

Antuza Genescu

## The Anglo-Romanian Cultural, Science and Science Fiction Exchange

The Anglo-Romanian Cultural, Scientific and Science-Fiction Exchange began in April 1993. Those from Timisoara, Romania, who came to *Helicon*, the European Science Fiction Convention held in Jersey, UK, that year met several members of the North West Kent Society 'The Phoenicians'. The relationship they established with the H. G. Wells Society from Timisoara is now over twenty years old.

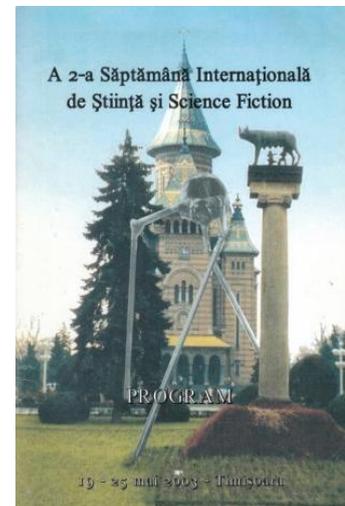
Why is this exchange especially significant? Because the people involved in it organised, among



other things, two unique events: the International Weeks of Science Fiction. Also a couple of editions of the *Science Fact & Science Fiction Concatenation* fanzine were published as part of this exchange.

At first, the idea of organising a whole week of science fiction seemed almost impossible. We, the Romanians, were used to just two- or three-day

regional events or national conventions run by our regional SF societies. If I remember well, the 1994 Timisoara Eurocon lasted for four days. How were we supposed to fill *seven* days for the international gathering of fans and writers we were expecting? This was one of the fears the H. G. Wells Society members faced in the summer of 1999, before the last solar eclipse of the last millennium that was to coincide with the event. We approached hotels, college faculties, bookshops, post offices, the headquarters of the Romanian Writers' Union, the airport, the station... We went everywhere we thought we might find solutions and help. And it worked!



By the start of the first International Week of Science Fiction we were already exhausted, but pleased. The pre-event progress reports in English and Romanian had been sent to participants, as had the initial press releases and invitations. The main organisation issues were solved: we knew for sure who was to arrive and when, our guests' accommodation was arranged, the programme was ready and..., the icing on the cake, we had our: Guest of Honour Robert Sheckley; Tony Chester as Fan Guest and Roberto Quaglia the Toastmaster. The week itself passed in a flash. I am looking at the official invitation now and I see that there were in fact eight days (August 5-12, 1999) and that the official opening took place in the middle of the week, when the people had already seen an excellent six-part film and George Mandics had taken us on a visual trip to Mars, with the help of the 1994 Pathfinder mission: it was typically SF, no explanation was needed. Everything was SFnal on the day of the solar eclipse, even the weather – the



Tony Chester, Jonathan Cowie and Robert Sheckley

sky was cloudy for the first time in a long series of very hot and sunny days – and the inflated bill at the open-air restaurant where we went to see the eclipse: the waiters there must have had Ferengi ancestors.



Writers Ian Watson and Silviu Genescu mull over the luncheon menu's plot

The first International Week also included launches of SF books published by Nemira (R. Shekley's *Mindswap* and R. Quaglia's *Bread, Butter and Paradoxine*). Jonathan Cowie delivered a great scientific talk about the *Eclipse and the Biology of Astronomy*, illustrating it with high-quality slides. At the end of the week, we enjoyed the brilliant conversation between Roberto Quaglia, Tony Chester and Robert Shekley. The banquet, as well as other items on the programme, was organised with help from our Western friends.

The Second International Week, held in 2003, was, as expected, even more exciting than the first. We prepared three pre-event progress reports. We already had a database with names and addresses of guests, organisers and participants. We asked possible participants to register and promoted the event on the most active Romanian SF websites. We made lists of arrivals and departures. We waited for our guests at the station or at the airport. We even made sure that the restaurant where we would go every night had enough food and beer for a week



Jonathan Cowie, Traian Badulescu and Silviu Genescu at the 2nd Week's Romanian book and zine launch

Like the first time, we had a bilingual programme book (printed in London by the generous fans) containing presentations of guests and organisers. The programme for our foreign guests included a visit in the charming town of Jimbolia (which some had previously visited in 1993). Our host that day was Mr. Kaba Gabor, the serving mayor of the town. We prepared a document with 'internal guidance' entitled *All Aboard – The news sheet enabling the Romanian SF and Jimbolia Hungarian communities welcome the international SF community to Romania for the 2nd International Week of SF*. The document indicated not only what the Romanians could do to help with the organisation, but also what we expected them not to do, namely: "1. Last minute gestures - however well meaning - that disrupt the hard work and plans of others. (This event should demonstrate that Eastern Europeans can be well organised and co-ordinate activity.) 2. Poorly



Jonathan Cowie talk at the Jimbolia town hall

thought-out ideas and activities that are not well prepared. Some effort will be required (but the intellectual and social rewards should make this worth it). (Remember the only place where 'success' comes before 'work' is in the dictionary.)" The British organisers also gave good advice for the smooth running of events: When attending the film sessions the Romanian translators will sit on the far left (as you face the screen) so as not to distract those directly listening to the English soundtrack. Consequently, *please* leave the right hand of the hall to English speakers. Thank you for your co-operation which is truly appreciated." There were four categories of participants: invited authors, Eastern European participants, western participants and the locals. Some people may laugh at such indications, but they were really very useful (and they were related to the sponsorship from our British co-organisers).

We all know what happens with last minute revisions to plans. No such alterations were allowed during our event! The 2nd International Week was

held in May 2003, but the document I have quoted from above had been drawn up and spread in the autumn of 2002, together with the three progress reports. Every participant received a customized envelope with a badge and useful informative material. The whole Week was prepared in great detail. We had a back-up plan for almost every item in the programme. I have browsed the tens of files and messages that we exchanged with our British partners and discovered that we had even established, for instance, in what order was the toastmaster (Roberto Quaglia) supposed to invite the guests to speak at the final banquet. The guests were: the famous author Ian Watson; Danut Ungureanu – Romanian SF writer; Professor Cornel Ungureanu, president of the Timisoara branch of the Romanian Writers' Union; and Vince Docherty, the Scottish SF fan and Worldcon organiser. We had only one regret: István Nemere, the renowned Hungarian author of over three hundred books, had been unable to join us. He was impersonated by George Mandics, who spoke about him in the first person singular. He was so convincing that some of those attending that programme item took him for the Hungarian writer. One of them was heard whispering at her neighbour's ear: "This Hungarian writer speaks excellent Romanian!"



J. Cowie, Roberto Quaglia, Tony Chester and Antuza Genescu

We had a remarkable Guest of Honour of the Second International Week, Ian Watson, but we also had an unexpected Ghost of Honour. The two of them blended perfectly in a unique performance. H. G. Wells made his appearance dressed in the traditional suit of his Edwardian time and started to talk to us: "Ladies and Gentlemen, I am not who you think I am. You see before you the body of Mr Ian Watson, but I who occupy this body am none other than Herbert George Wells, a name which may be rather better known to you than that of Mr Ian Watson. In fact, this situation has happened to me *three times* before, and on each occasion the body of Mr Watson has been involved! This happened in 1987 in Birmingham, and in Portsmouth in 1995,

and yet again in Glasgow in the year 2005. Ah, I see a face which I remember from Glasgow in 2005 – that of Mr. Vince Docherty." In the end, Ian Watson managed to recover his body and joined the people who watched *A.I.*, the film based on his screen story and directed by Steven Spielberg.



Liviu Pirvan, J. Cowie, Tony Chester, Robert Sheckley & R. Quaglia

People had great fun at the TV sci-fi quiz between Timisoara and Scotland on one side and the Rest of the World on the other. The winners got the Great Prize, absolute control of the universe for a nanosecond. Before the competition, the teams had to decide what they would do in that nanosecond.

We watched *Minority Report* and *The Time Machine*, which were then new, and the British TV mini-series *Ultraviolet*, a modern and scientific approach to the vampire trope.

The 'Orientation Day' included three different Timisoara tours. In the 'Publication Launch Day', we offered the participants the new books that the Romanian SF author Sergiu Somesan had sent especially for this event. In the afternoon of 'Jimbolia Day', Dan Heidel, a Spanish Dane who delivered an impressive presentation entitled *Internet Exotica* about astronomy and space, science fiction erotica, and film trails on the internet. On the 'Travels in



Part of the Dead Dog party

Space and Mind Day', Jonathan Cowie presented a slide show exploring technical images of future space travel past and present. Ian Watson lost and recovered his body in the 'H. G. Wells Day'. In the 'Appetite Stimulation Day', it was Danut Ungureanu's and Vince Docherty's turn to speak and Roberto Quaglia moderated the Grand SF Interview of all the guests.



Alan Boakes, Dan Heidel & Jonathan Cowie

All Western guests paid for their airfare, accommodation in a central hotel in Timisoara and meals. Two of them bought tickets for all the participants who wanted to see the newly released *The Matrix Reloaded* at a local cinema, asking them to come and express their opinion about the film the next day. I'm embarrassed to say that very few of those who had watched the film came to the next day's events. Not only did the foreign guests participate in the two International Weeks, but they also provided the resources for organising them. It's a shame their echo in Romania was so weak. Except for the fans and writers from Timisoara, only two people from the Romanian fandom took part in the Second International Week: Traian Badulescu and Ovidiu Petcu. It is sad to see that the Romanian fans were very little interested in a unique event that had been promoted long time before it started. As far as I know, so far no other Science Fiction Weeks have since been organised in Romania. The Atlantykrone summer camp is quite a different thing and has subsequently lost its SF connection.

An unexpected, but all the more pleasant, surprise was Eugen Stancu, who was then a student in Budapest, and two Hungarian fans who came to Timisoara especially for the Second International Week. Alan Boakes, a very good friend of *H. G. Wells* SF Society was with us too, as was Peter Redfarn, a fan who has never missed a European SF convention. I wish I could name all the participants. They were over 50 when we last counted them. At the final banquet, the menu included Dracula's Peasants' Soup (made with 100% Transylvanian

peasants), a Space-Time Mixed Grill (Tyrannosaurus, Soylent Green and Fire Worms) served with salad from the Gardens of Delight, and drinks that turned everyone's eyes *Dune* blue. In the background, H. G. Wells' *Invisible Man* performed classic SF book and film mimes.

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Over the Cultural Exchange's twenty years, I mentioned at the beginning of this article, several issues of the *Science Fact & Science Fiction Concatenation* were published. The zine first appeared in 1987, and subsequently *H. G. Wells* SF Society members contributed material to some of them. The 1994 special trilingual (English, Romanian and German) issue garnered a 'Best Fanzine' Eurocon Award that year at the Timisoara Eurocon. While in 1997 the *Concatenation* team received a Eurocon Award for 'Best Promoter' at the Dublin Eurocon.

The FESTIVAL of FANTASTIC FILMS  
The 6th Annual Convention of The Society of Fantastic Films: September 22nd to 24th 1995  
Progress Report Number Three September 1995

MEET THE LADIES  
WHO MET THE  
MARTAINS!  
ANN ROBINSON &  
BARBARA SHELLEY  
ARE AT THIS YEAR'S  
MOVIE CONVENTION



In due course, *Concatenation* moved online (<http://www.concatenation.org>). It has three principal editions *per* year, in spring, summer and autumn. In 2012, at the Zagreb Eurocon, twenty-five years after its first issue, *Concatenation* received Eurocon Award in the inaugural 'Best Website' category. Also, back in 2009 and 2011, it published a two-part article about Romanian Science Fiction ([http://www.concatenation.org/europe/sf\\_romania\\_2.html](http://www.concatenation.org/europe/sf_romania_2.html)) written by several *H. G. Wells* members.

Criticised by some in Romania, but appreciated by others and elsewhere, the article was a brief history of Romanian SF: it could now be improved and updated as many good things have happened in the Romanian SF over subsequent years.

In 1995, as part of the Anglo-Romanian Cultural Exchange, Cristian Lazarescu from Bucharest and yours truly spent two weeks in London and Manchester at the Festival of Fantastic Films (<http://fantastic-films.com>). We are still proud to say that we talked to film director Roger Corman and horror author Ramsey Campbell, among others.

In 1996, Tony Chester spent two weeks in Timisoara. George Mandics and yours truly again

visited London and also Glasgow for the 2000 Eastercon. In 2001, the second Romanian Eurocon organised near the Roman ruins at Capidava, Constanta County, brought Jonathan Cowie and Alan Boakes back to Romania. In 2010, two *H. G. Wells* members went to London and visited Canary Wharf, ExCel, the place where Loncon 3, the 72<sup>nd</sup> World Science Fiction Convention will be organised.

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None of the above-mentioned events would have been possible without the help and dedication of 'The Phoenicians' and '[Concatenation](#)'. Remembering them through this article is one way to express gratitude, and at the same time an attempt to encourage others to organise similar events. The Internet cannot replace them.

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This article was written and translated from the original's Romanian by Antuza Genescu from an article first published in *Paradox* #22, a special edition to mark in 2012 the 40th anniversary of the H. G. Wells SF Society's formation. You might not appreciate that this article was originally written in Romanian, but be assured it was. For example, the English expression "the only place where 'success' comes before 'work' is in the dictionary" works in Romanian too.

Below there are additional pictures from the two International Weeks of Science & SF that were not included in the original piece.

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Translators and visitors' dinner 1st International Week 1999



Jonathan Cowie and Robert Sheckley

Continued below....



Visit to the heritage museum Jimbolia



Audio-visual sci-fi quiz



Mandics (George) Gyorgy and Jimbolia Mayor Kaba Gabor



Danut Ungureanu and Antuza Genescu



Vince Docherty (left), Ian Watson (centre) and Mandics Gyorgy in the coffee break



Dan Heidel and Internet Exotica



Ian Watson as H. G. Wells



Roberto Quaglia & Vince Docherty



Writer's fuel: 'Red Paradox' wine