[a] new class system is born based on *biological* inequality, its commandments issued … by the intellectual religion of Science (Lenin's 'scientific socialism')" (769).

The animals quickly understand that they need to work harder than ever before, and they do so quite enthusiastically because they feel free and safe from Mr Jones's temper, whip and knife. Boxer, the hardworking but naïve cart-horse, is the most dedicated animal on the farm, much like the loyal proletariat in Soviet Russia. Other animals either unquestioningly follow Snowball's and Napoleon's orders (the sheep and the chickens), and gradually fall into a routine of powerless obedience later fuelled by fear. Benjamin, the cynical donkey, is the only one that accepts the new order without much enthusiasm or hope for a better future. As the idealist Snowball – advocating, like Trotsky, for progress and education – becomes a threat to the cunning and power-hungry Napoleon, he is forced to leave the farm. His escape is presented by Napoleon and Squealer as an act of treason and proof that the frail new "democracy" may be vulnerable to internal as well as external threats. This marks the beginning of Napoleon's totalitarian rule in the manner of Stalin, with Squealer acting as the regime's main propagandist. Some animals are exposed as acting or thinking against the regime and the supreme leader and are accused of treason and publicly executed. Exploitation and oppression – once associated with the human (Tsarist-like) rule – become the new reality of Animal Farm, dread and exhaustion preventing the animals from even considering resistance.

Ultimately, at the core of Orwell's story lies the writer's critique of the corruption of ideals. Napoleon and his nomenklatura secretly rewrite the seven principles of Animalism – the ideology at the heart of Animal Farm – including the most important of all, "All animals are equal," rewritten as "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others" (*Animal Farm* 112). The memory of the original commandments is thus erased and replaced by an official truth that the animals are forced to accept through fear tactics, verbal and physical violence, mind control and cunningly devised propaganda. The irony, of course, is that the animals have exchanged one form of tyranny for another,

one more perverse and difficult to accept because it comes not from humans – the ultimate enemy of animals – but from other animals, their "liberators".

Revolutions, Orwell suggests, can reproduce and legitimise the same kind of oppression they were meant to overthrow. The closing lines of the novella leave the reader confused as to what the future holds for the oppressed farm animals, as they realise that the pigs have become indistinguishable from humans in behaviour and lifestyle:

> Twelve voices were shouting in anger, and they were all alike. No question, now, what had happened to the faces of the pigs. The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which. (*Animal Farm* 118)

There is no agreement as to how the final lines of the novella can be interpreted. William Empson, the author of *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, pointed out to Orwell that his text was bound to be "misunderstood," allegory being "a form that inherently means more than the author means, when it is handled sufficiently well." (qtd. in Quinn 58). While the text's open ending does invite more optimistic readers to conclude that the very fact that the animals saw the pigs' transformation into human-like oppressors is the first step towards a counter-revolution, that was not necessarily Orwell's intention. Had he lost all hope in humanity's ability to regenerate through revolution, to reform society on ethical principles that would not allow the possibility of one form of abusive government to be replaced by another one, possibly even worse, as Martin Kingsley suggests when he writes that Orwell "has not quite the courage to see that he has lost faith, not in Russia but in mankind" (45)? Or could it be that the mere glitter of awareness in the animals' minds represents the spark that will eventually lead to their revolt? Raymond Williams does not exclude the possibility of a more optimistic reading: "Seeing that they are the same because they act the same, never mind the labels and the formalities–that is a moment of gained consciousness, a potentially liberating discovery" (42). Writing in the early 1990s, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, V.C. Letemendia also sees some hope in the concluding paragraph of the novella: "Orwell is not implying … the hopelessness of a proletarian revolution"; the final scene of the book "reveals the disillusionment of the working beasts with their porcine leaders, an essential step in the process of creating a new revolution" (129).

It was this optimistic interpretation that turned *Animal Farm* into an anti-communist propaganda tool by the United States and Britain in the 1950s, right at the beginning of the Cold War. The most effective and well-known adaptation of the novella at the time used for that purpose was the British animated adaptation of *Animal Farm* (Halas and Batchelor,1954) which, according to Andrew Rubin, was orchestrated by the Office of Special Projects (OSP), a department overseen by Department of State and the CIA, as part of a "psychological warfare" strategy to counter USSR Cold-War disinformation tactics (90). The animated drama was directed by John Halas and Joy Batchelor (experienced in wartime propaganda), and it ended with the animals' counter-revolution, overthrowing Napoleon and putting an end to the pigs' (socialist) rule. The text also suffered tweaks and pruning while being translated and distributed in parts of the globe considered vulnerable to communist countries' disinformation tactics.[3] After the 1989 revolutions in the former Eastern Bloc countries and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the ending of *Animal Farm* was read as prophetic, announcing the end of communist totalitarianism once and for all, returning, as the 1999 TV adaptation of the novella shows, to a pre-revolutionary leadership: the rule of Man on better negotiated terms.

In Romania, *Animal Farm* may have circulated, like in all other communist countries in the Eastern Bloc, as illegally transmitted copies typed on untraceable typewriters,[4] but the first official translation was made by Mihnea Gafița in 1992. He also adapted his translation for the stage for the first production of *Animal Farm* in Romania at the "Marin Sorescu" Theatre in Craiova

[3] For more information on how the American and the British governments sponsored and actively promoted translations and adaptations of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in countries in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union or China, see Andrew N. Rubin's well documented "Orwell and Empire: Anti-Communism and the Globalization of Literature" (2008).

[4] For more on the covert CIA-funded book-distribution programme operating in Eastern Europe between 1957 and 1991, see Alfred A. Reisch's *Hot Books in the Cold War: The CIA-Funded Secret Western Book Distribution Program Behind the Iron Curtain* (2013) and Charlie English's *The CIA Book Club. The Best Kept Secret of the Cold War* (2025). Both books emphasize the scale and impact of the programme facilitating intellectuals' access to fictional and non-fictional books unavailable behind the Iron Curtain. Considering that the head of the International Literary Centre (ILC) responsible for the programme was Romanian-born George C. Minden, some copies of *Animal Farm* must have reached Romanian readers in English at least.

in 1994. The production was based on Peter Hall's musical adaptation and it was adapted and directed by Cristian Hadji-Culea. Since then there have been only a few adaptations of the novella for the stage, including a 2012 minimalist production by Vlad Cepoi and Ovidiu Ivan – a two-actor theatrical experiment at Ateneul Tătărași in Iași that failed to impress; a musical experiment by Auăleu band (Timișoara) in 2016; a 2021 musical stage production at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj, adapted for the stage by Róbert Lénárd, directed by Zoltán Puskás, with music composed by Dávid Klemm and Ervin Erős; and a small-budget children's theatre production at the "Imaginario" Animation Theatre for Children and Young Audiences, Ploiești, adapted and directed by Sabina Vlăiculescu Arsenie (9+ age rating). Marking the eightieth anniversary of the novella, two Romanian theatres offered each a different kind of rewriting: Victor Olăhuț's adaptation for "Luceafărul" Theatre in Iași was designed as suitable for the entire family, and Andrei Huțuleac's adaptation for "Teatrul Mic", București (16+ age rating), each using noticeably different theatrical modes to reimagine the Orwellian text in politically complex circumstances that – both productions suggest – can be better understood and navigated if the lessons of the past are understood and learned.

THE CHALLENGES OF ADAPTING *ANIMAL FARM* FOR THE YOUNGER DEMOGRAPHIC: VICTOR OLĂHUȚ'S ADAPTATION FOR THE "LUCEAFĂRUL" THEATRE FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH, IAȘI

The adaptation of a literary text for an age group that was not the target audience makes interpretative and creative decisions even more complicated. Adaptations of "adult" texts designed for children are seldom addressed in papers or articles on adaptation (Muller 2). Such adaptations are "essential for sharing a common cultural heritage" and they reflect an "educational agenda" (2), but the "low estimation of the young readers' literacy and aesthetic capacities… [imagining the audience as a] vulnerable child who must be protected from morally harmful or traumatic material (like sex, violence, crime, extreme suffering) additionally may lead to a call for sanitizing texts before offering them to children" (2-3). Young audiences are generally considered incapable of grasping profound ideas, complex situations or characters, or of appreciating the artistry in canonical texts, so it comes as no surprise that "fears of 'downsizing', 'dumbing down',

oversimplifying, bowdlerizing or even only abridging venerable canonical artefacts still inform the evaluations" (2).

Such views on adaptations for children reflect an undeniable truth: writing for children's theatre requires slightly different sets of skills, the shift being not only one of medium (from narrative to theatrical text), but also of age group, which comes with its own challenges. Ambitiously aiming to appeal to children, teens and adults equally within the space of less than an hour, Olăhuț hesitated between prioritising the message and entertaining the younger members in the audience in what is arguably an uneven production that relies mostly on the conventions of children's theatre, hoping they will work on older spectators as well.

Children's theatre writer David Wood distils the art and craft of writing and directing plays for young viewers as follows:

> The challenge is to give a unique theatrical experience to an audience … to involve them emotionally, to sustain their interest in a story, to inspire and excite them using theatricality, to make them laugh, to make them think, to move them, to entertain and educate them by triggering their imaginations. (Wood xxii)

Children, Wood writes, enjoy to actively participate in the performance, becoming fully immersed in the story and openly showing their preference for certain characters; they also react emotionally to the action (16;18); they must be engaged through various theatrical tools to avoid boredom (19); they enjoy a bit of fright and are surprisingly capable of tolerating unpleasant situations or characters that adults believe might overwhelm them (22-23); they usually respond to action more than dialogue, and conversations must be directly connected to action (27); children are logical beings, enjoying stories with a clear plot and a satisfactory (and clear) conclusion to the story (24-25). Finally, children are interested in contemporary issues, topics they may have already discussed elsewhere. An important difference between young and adult audiences is the former's expectation that justice will prevail (58). This is an important convention that may prove challenging when the dramatized literary text has an open ending.

Animal stories are among children's favourites, Wood explains, because animals are so easily lovable and children often identify themselves and their

parents in the animal characters from the books they read. A beast fable ensures the children's emotional engagement (34), but very much depends on the writer's ability to create likeable animal characters. Clear characterisation, sometimes defined by one primary feature and a clear purpose or worldview, is essential (40-41). Children should be able to distinguish good from bad characters as their participation in the performance (shouting, answering questions, clapping) is essential.

Everything matters in theatre: colourful sets and costumes, mise-en-scène, lighting, music, choreography (mime and movement, but also dancing), dialogue that children can understand, humour, which often derives from the repetition of something funny – "the rule-of-three" – or from physical comedy (52-58), all of which constitute ways of keeping the audience focused on the story. Knowing what works and what children are most likely to enjoy and experience fully in a stage production is essential because children's theatre is simply a different art form. In the words of Andrew Melrose, "master the craft of writing for children and you will be able to write for anyone" (2).

Based on available records, Victor Olăhuț's 2025 adaptation for the "Luceafărul" Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași is the only noteworthy Romanian stage adaptation for children to date. Moreover, the production foregrounds a quality oftentimes ignored, namely Orwell's combination of the beast fable with the fairy tale, both appealing to children and appropriate for a children's theatre production. There is a clash between form (child-appropriate) and content (complex themes inviting often conflicting interpretations) at the heart of *Animal Farm* that gives the text a special literary quality. Both the fairy tale and the beast fable have a long tradition of reflecting realities of human experience in an oblique manner – the former through elements of the fantastic, the experience of an alternative type of reality, acquired wisdom, and a happy denouement, of which only the former two can be found in *Animal Farm*, and the latter through the use of anthropomorphic characters whose features, motivations, actions and experiences are recognizably human. Matthew Hodgart captures the very paradoxical nature of the text when he writes that

> since [Orwell] wanted to reach the widest possible world public, through translation, he also parodied the style of children's books; but not patronizingly, since Orwell, I think, liked children as much as he liked animals. Although the betrayal of the revolution is a 'sad story' it is told with

> the straightness that children demand, and with childlike cunning and charm. (Hodgart 39)

Paul Kirschner places Orwell's text in a contemporary literary context, claiming that Orwell may have also found inspiration in "proletarian" fairy tales thriving in the 1920s and 1930s in the Weimar Republic, the United States, and, only timidly in England. Orwell heartily disapproved of such indoctrinating fairy tales and decided to parody them in *Animal Farm* (781). Kirschner's conclusion, which is relevant for the present analysis of the Romanian children's production, is that Orwell's literary strategy, especially his use of fictional rhetorical strategies borrowed from the fairy tale and the beast fable, interfered with his political intent and opened up the text for interpretations contrary to his intentions, making it "near-perfect material for propagandists of the status quo" (785).

Ferma Animalelor. O fabulă, the *Animal Farm* production at "Luceafărul" Theatre, announces its reading of the text as a fable from the title. It also advertises the play on the theatre website and the poster as suitable for children from the age of 6 and appropriate for the entire family. On the whole, the mood of the play is dictated by the beast fable genre and children's theatre conventions, pushing the novella's darker, dystopian overtones in the background.

Victor Olăhuț, a young director who won several accolades mostly for comedies, took on the challenge of writing and directing *Animal Farm* for a children's theatre after nearly 12 years of writing and directing plays for adult audiences, oftentimes in rural areas and other unconventional settings as part of his project, "Cultură'n șură" ("Culture in the shed")[5]. He started from the premise that the key ingredients for a play for children and teenagers are the same as for popular theatre: audience involvement, humour, characters defined by one main feature, contemporary music and dance moves, and references to contemporary realities such as television to make the story seem relevant and contemporary.

Given the inherent limitations of the production, formatted for children's theatre, Victor Olăhuț had the difficult task of selecting only the scenes presenting the main actions in the story, a challenging task considering that the

[5] This and all subsequent translations, including lines from the text of the Romanian production are mine.

novella relies so much on the omniscient narrator to explain and comment on the action. Some characters had to be deleted to keep the story focused on the characters who play the most important part in the revolution. Old Major – the ideologue of the animals' revolution – appears in Snowball, whose idealism and commitment to the animals' cause become evident from the first scenes of the play. The actor playing the part, Beatrice Volbea, makes it very hard for the children in the audience not to like her character as her petite figure makes her character look unthreatening and a credible victim of Napoleon. The play's Snowball is animated by good intentions at first, but also seems obsessed with the revolution, forgetting that its whole purpose was to make the animals free and happy, which the pigs' new, socialist order cannot guarantee. Snowball also suffers from a type of pragmatism that borders on snobbery. Seeing that the animals struggle to learn to read and write, he thinks remembering only a shortened version of the simplest of the seven principles of Animalism, now reduced to "Four legs good, two legs bad," is preferable. This becomes the only principle the animals are expected to remember and the only commandment the pigs will observe as Napoleon's tyrannical rule replaces the egalitarian system of the early days of Animal Farm. Olăhuț devised a musical number to show the animals' mindless acceptance of the pigs' indoctrination and their enthusiastic dogmatic adherence to the new, oversimplified ideology of their revolution. While singing, the animals joyfully dance to contemporary music (composed by Marin Grigore), getting the younger spectators on their feet, repeating the chorus: "Patru picioare bine, două picioare rău/ Omul a plecat, e mai bine-așa zău" ("Four legs good, two legs bad/ Man is gone, it's really for the best"). Though a good theatrical strategy designed to engage the audience, rendering this crucial moment in the story through song and dance radically diminishes its impact and turns a moment of reflection on the deeper significance of the elimination of all other six principles of Animalism into an entertaining intermezzo. Even more disappointing was Olăhuț's decision to make the "Four legs good, two legs bad" principle replace the more shocking and impactful "All animals are equal but some are more equal than others" (Napoleon's rewriting of the original "All animals are equal"), which Orwell had intentionally changed last to show how far from the ideals of Old Major and Snowball Animal Farm had deviated under Napoleon's totalitarian rule.

The next important musical number focuses on Napoleon's newly acquired status as supreme leader and his cult of personality. Having trained two dogs to obey him and taking advantage of Squealer's willingness to become his spokesman and propagandist, Napoleon rules from beyond the invisible wall he has erected between himself and the farm animals and seldom addresses them directly. The cuts made to the original text make the political takeover process difficult to understand. Without prior knowledge of the Orwellian text, it is hard to see how cunningly and violently Napoleon reinvents himself as a dictator. This being a children's theatre production, the public execution of several farm animals, accused of various crimes against the young state – mostly food-related – could not be shown on stage. Olăhuț avoids directly showing animals as victims of violence. The animals show signs of distress, appear worried and afraid of Napoleon and his dogs, but the true extent of Napoleon's monstrosity is never explicitly shown.

In fact, this Napoleon, described in the text as a "large, rather fierce-looking Berkshire boar" (*Animal Farm* 13) is played by young actor Alex Iurașcu, liked by the regulars of the "Luceafărul" theatre. He is slender, with a delicate figure and a tenor voice, evoking anything but the portly, menacing-looking Napoleon of the text. It is true that the pigs rule through cunningness and intelligence, brains outweighing physical power in politics, but in children's theatre characterisation through physical attributes and costume should not be subtle or difficult to understand. The spectators have little time to understand the character because the relatively few times he is centre stage (literally and figuratively), the significance of his actions and words is soon lost in a musical intermezzo or a scene added to make the production more entertaining, so the more serious implications of Napoleon's words or actions fade into dance or laughter.

Close to the end of the play, Napoleon acquires a mythical status, like all dictators. Victor Olăhuț decided to sugarcoat what should be a worrying reflection of animals' blind obedience and thoughtless acceptance of Napoleon's totalitarian rule in a musical number – a hip-hop ode to Napoleon. The lyrics – inspired by late 1980s praise poems and songs dedicated to the Romanian dictator Ceaușescu – present comrade Napoleon as the source of all good things in the lives of the animals, a founding father and a provider, but above all, the one who drove Man away. The music and the dancing are so engaging that it is

difficult to follow the lyrics, especially when the animals sing about the leader guiding them eastwards. It is a reference to the Soviet Union as the guiding light, ideologically and politically speaking, in the 45 years of communism in Romania, but it could also be an even subtler allusion to the more recent accusations regarding the interference in Romania's 2024 presidential elections by the Russian Federation through a significant disinformation campaign that nearly put the Russian-backed candidate in office. There is simply too much noise on and off the stage – children up on their feet, trying to copy the actors' dance moves – to get all the references and additional meanings in the lyrics, deemphasising the message that should help the audience understand how effective Squealer's propaganda and Napoleon's authority really are at this point.

One of the most theatrically achieved scenes in the play, minutes after watching the animals sing their ode to Napoleon, is a pantomime number suggestively choreographed by George Pop to represent the dire working and living conditions of the animals and the oppressive measures in Napoleon's totalitarian state. It is the darkest, gloomiest and most disturbing scene, showing the animals toiling while being whipped by Squealer while Napoleon watches from upstage and then disappears, distancing himself completely from the animals. The music, with an industrial techno sound, radically changes the mood of the play and prepares the denouement, which in this production immediately follows Boxer's collapse and his removal from the farm to be taken to the horse slaughterer's. This helps Benjamin and the other animals understand that Napoleon would stop at nothing to monetise their work and suffering. During the two performances I attended, the audience response to this scene was very different. The mixed-age audience (adults, teenagers and children) on the opening night watched the scene in silence, understanding its message. The primary school children (aged 6 to 10 or 11) experienced the scene as confusing and boring, especially after nearly 50 minutes of fun and entertaining musical numbers. The children's restlessness by this point made the climactic scene that followed difficult to follow and to experience with the compassion and understanding it required. Boxer's collapse, Squealer's swift intervention to keep the animals distracted from the gravity of the situation, Napoleon's plan to sell the dying workhorse Boxer, and Benjamin's epiphany, which helps the animals see the truth behind the propaganda and decide to revolt – all these important and thought-provoking actions feel rushed. As Squealer

tries to persuade the sheep and the Hen that Benjamin is wrong and the horse was not sold to the slaughterer, the lights upstage, where Napoleon and his two dogs are, go dimmer and completely obscure them, and only Squealer and the animals hemming him in appear in the spotlight. Physically dominated by Benjamin, the sheep and the Hen, abandoned by the cowardly Napoleon, Squealer falls to the ground and freezes when the animals raise their clenched fists (Benjamin holding an apple – a symbol of the pigs' privilege and of the corruption of the animals' revolution) and they scream "Revolution!" The visual design of the end of the play is minimalist yet powerful: as the lights go dim and the score of the first song of the play, "Vine Revoluția!" ("The Revolution is coming!") is played, we are left with an image of the animals rising against tyranny that seems inspired by Eugène Delacroix' s depiction of the spirit of the French Revolution in "La liberté guidant le people".

The visual design of the play by scenographer Bianca Vești̇eman is brilliant and fitting for a children's theatre production. The set design is minimalist and suggestive: a chicken coop on the left, the farmhouse in the middle and a shed on the right, all similar in design, with half of the front side only suggested by the beams to allow the free movement of the actors and make the stage space fluid. Animal Farm as a fictional space is sketched in just enough sets and props to stimulate the spectators' imagination, without being distracting. Vești̇eman's costume design is equally appropriate, making the animals come to life with a child-friendly appearance, though Napoleon, Snowball and Squealer – all played by slender actors – could have benefitted from prosthetics to make them look portly and menacing. Unlike the other animal characters, whose costumes help us identify the animal each is supposed to represent, the pigs wear workman's clothes from the very beginning – a reference to visual representations of the New Soviet man, a member of the working class and a model communist citizen. The one costume detail that marks Napoleon's transformation into a human-like oppressor – the sign of his new bourgeois, capitalist mentality – is an oversize bow tie that he starts wearing as he begins his metamorphosis. The symbol of this change makes him look ridiculous, like a clown, which makes totalitarianism ridiculous as well. The satire is there, hanging by a bow-tie, reinforced by a line in the "Ode to Napoleon" song that makes the animals' naivety tragicomic.

Much of the success of a theatrical production derives from its ability to attract audiences by offering them something that is relevant to them, packaged in a form that they are willing to accept as appropriate. In the case of this production, the audience response clearly depended on the age of the spectators. If on the opening night, the audience (mostly adults and teens) was reserved until the end, children on a school outing were a much warmer and engaged audience, participating enthusiastically in certain scenes. To help children understand the spatial (and ideological) distance between the world of Animal Farm and that of humans, Victor Olăhuț wrote three additional scenes showing a reporter interviewing Mr Jones and the defectors, Millie the mare – lured by "bourgeois" items such as sugar and ribbons – and Snowball, each interview taking place on the aisles of the theatre. By bringing the characters physically closer, the children in the audience became more absorbed in the story, booing Mr Jones or applauding Millie and Snowball – a much-needed audience engagement in a production in which the characters often speak of things that make little sense to children. During the interviews, Mr Jones presents himself as a despicable master, and the TV reporter helps the children understand that Jones is guilty of cruelty towards animals, rewriting the themes of exploitation and enslavement in a way that resonates with children more than class struggle and systemic oppression. It is a simple and effective theatrical strategy that enhanced audience participation, but very little of what the actors said could be heard because of all the shouting by dozens of children. Mr Jones, claiming he felt unprotected by the state and had little hope of seeing his property returned to him, like many Romanians struggling since 1990 to recover their nationalised properties, is a subtle reference to contemporary Romanian social problems that children would not even understand. The same is true of the interview with Snowball, who delivers a populist speech in the hope of making his way back to power at Animal Farm, just as many politicians did in the early 1990s (including Romanian former President Ion Iliescu), struggling to show the humane face of communism even as communism was dying in the Eastern Bloc.

Such a reading of the characters' added lines aligns with the other references to Romanian political history in the play. The two news programmes feature the most obedient and thoughtless animals at the farm, the Hen and the sheep. The former, "aired" soon after the beginning of the pigs' government, with all the implemented reforms and reorganization of the activity at the farm,

echoes pre-1989 Romanian television propaganda in format, diction and pathos. It is the intentionally unrealistic representation of a news programme that children find entertaining here: two sheep holding the frame of a TV set, the Hen behind the frame acting as the news anchor. Equally amusing is the fact that the programme is announced by the opening score of *Star Wars* bleated by the sheep, which works both as an attention grabber and as an ironic comment on Napoleon's use of the animals' desire to be part of something big, epic, of the scale of a space war in which heroes fight for the good cause. And, why not, the musical reference might be an attention grabber for teens, suggesting that Napoleon is like Darth Vader, a heroic Jedi Knight seduced by the Dark Side, his thirst for absolute power and greed equally destructive.

The latter programme is similarly parodic in intent, only the subtext is much darker: Napoleon's dictatorship is already the new reality of the animals, with the freedom of expression or choice annulled and the cult of personality passively accepted by overworked, exhausted and confused animals. Once again, the main problem is that for the younger demographic this is just a fairly amusing pause from the action, and by this time children are already fidgety and tired. The succession of this slightly amusing scene and the choreographed one that follows prevents them from staying focused when the climax and the denouement of the play are presented before them. Boxer's collapse, the animals' confusion as the poor horse is picked up by the slaughterer's cart, and Benjamin's epiphany are all important moments that lead to the animal's revolt against the oppressive regime and are appropriately prepared by the pantomime number, but the dramatic effect, at least in the case of the performance attended by school children, was ruined by the audience not being fully in the moment. Very few of them could watch the series of connected actions unfold in silence, focused. What many children seemed to experience was compassion for Boxer, a shared understanding of the animals' loyalty to their friend and anger towards the cruel Squealer and Napoleon, so they joined the animals in their revolt echoing their scream, "Revoluție!" ("Revolution!") just as the lights went dimmer and the score of "The Revolution is coming!" was heard again. If there is one thing most children leaving the theatre seemed to remember about the production was that song and the idea of revolt. Revolt against injustice, against authority? Difficult to tell, but for primary school children, that entire production seemed to boil down to that one chorus line.

CONCLUSION

There are many things that the adapter did well in this production; however, the central problem rests with how in adapting the play's text as well as in construction, character design and theatrical mode, the adapter hesitated between reimagining Orwell's political allegory for a child audience or for a mixed-age audience. This hesitation might have been resolved had the age limit been set at 12+ or older, as is common for most stagings of *Animal Farm*. Since the production was commissioned by the "Luceafărul" Theatre for Children and Youth, Iași, Victor Olăhuț felt compelled to envision a theatrical experience fit for the entire family (as promoted on the theatre website), the result being an experiment in different theatrical modes, in which the dominant was the children's theatre mode, prioritising entertainment through visual and aural spectacle. In this production, the text with its complexity and ideological weight was pushed to the background, recognizable yet reinterpreted to prioritise issues deemed relevant for younger viewers. Orwell's themes of totalitarianism, manipulation, corruption, injustice, power, inequality, betrayal, and political violence – overwhelming and difficult to comprehend for younger audiences – were rewritten as themes relevant for children: injustice, (un)fairness, control, animal cruelty, lying, courage, and friendship. The characters were also rewritten with younger spectators in mind: the animals were instantly likable, even cute and amusing (the sheep, the Hen, the mare Millie), although the pigs should have been more clearly represented visually as evil, terrifying characters.[6] On the whole, the visual and experiential composition of the production, incorporating music, rhythm, movement, and audience interaction to keep the energy in the room high, as well as the simplified story and the talented actors' performance make this a children's production theatre fit for subsequent class discussions about social dynamics, bullying, lying, injustice, inequality, and greed. Beyond that, however, there is little of consequence about this 50-minute dramatization of Orwell's satirical allegory. That is, perhaps paradoxically,

[6] Another reading of the casting choice and the pigs' appearance is that no historical villains looked or behaved at first like the monsters they were to become, and that is what enabled them to gain others' trust and gave them access to power. For the sake of production coherence, however, they should have looked like villains from the beginning in the same manner that the other farm animals are represented as innocent victims.

because the form of the production itself does not allow thematic complexity or satire to take precedence over visual and aural spectacle. Children need clarity (from a narrative perspective and in character portrayal), and they cannot easily grasp nuance or allegorical meanings. They are more likely to take things at face value and respond to things they immediately understand.

On the other hand, teenagers, like adults, feel frustrated when their ability to understand nuance and complexity is questioned. The extensive textual cuts (including the absence of a narrative voice, which provides key information as well as ironic and humorous comment in the novella), the oversimplified portrayal of characters, the acting relying on physical comedy, and the addition of singing and dancing numbers set to upbeat dance music – all designed to entertain and ensure audience participation – have the opposite effect on teenagers and adults for whom the tone, the mood, and the theatrical storytelling methods feel inappropriate and distracting. Without a sound knowledge of the Orwellian novella, the adults have to work their way through scenes designed to engage and entertain children to extract figments of the Orwellian text in the play, trying to unpack the allegory without getting too distracted by the musical or comic interludes. Some Romanian spectators are likely to recognise the direct or indirect references to communism with its truth-changing tactics, disinformation, manipulation, power struggles thought-annulling practices still influencing Romanian politics, just as they can also place the Romanian experience of populist demagogy, power dynamics, manipulation, mis- and disinformation, and propaganda in a global context, especially with major armed conflicts influencing European and global politics and Cold War conflicts revived and reinvented.

Since the format of the production allows little room for nuanced discussion, important historical references and satirical comments from Orwell's *Animal Farm* remained undeveloped, creating a puzzle with many missing pieces. This theatrical adaptation, advertised as a play for the entire family, is, sadly, a downsizing of the Orwellian novella failing children (who, though entertained, miss the moral of the story and remain stuck on the word "Revoluție!" and the theme song of the production), teens and adults in equal measure, precisely by operating in different (and competing) theatrical modes simultaneously, creating confusion about this production's relevance to them and to the interpretive history of the Orwellian text.

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