

How the ASTRA Association Contributed to the Emancipation of Transylvanian Romanians Using Cultural Propaganda Through Theater

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Building of the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People

SOURCE: Postcard in IOAN DEJUGAN'S personal collection.

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ESTABLISHED IN Sibiu (Hermannstadt, Nagyszeben) in 1861, the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA) played a key role in the cultural emancipation and the preservation of the national and cultural identity of Transylvanian Romanians under the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy. Although its actions aimed at educating the Romanians and especially the peasants in Transylvania through the publication of books, brochures, and by way of conferences are well-known and appreciated, the contributions of the Association to the development of a cultural propaganda through theater, especially after the Great Union¹ of 1 December 1918, when the need for a national education was far from fulfilled, despite the new political and administrative unity, have received rather little attention.²

A series of unique documents in the Sibiu County Branch of the Romanian

National Archives show the incessant and constant efforts of the ASTRA Association officials to set up a theater movement in Sibiu and in the nearby localities, with a view to educating the masses through this art, promoting Romanian literature and dramaturgy, supporting young authors to create original plays and cultivating the audience's interest in the arts. In the vast ASTRA Collection, kept by the County Branch of the National Archives, we have discovered a series of unique documents, handwritten letters, minutes, reports, internal notes of the Association, and pieces of correspondence with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts. These documents show the incessant actions and efforts made by the ASTRA Association for the development of a cultural propaganda through theater among the Romanian population in Sibiu and throughout Transylvania. Association officials deemed the establishment of the first national theater³ in Transylvania (1919, Cluj) and the tours of the great theaters from Bucharest, Braşov or Craiova in Transylvania to be insufficient, first of all because their performances never reached the small provincial localities, and secondly because they did not promote valuable original dramatic creations, but often chose an easy repertory, looking for financial gain.

Theater As a Cultural Bridge

IN LINE with the beliefs of the officials of the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund, who saw theater as a great national school,⁴ the leaders of the ASTRA Association wanted to use theater as a means to educate the population, to make known the creations of Romanian literature among the masses, and thus increase the people's level of education and culture. For this reason, starting with 1921, the ASTRA Association decided to take it upon itself to organize a propaganda through theater, sent a memo to all its departments, hired an artistic director and began its endeavors with the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts to obtain the necessary funding to set up a travelling theater company that should reach the villages and the smaller towns of Transylvania. ASTRA's endeavor is tightly connected to all the social realities of the particular time after the Great Union. More than that, this genuine strategy would be an excellent example to follow now, at the beginning of the 21st century, when these isolated places in Transylvania still lack a basic and elementary cultural offer in the field of performing arts. The hundred years that followed ASTRA's venture did not change much for the underprivileged audience in this part of Romania, which still remains at a great distance from the important cultural hotspots.

The proposal to add theater to their scope of action and influence in the cultural field came from the members of the ASTRA Central Committee. At the meeting of the ASTRA Association Central Committee of 9 April 1921, member



NICOLAE BĂILĂ (1887–1950), artistic director.
SOURCE: ASTRA Sibiu County Library, Special
Collection. Iconography, no. inv. 12871.

Gheorghe Preda, a renowned doctor in Sibiu and future vice-president of the Association, voiced for the first time the idea that ASTRA “should better include theater into its means of cultural propaganda.”⁵ To coordinate this activity, Gheorghe Preda suggested the name of Nicolae Băilă, the former director of the German Theater of Sibiu, a graduate of the Bucharest Conservatory, in the class of master Constantin Nottara, former fellow of the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund, former secretary of the society *România Jună* (Young Romania), who had studied in Vienna and worked with theaters in Marburg, Pilsen and Budweis.⁶

The officials of the Association discussed recommending to the departments “to take this useful action into their care”⁷ and suggested the establishment of a group of amateur students to make cultural propaganda through theater in Transylvanian villages.⁸ The reasons why the ASTRA officials advocated

this idea had to do with the fact that through these trips in Transylvanian villages, the students could improve their knowledge, while the peasants could enjoy cultural events that would open their minds. At the following Central Committee meeting, on 12 May 1921, the ASTRA Association made the decision to employ Nicolae Băilă for three months to put together a travelling popular theater group, and then devise a detailed program of the project and submit it to the Financial Committee for approval.⁹ Nicolae Băilă presented to the ASTRA Association Central Committee an action program including the organization of stage speech classes for the students of the pedagogic and theological school, as he was aware that teachers and priests could help spread the art of the theater and promote Romanian literature and drama, including through small activities such as school performances and other celebrations they would organize with their students.¹⁰

Nicolae Băilă also suggested the formation of the first theater group in Sibiu, under the guidance of the Association, i.e. the setting up of a group of local amateurs to hold representations in Sibiu and in the departments of the Associa-

tion, their repertory taking into account local circumstances; in towns that had theater halls with sets and appropriate technical equipment, they could perform major plays, while in villages they could stage popular plays with a small cast and purely Romanian in character.¹¹

Soon after that, at the meeting of 25 May 1921, the Financial Committee of the ASTRA Association consented to employ Nicolae Băilă, considering that “training a travelling theater group was an important cultural matter,”¹² and decided on his salary, which was to be paid for three months from a donation made by the Romanian National Bank. In the same meeting, the Association Committee proposed a negotiation with the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund, so that the latter transferred its funds to be administered by the ASTRA Association, which would use it for theater propaganda.

In fact, on 1 June 1921, Andrei Bârseanu, president of the ASTRA Association, sent a letter to the Committee for the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund¹³ asking for an annual subsidy or even for the merger of the two societies, announcing that the Central Committee had decided “for a more efficient cultural propaganda at various levels of the population, especially for the people living in villages, to include among the cultural issues that it has looked after so far that of propaganda through theater.”¹⁴ Bârseanu raised the problem of the lack of funding for such a matter of outstanding relevance for the Association, requesting that the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund “agree to more diligent action with a view to spreading our culture among the broad masses of our people, by means of theater.”¹⁵ The president of the ASTRA Association also opened the possibility for the two societies to merge, so that “with joint powers, we should try to fulfill the program of the devoted initiators of the 1870 Society for the Funding of a Romanian Theater.”¹⁶

Over the following period, the Association sent letters to the schools of Sibiu, requesting that they allow their students to take part in the stage speech classes organized by Nicolae Băilă, as “in their public life, they could also use knowledge of the art of theater, as organizers of literary meetings, theatrical representations, etc.”¹⁷ This endeavor needs to be emphasized, with all its possible significations. Stage speech classes and workshops, as they were envisioned by Nicolae Băilă, would have helped improve what we now call the “capacity to communicate,” which was absolutely vital for the cultural and social environment of 1921 Transylvania, just three years after the Great Union. The strategy went beyond the plain development of vocal eloquence, and included special training for those with an interest in communication and in organizing events. All these prove a special and strong interest in cultural management. At the same time, these classes were useful on account of their primary purpose, which is the use of correct and expressive speech on stage; the vision and the artistic strategy of the promoters are to be praised.

In the first three months of activity—June, July and August 1921—the cultural propaganda through theater carried out by the ASTRA Association made little progress, partly because the society had no interest in drama and because of the lack of resources. The stage speech and drama classes were only attended by eight people, and as summer was a holiday season, Nicolae Băilă was unable to prepare theater shows, so he only organized certain local celebrations, festivals and one theater production at the girl's high school at the end of the school year.¹⁸

In the ordinary meeting of 15 September 1921, the Central Committee of the ASTRA Association decided to extend the employment of Nicolae Băilă for another three months,¹⁹ and in the meeting of 29 September 1921, it decided to further extend his employment until March of the following year, as well as to continue its discussions with Alexandru Vaida-Voevod, the president of the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund, and Octavian Goga, minister of Religious Affairs and Arts, in order to secure financial support.²⁰ Since his letter of 1 June 1921 to the Central Committee of the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund remained unanswered, Andrei Bârseanu, the president of the ASTRA Association, decided to send the same letter directly to Alexandru Vaida-Voevod on 8 October 1921.²¹

The ASTRA Association decided to send a memorandum to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts, to Minister Octavian Goga, informing him about their stage speech and drama classes for students of the Theological Seminar, the Normal School, and the Gheorghe Lazăr High School, aimed at training future priests and teachers to speak clearly when preaching, teaching, or holding conferences, so that they would be able to oversee and coordinate a basic cultural education in their villages. Cultivating the correct Romanian language was another objective of this endeavor, for high school students were granted the chance to acquire “a clear, Romanian diction.”²² Andrei Bârseanu asked Minister Octavian Goga for financial support for an amateur theater group through a subsidy from the state budget and for certain facilities for the transport of actors to the villages and towns of Transylvania, confessing that they were aware of the fact that “having a certain amount for this theater movement, we are contributing to our state's advancement.”²³

Desire for Emancipation

ONE OF the most relevant endeavors of the ASTRA Association, in the sense of carrying out cultural propaganda through theater, was the sending, on 7 March 1922, of a memo to all its departments to inquire about the exact condition of the infrastructure necessary to organize theatrical-musical rep-

resentations, as well as about the public's preferences and details about the skills of the amateur performers. The memo asked the departments to give precise answers to several questions regarding the number of venues suitable for theater shows, their capacity, the existence of sets, electrical facilities, the existence of music or drama clubs, the type of theater the audience preferred, whether any of the amateurs—intellectuals, craftsmen or peasants—showed remarkable talent, or the period dedicated to organizing a tour.²⁴ Beyond the purpose of making an inventory and assessing the infrastructure needed for theatrical purposes, we need to emphasize the relevance of the whole endeavor. More than that, such an assessment would also be useful now, a century after ASTRA's first initiative. Unfortunately, now, at the beginning of the 21st century, cultural operators still have problems in performing a detailed survey of the infrastructure in the field of performing arts, with all its possible opportunities in Transylvania.

In the ASTRA Collection of the Sibiu County Branch of the Romanian National Archives, we have identified several replies from the Association departments, indicating the precarious condition of the Romanian cultural and theater movement of Transylvania, as the number of venues was extremely low, many places having no theater group whatsoever, not even at amateur level; however, the Association officials strongly wished to develop this movement as soon as possible.

The first reply to the Memo of 7 March came from the Viștea Department, which informed that they had no performance halls, only the school classrooms that could be used for such purposes, and that the people were very enthusiastic about comedies. Priest Pavel Borzea, the director of the Viștea Department, wrote to the ASTRA Association suggesting the staging of N. Iorga's historical dramas, prefaced by some conferences held by the priest or the teacher to prepare the villagers so they could understand the plays, as he thought the theater movement was a good opportunity to educate the village population in the national spirit:

Our leaders' very angry and hateful policy fosters no unity, but deepens the distance between people, so I think a cultural propaganda through musical theater shows is most welcome, but it should be educational through a recourse to history, for only by gaining trust in ourselves through the brave actions of our forbearers can we trust the future, which is why I think Mr. Iorga's dramas prepared beforehand will have beneficial effects.²⁵

The other replies sent by the department directors to ASTRA reveal a more than critical situation for 1921 Transylvania. For instance, in the Gurghiu Department, there was no theater hall, with classrooms being the only spaces that could be used as performance venues, they had no sets, nor cultural clubs or electrical installations,²⁶ while in Lăpușul Unguresc (Magyarlápós, Lapos, today Târgu-

Lăpuș), there was a 1,000 seat hall with minimum sets, but no music clubs or electricity.²⁷ The situation in Lăpușul Unguresc was so difficult that the call of archpriest Zaharia Marcu, department director, remains impressive to this day, as he wrote the following to the Association's Central Committee:

*Please do not forsake us, as we have been much forgotten, we lack the opportunities to raise and lift our souls from numbness to the heights of refinement. In the absence of an impulse, the collaboration and directions coming from above, all the efforts and the turmoil of the isolated people here, are futile.*²⁸

The ASTRA Association departments were happy to take up the task suggested by the central office and conveyed to the leadership of the Association their hope for support for the cultural and spiritual emancipation of the people in their small localities, as they seemed willing to support, in their turn, the Association's efforts to implement the cultural propaganda through theater.

In Sibiu, on 4 April 1922, artistic director Nicolae Băilă proposed to the Central Committee of the Association the first project for setting up a 15–20 person theater group to organize tours in Făgăraș, Brașov, Săliște, Sebeșul Săsesc, Orăștie, Deva, Alba Iulia, Blaj, and other smaller Transylvanian towns.²⁹ This project clearly reveals Nicolae Băilă's intention to respond to the wish of the ASTRA Association officials to increase the level of education and culture of the rural population by staging original popular plays in the Romanian repertory, as well as to educate youngsters and attract them towards arts, by performing shows available for students and young people.

The ASTRA Association's concern for a higher level of education of Transylvanians, achieved through theater, is visible from the very start, in their desire to especially present original popular plays that could be easily understood by a general public and which gradually increased their artistic taste. Nicolae Băilă suggested a diverse repertory, depending on the specificities of each area, and made up of popular plays for the audience in the small Transylvanian centers, and with plays from the repertory of the National Theater for bigger cities, mentioning that they would select "only those plays that can be watched and understood by the students of our schools."³⁰ He also supported the idea of asking for a subsidy from the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts, as his letter touched upon the lack of education of the Romanian public, and its preference for light entertainment. The Association's theater propagandist talked about the need to educate the public, which must first be "taught to renounce luxury, to throw less costly *tea parties*, to enjoy a good theater show, rather than cinematic dramas,"³¹ so that, this way, the people in Transylvania would reach the higher level of education and culture which they should have achieved already, but had

been hampered by the harsh social condition of Transylvanian Romanians in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Association official was aware that it would not be easy to educate the audience and cultivate its sense for the arts, as “bad customs and habits are harder to unlearn,”³² but drew attention to the fact that “getting started is hard, and sacrifices are unavoidable. However, the longer we wait, the greater the sacrifices that will have to come later.”³³

All these prove again (if necessary) the coherence of ASTRA’s cultural endeavor, as well as the rapid emergence of a specific set of cultural policies that were a good response to the needs of the audience. The education through theatre is what contemporary cultural management calls “the search for and the development of new audiences” and is a vital concept for the entire performing arts phenomenon. Respectable cultural institutions work hard to reach diverse and fresh cultural environments and ASTRA started these actions a century ago.

Lobby for a Greater Cause

AT THE meeting of 20 April 1922, the ASTRA Association Central Committee decided to submit a memorandum to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts asking for financial support to establish a travelling theater group and, at the same time, to submit a request for a subsidy to the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund.³⁴

On 14 June 1922, Andrei Bârseanu, the president of the ASTRA Association, and Nicolae Băilă, the Association’s theater propagandist, sent a letter to Constantin Banu, minister of Religious Affairs and Arts, in which they justified the need to organize theater propaganda in the light of its constant concern, from the very outset, for the promotion of the values, the culture, the morality of the masses:

*The Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People, which, in the past, under foreign rule, oversaw and supported all cultural-artistic aspirations, undertaken by professional actors or, when there were none, by amateurs led by teachers, priests or any other intellectual, guided by the fact that cultural propaganda, uplifting the soul, forging honest characters, preaching morality, preserving our ancestors’ language and especially strengthening Romanian feelings, can more successfully be achieved by word of mouth and through examples shown in various plays to those who attend such artistic manifestations.*³⁵

The officials of the ASTRA Association informed the minister of their intention to further utilize the advantages of theater and use it to offer a good cultural

education to the masses, and openly manifested their discontent with how education through theater was conducted, drawing attention to the fact that the theater tours of Bucharest groups could not fulfill local needs, as “they are not sufficiently aware of our people’s level of artistic culture and do not know that even our city intellectuals are still insufficiently *emancipated* to attend frivolous plays without blushing.”³⁶ The two informed the Minister of Religious Affairs and Arts that students’ access was forbidden to many representations, even if these should have been addressed particularly to them.

One of Andrei Bârseanu and Nicolae Băilă’s arguments for the idea of a theater group had to do with the Association’s prestige and its supporting the interests of the Romanian population in the province that, not long before, had been under Austrian-Hungarian rule, mentioning that such an effort was also necessary

*in what concerns our Romanian prestige, while our fellow German and Hungarian countrymen carry out a remarkable activity and invest a lot in supporting their theater groups, we Romanians are obliged to look for cultural entertainment and leisure in performances foreign to our language and souls.*³⁷

Following this letter, the minister of Religious Affairs and Arts requested a meeting with a delegate of the Association on 27 July 1922,³⁸ and on 16 December 1922, the General Department for Arts of the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts informed the Association of the fact that the budget for the following year would take into account the Association’s request to establish a theater group.³⁹

In the first six months of 1923, the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts did not send any financial support for the theater, which is why the ASTRA Association was unable to carry out a consistent activity with regard to cultural propaganda through theater, as the precarious material resources of the Romanian population in Transylvania, and the Association’s lack of funds, made it impossible to fulfill the Association’s objectives in the field of theater. In his report on his activity as theater propagandist in the first six months of 1923, submitted by Nicolae Băilă at the meeting of the Association’s Central Committee of 19 July, he talked about the lack of material means, saying that “because of the lack of interest of the public in Sibiu for fine arts”⁴⁰ his theater activity was not very fruitful. Over half a year, the Association’s theater propagandist barely managed to put together two theater representations with his students, and to organize the stage speech classes for the students of Andrei Șaguna Normal School.

It was only in the meeting of the Central Committee of the ASTRA Association of 19 July 1923 that the payment ordinance by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts was mentioned, for a subsidy of 400,000 lei to organize a propaganda



Sibiu German Theater, located in the Thick Tower in Sibiu

SOURCE: Postcard in IOAN DEJUGAN'S personal collection.

theater group by the Association, money that would be deposited at the Albina Bank; Nicolae Băilă was responsible to make use of the amounts necessary to employ the actors.⁴¹

In its meeting on 20 July, the Central Committee of the ASTRA Association decided that the name of the future theater group would be Astra Theater Company,⁴² and appointed Nicolae Băilă as manager and director of the theater company, with administrative and artistic responsibilities for the theater group.⁴³ In September, the Astra Theater Company began preparations for the first Romanian theater season in Sibiu, as they were to only work with plays in the repertory of the Bucharest National Theater, as actors from the capital city were going to come to support the Association's theater group in the more difficult roles.⁴⁴ They also hired 15 actors, who were "born in Romania, all of them Romanians,"⁴⁵ young graduates of the Bucharest Conservatory, who, in time, became famous on the Romanian stage. Rehearsals took place in the fall of 1923 in the festivity hall of the ASTRA Association, with plays from the Romanian repertory and an adaptation: *Fântâna Blandusiei* (The fountain of Bandusia), by Vasile Alecsandri, *Pe malul gârlei* (On the bank of the river), by Dimitrie C. Ollănescu-Ascanio, *Nevasta lui Cerceluș* (The wife of Cerceluș), by Petre Locusteanu, and *Țăranul Baron* (Jeppe on the Hill), by Ludvig Holberg, translated from Danish.⁴⁶ Still, the problem of the theater hall where the Association's

Company was to hold its representations remained unsolved. In Sibiu, there was a strong German Theater which carried out its activity in the Thick Tower, part of the city's defensive walls, a building that had been turned into a theater in the 18th century. The ASTRA Association had to work hard to gain access to the city theater hall, as the management of the Sibiu German Theater managed to secure the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts' agreement to not cede the hall for the shows of the Astra Theater Company, so the representatives of the Associations only managed to gain access to the hall in November.⁴⁷ More than that, the report submitted by Nicolae Băilă to the ASTRA Association indicates that the representatives of the German and the Romanian theaters did not get along; Băilă stated he was left without sets for his shows because the German Theater had replaced their sets with expressionist ones.⁴⁸

On 27 October 1923, the Astra Theater Company held their first representations on the occasion of the General Assembly of the Cohalm Department; then, in Sibiu, they performed 29 representations between 17 November 1923 and 3 February 1924,⁴⁹ this being the first Romanian theater season in Sibiu, as the ASTRA Association had long desired. With the inherent gaucheries of the beginning, the first season was seen as the initial structure underpinning the later design of a strong and valuable Romanian theater movement in Transylvania. Nicolae Băilă informed the ASTRA Association Committee of his intentions and vision for the future:

And my purpose was not to perform representations that were perfect from all points of view and to compete with the Bucharest National Theater, but in my opinion, this theater should be an extension of the Conservatory, a theater where the actors would have the chance to develop a repertory of roles, so that, in a few years' time, when more stable provincial theaters are established, which will certainly happen, these would find it easier to find professionals for their troupes.⁵⁰

After the end of the first season, the ASTRA Association encountered big problems in terms of financially supporting its theater propaganda, and asked Vasile Goldiș and Ilie Beu to intercede with the Minister of Religious Affairs and Arts, Alexandru Lapedatu. In the meeting of the Central Committee of the ASTRA Association of 1 March 1924, Nicolae Băilă read the report on the activity of the Astra Theater Company from September 1923 to the end of January 1924, showing that, out the 400,000 lei subsidy received from the state for propaganda through theater, there was insufficient money left to continue their endeavors.

The members of the Central Committee embarked on intense lobbying to secure funding from the state so that they could continue the education through theater they had started in Sibiu. Vasile Goldiș was assured by the Ministry of

Religious Affairs and Arts that the ASTRA Association would receive funding of 600,000 lei to continue its theater propaganda, but this never happened. In the meeting of 1 March 1924, Ilie Beu suggested that, based on the promises made to him by Alexandru Lapedatu, minister of Religious Affairs and Arts, regarding the theater subsidy, the Association should temporarily ensure the funds necessary to continue the theater propaganda until mid-March, and on 15 March to suspend the activity of the theater group until they received the state subsidy.⁵¹

The representatives of the ASTRA Association wanted to continue the cultural propaganda through theater, as they were aware that, once the initial difficulties were overcome and the theater group was set up, Nicolae Băilă could continue these actions and develop them in time, thus meeting the need for quality performances in the province, especially in small localities. Besides, the Association's prestige would be damaged if it didn't prove capable to continue an effort it had begun.

The Central Committee of the ASTRA Association "ascertains that the prestige of the Association would suffer if the Theater Company was dismantled," which is why, in the meeting of 1 March 1924, it decided to offer temporary financial support to the theater company and

*to inform President Vasile Goldiș of the critical situation of our theater company and to ask him to take urgent action, from his position of authority, as he best sees fit, with the competent authorities, so that the subsidy is received as soon as possible, so that we don't reach the point where we have to dismantle this cultural propaganda company that was established through so much sacrifice with the aim to be truly useful in our contact with the masses of our people.*⁵²

Reaching a highly critical situation, on 3 March 1924, the Sibiu Central Committee wrote to the president of the ASTRA Association, Vasile Goldiș, who was in Arad, informing him of its "poor financial situation," and requesting that he take action.⁵³ In the same letter, the members of the Central Committee informed Vasile Goldiș of their concerns regarding the fact that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts would not grant them the theater subsidy, and furthermore would not provide the money for the Association's Popular Library, in which case the "Association would be in an inescapably dire situation."⁵⁴ The Association's Central Committee delegated Nicolae Băilă to go to Bucharest on 3–7 March to discuss the situation of the subsidy promised by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts for the Astra Theater Company. Upon his return to Sibiu, Nicolae Băilă described his visit to Bucharest to the Association's Central Committee, revealing a series of arcane plots and bizarre situations which had led to the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts no longer granting the sub-

sidy to the Association, despite having made repeated promises in this sense.⁵⁵ Nicolae Băilă talked about the meeting that took place in the office of the general director for theaters, Ion Alexandru Vasilescu-Valjean, who assured him that the 600,000 lei subsidy had been approved by a commission attended by the Minister Alexandru Lapedatu, but when trying to convince him

*fully of the fact that the subsidy had been approved, he opened the printed budget at the page entitled **Subsidies for theaters** and, searching for our subsidy, was startled to realized it was missing from the printed budget and shouted: “I no longer understand a thing!” I, for one, was fully enlightened.*⁵⁶

Moreover, Minister Lapedatu refused to see Nicolae Băilă, and Ion Alexandru Vasilescu-Valjean led him to believe that the state subsidy had been suspended because of “intrigues” by certain members of the Association.⁵⁷

Lacking material resources, the Association had to suspend the activity of the Astra Theater Company, but did not abandon the idea of cultural propaganda through theater and kept Nicolae Băilă,⁵⁸ who continued to organized stage speech classes and to lead the Association’s small artistic manifestations.⁵⁹

Conclusions

THE ASTRA Association’s contributions to the cultural emancipation of the Romanian population in Transylvania also included the outline of a cultural propaganda campaign through theater. The Astra Theater Company, which was active in Sibiu for only one season, in November 1923–March 1924, played an important part in the Association’s future direction, based on the belief that theater and art could be useful means of cultural propaganda. It was an impulse for the future endeavors of the ASTRA Association in the field of cultural propaganda through theater. The episode of organizing the first Romanian theater season in Sibiu paints a clear picture of a time marked by challenges and shortcomings, of a province that waited for support from the authorities in Bucharest to complete cultural projects which, before the Great Union of 1 December 1918, had been impossible because they had limited cultural rights.

During the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy, the ASTRA Association had been unable to put together a well-defined theater movement in Romanian, as the city of Sibiu did not have a permanent theater, so it could only enjoy the rare occasional performances by Romanian groups or by the travelling group led by Zaharia Bârsan, who in 1919 was appointed director of the Cluj National

Theater. The Great Union of 1918 also brought the hope that all the failures suffered during the Austro-Hungarian Dual Monarchy would be overcome, but this did not happen, as even after the unification the state had modest financial resources, rather weakened as a consequence of the First World War, so the dream of the people of Sibiu and the ASTRA Association to have a permanent Romanian theater movement to fulfill the needs for theater of the smaller Transylvanian villages also had to wait. Despite the fact that the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts stopped financing the theater movement of the people of Sibiu, the ASTRA Association supported the cultural-artistic movement, published creations by Romanian playwrights in the Popular Library, and supported the theater representations held by amateurs. The ASTRA Association continued its endeavors in the theater field, and in 1934, the Society for the Romanian Theater Fund and the ASTRA Association merged, the Society's assets being used to support artistic and theater manifestations.

The cultural propaganda through theater carried out by the ASTRA Association in 1921–1924 shows that the Association knew how to use all the means available to spread culture among the masses, utilizing theater to enliven the cultural life of Transylvanian localities, cultivate the audience's artistic taste, and promote Romanian literature.

In the end, we shall focus on and emphasize two aspects that seem to be very important. Firstly, ASTRA's cultural strategy was dictated by certain rules of cultural propaganda. This is absolutely natural, as these were the specific realities of that particular time and this was the social and cultural context in Transylvania right after the Great Union of 1918. ASTRA proved to be an excellent mechanism that used to operate based on an agenda suited for cultural propaganda, and its actions were motivated by the cultural landscape of the local and regional communities. Secondly, this particular mechanism of cultural propaganda seems to be useful even right now, a century after ASTRA initiated this agenda. For that purpose, it is important to prove that all the actions that were devised back then may still be useful today, if they are adapted to our realities. It is still useful to have some sort of stage speech classes in schools, in order to develop vocal eloquence (and also to preserve the language). Again, it is still useful to create an inventory of the cultural infrastructure and to synchronize the repertory to the cultural needs of the underprivileged audiences. All these phases of the actions that ASTRA carried out are still important, and they represent the challenges of the contemporary Romanian cultural environment. A century later we still need theater to revitalize the cultural life of the communities in Transylvania (and also the entire Romania), in order to educate the artistic taste of the audience and to promote Romanian literature.



Notes

1. ASTRA continued to play a major role after the Great Union, as it re-evaluated its capacities and outlined new action plans. This was the direction for a new theater movement. Interesting data about the ASTRA's agenda in terms of cultural propaganda can be found in Pamfil Matei's "*Asociațiunea Transilvană pentru Literatura Română și Cultura Poporului Român*" (ASTRA) și rolul ei în cultura națională (1861–1950) (Cluj-Napoca: Dacia, 1986). See also: Pamfil Matei, *Asociațiunea în lumina documentelor (1861–1950): Noi contribuții* (Sibiu: Ed. Universității "Lucian Blaga," 2005); Teodor Ardelean, *Asociațiunea ASTRA și limba română* (Sibiu: Ed. Asociațiunii ASTRA, 2011); Elena Macavei, *Asociațiunea ASTRA și Adunările Generale 1861–2011* (Sibiu: Ed. Asociațiunii ASTRA, 2011); Constantin Necula and Sorana Maier, *Asociațiunea ASTRA, recuperarea unei memorii culturale*, vol. 1, *Întemeietorii* (Bucharest: Eikon, 2020).
2. An excellent and detailed analysis of the activity and aims of the ASTRA Association in the first decade following the Great Union in Valer Moga, *ASTRA și societatea 1918–1930* (Cluj-Napoca: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2003). For more explanations regarding the evolution of the ASTRA Association in this period see: *Astra în anii de după război 1918–1928* (Sibiu: Ed. Asociațiunii, 1928); Ioan Georgescu, *Ce este și ce vrea să facă Asociațiunea* (Sibiu: Biblioteca Poporală a Asociațiunii, 1921); G. Preda, *Activitatea "Astrei" în 25 de ani de la Unire (1918–1943)* (Sibiu: Ed. "Astrei," 1944).
3. We shall mention here a few of the most relevant contributions dedicated to the Romanian theater movement in the history of Transylvania and Romania: Simion Alterescu, ed., *Istoria teatrului în România*, 3 vols. (Bucharest: Ed. Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, 1965–1973); George Baiculescu and Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul românesc acum o sută de ani*, with a foreword by Paul I. Prodan (Bucharest: Vreimea, 1935); Ileana Berlogea, *Teatrul românesc în secolul XX* (Bucharest: Ed. Fundației Culturale Române, 2000); Virgil Brădățeanu, *Istoria literaturii dramatice românești și a artei spectacolului* (Bucharest: Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1982); Ioan Massoff, *Teatrul românesc: Privire istorică*, vol. 1 (Bucharest: Ed. pentru Literatură, 1961); Mihai Vasiliu, *Istoria teatrului românesc* (Bucharest: Albatros, 1972).
4. "Theater is the greatest moral school, the greatest educational school, together with the church and the schools; it is a temple of morality and science," said Iosif Vulcan, the future president of the Society for a Romanian Theater Fund: Iosif Vulcan, "Să fondăm teatru national," *Familia* (Pest) 5, 29 (1869): 338. The opportunity for having a Romanian theater in Transylvania was intensely debated at the end of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century, especially because some members of the Transylvanian intelligentsia considered the establishment of Romanian schools to be more important than the establishment of the Romanian theater. More details in "Relatiunea dlui Iosifu Hodosiu despre teatru in tierile romane," *Familia* 6, 41 (1870): 481–486; Iosif Vulcan, "De ce voim s'avem un teatru national," *Familia* 6, 40 (1870): 469–477; Oct. C. Tăslăuanu, "Teatru românesc," *Lucașfărul* (Sibiu) 5, 19–20 (1906): 401–403; Atanasie Marian Marienescu, "Teatru natiunal," *Familia*

- 4, 23 (1868): 274; Horia Petra-Petrescu, “Este mișcarea noastră teatrală un lux? Conferință ținută la adunarea generală, în ziua de 5/18 Noemvrie 1913, la prima ședință a Societății pentru fond de teatru român, în Brașov,” *Revista teatrală: Publicație teatrală-culturală: Organul “Societății pentru fond de teatru român”* (Brașov) 1 (1913): 183–184.
5. Sibiu County Branch of the National Archives (hereafter cited as SCB), ASTRA Collection, Minutes of the 1921 Meetings of the ASTRA Committee, “Minutes of the 5th Meeting of the Central Committee of the Association, Held on 9 April 1921,” 42.
6. Ilie Hașeganu, *Figuri din Mărginime*, vol. 2, *Cărturari, îndrumători culturali și economici, redactori de gazete populare și calendare, dascăli, memorialiști, călători, artiști* (Bucharest: Litera, 1976), 81–82.
7. SCB, ASTRA Collection, “Minutes of the 5th Meeting of the Central Committee of the Association, Held on 9 April 1921.”
8. For further details on the theatrical movement in Sibiu see Sorana Maier, *Teatrul românesc din Sibiu 1868–1948*, with a foreword by Constantin Valer Necula (Bucharest: Eikon, 2019).
9. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Minutes of the 1921 Meetings of the ASTRA Committee, “Minutes of the 6th Meeting of the Central Committee of the Association, Held on 12 May 1921,” 58–59.
10. *Ibid.*, Papers, document no. 656/1921, letter dated 25 May 1921.
11. *Ibid.*
12. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Minutes of the 1921 Meetings of the ASTRA Committee, “Minutes of the 7th Meeting of the Central Committee of the Association, Held in Sibiu on 25 May 1921,” 74.
13. ASTRA and The Society for the Romanian Theater Fund had a strong collaboration that lasted for many years. See Victor V. Grecu, “Astra și Societatea pentru Fond de Teatru Român,” in *Centenarul Societății pentru Crearea unui Fond de Teatru Român 1870–1970* (Oradea: Comitetul pentru Cultură și Educație Socialistă al Județului Bihor, 1972), 33–43.
14. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Papers, document no. 650/1921, 27, letter dated 31 May 1921.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*
18. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Papers, document no. 1141/1921, Report by Nicolae Băilă to the Central Committee of the ASTRA Association, 13 September 1921.
19. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Minutes of the 1921 Meetings of the ASTRA Committee, “Minutes of the 9th (Ordinary) Meeting of the Central Committee, Held on 25 September 1921,” 136.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Ibid.*

24. Ibid., Papers, document no. 290/1922.
25. Ibid., no. 438/1922.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., no. 296/1922.
28. Ibid., no. 438/1922.
29. Ibid., no. 460/1922, 139.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., Minutes of the 1922 Meetings of the ASTRA Association, "Minutes of the 8th Meeting of the Central Committee of the Association, Held on 20 April 1922," 41.
35. Ibid., Papers, document no. 796/1922, 134.
36. Ibid.
37. Ibid.
38. Ibid. no. 1004/1922.
39. Ibid., no. 1779/1922.
40. Ibid., Minutes of the 1923 Meetings of the ASTRA Committee, "Minutes of the 14th Meeting of the Central Committee, Held in Sibiu on 19 July 1923," 60.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid., "Minutes of the 15th Meeting of the Central Committee, Held in Sibiu on 20 July 1923," 66.
43. Ibid., Papers, document no. 1751/1923.
44. Ibid., no. 1123/1923, 1–2.
45. Ibid., no. 969/1923.
46. Ibid., no. 298/1921.
47. Ibid.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid., no. 198/1924.
52. Ibid.
53. Ibid., no. 298/1924, 3.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid., no. 435/1924.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid.
58. Valer Moga (501) ascribes the partial failure of ASTRA's Drama Company to the amateurism of Nicolae Băilă, who supposedly went beyond what was suitable for a popular theater, leading to comparisons between the Company and the great theaters in Romania.
59. SCB, ASTRA Collection, Papers, document no. 1190/1924, 2.

Abstract

How the ASTRA Association Contributed to the Emancipation of Transylvanian Romanians Using Cultural Propaganda Through Theater

Starting with 1921, the Transylvanian Association for Romanian Literature and the Culture of the Romanian People (ASTRA) included in its scope of activities a cultural propaganda through theater, aiming to support the cultural emancipation of the Romanian people in Transylvania, especially in the small towns of the province, where the situation of cultural-artistic life was poor. Financially supported by the Ministry of Religious Affairs and Arts, the ASTRA Association managed to set up a theater movement in Sibiu, with a view to enriching the cultural life of Transylvania, cultivating the artistic taste of the audience, promoting Romanian literature and the spiritual values of the Romanian people. This study analyses a series of unique documents in the ASTRA Collection, which reveal less-known aspects of the activity of the ASTRA Association.

Keywords

ASTRA Association, cultural propaganda, emancipation, theater, audience, education