

Prolegomena to an Evolution of the Theatre of the Absurd from Eugène Ionesco to Matei Vişniec

PhD Student Catalina-Diana Popa*

Résumé: *La dramaturgie de l'absurde a, dans la littérature roumaine, deux points de référence: le théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco, celui qui a mis les bases de cette formule dramatique, et celui de Matei Vişniec, qui marque la disparition de ce langage théâtral. Les pièces de Matei Vişniec, quoiqu'ils soient influencées par son prédécesseur roumain - français, se situent sous le signe du pseudo-absurde, parce qu'ils portent apparemment l'empreinte de l'absurde, en enfreignant les principales règles et en surdépassant ses limites. Malgré le fait que ses premiers textes peuvent être considérés du point de vue de la structure et de la thématique des farces tragiques, les pièces suivantes se détachent de cette règle. Nous sommes, donc, les témoins d'une évolution du non-sens à une logique intérieure du texte, de l'auto-destruction du langage à son résurrection, de clichés à des formules entièrement nouvelles, du personnage- stéréotype au personnage-archétype. Il s'agit donc d'une réinvention du théâtre moderne, de la découverte d'une nouvelle formule dramatique qui emprunte l'expressivité de la poésie et qui trouve les sujets dans le reportage social, dans l'histoire nationale et personnelle, dans littérature classique et absurde à la fois*

Mots-clés: *absurde, pseudo-absurde, Ionesco, Vişniec, résurrection du langage*

Absurd. Ionesco. Vişniec.

Ionesco is unanimously appreciated as one of the most important representatives of the absurd, which he applied in his theatre, also setting a number of theoretical coordinates. The few voices considering that Beckett might have preceded him in representing waiting as a defining element of the theatre of the absurd seem to forget that the play *The Chairs*, where the two protagonists are waiting together with their imaginary guests the arrival of the (equally imaginary) King and the Orator's speech, was first staged on April 22nd 1952, before *Waiting for Godot* (staged in 1953). Irrespective of the controversies of world literature, things are much simpler in Romanian literature: Eugène Ionesco is undeniably the initiator of the theatre of the absurd and its main representative.

If the beginnings of this type of literature are inextricably associated to his name, the "death" of the absurd bears the influence of another Romanian immigrant to France: Matei Vişniec. Having made his debut in poetry, like his predecessor, Vişniec finds his vocation in theatre, which he shapes by means of the instruments available to the poet and journalist, going beyond the limits of the absurd, and in fact of any other literary current of the time. Although critics have agreed to include his theatre in the postmodern absurd, stating that it originates in the dramatic formulas of Ionesco, Beckett or Sartre, his writing is equally metaphor, parable, poetry – hidden behind a mask of nonsense. Here follows an attempt at analysing the manner in which the theatre has evolved from Ionesco to Vişniec, from the absurd to the pseudoabsurd [1].

Tragic. Comic. Tragic farce

In the theatre of the absurd, as in all modern literature, the category of the tragic cannot possibly be separated from the comic, as they ceased being clearly delimited ever since the advent of drama. In the process of deconstructing writing, there occurs the alteration of classic concepts and the erasure of the boundaries between them. The comic and the tragic cannot be isolated and do not occur in a pure state, moreover they are evolving one towards the other so that the comic "involuntarily becomes tragic each time it is faced with the absurd destiny, the fatality of the nonsense, the unavoidable lack of high values and ideals", and the tragic in its turn is "parodied, minimised, caricatured, becoming a form of derision and grotesque", according to Adrian Marino [2].

*"Dunărea de Jos" University of Galaţi, Romania

The absurd humour, the absurd comic, and the "shock triggering laughter" [3] have also been mentioned in this respect. In fact they do not exist, as the tragic component of absurd plays, hidden beyond an apparent frivolousness, is much stronger, and no text recipient, be he initiated or not, may ever be amused by the grotesque show of human condition. In Vişniec's theatre the comic or humour in their pure state cannot be mentioned, even if his texts are not entirely built according to the "laws" of the irrational; having a logical internal structure, they remain at the border between the tragic and comic dimensions.

Out of this tragic-comic amalgam comes out the tragic farce, "the adequate artistic genus through which a part of the Western dramaturgy reflects the alienated human condition of the contemporary period" [4]. Being an elusive species, difficult to confine in aesthetic determinations, no precise name could yet be applied to it. Its very creators are reluctant to agreeing on a clear terminology, proposing various names. Thus, Eugène Ionesco himself denounced the hybrid character of his dramatic constructs: "I have entitled my comedies *antiplays*, *comic dramas*, and the dramas *pseudo-dramas* or *tragic farces*, as it seems to me that the comic is tragic, and man's tragedy risible" [5].

In Ionesco's tragic farces there are tragic elements, but they do not entirely achieve their valences, moreover they acquire new significations and nuances, becoming heterogeneous, combining the tragicomic, burlesque, grotesque. Therefore, the tragic is no longer born out of the battle of the superior human being against the hostile fate or the existing world order, but out of the absurd man's incapability of reacting and opposing the existential nonsense, chaos, and aberration defining the universe. In turn, the comic of situations or language are converted into an absurd, grotesque comic, at the borderline between terrible, tragic, fantastic. But Ionesco's plays not only evince various facets of the alienated human condition, but also include critical accents targeting the social structures hostile to the individual's development and protests against conformism and political oppression of the Nazi or communist type, as apparent in the *Rhinoceros*. The same component is to be found in several of Vişniec's plays, *The History of Communism Told for the Mentally Ill*, *Gufy's Land*, *The Fear's Prompter* or *Decomposed Theatre*, but the nonsense encountered at his predecessor is replaced by an internal logic of the dramatic text, and the characters gain substance, become coherent, and that is why their attempt at opposing the world they live in is closer to the tragic in its classical acception.

In the context of absurd drama writing, the plot, intrigue, characters, language also acquire new valences. With Ionesco the plot proper does not exist as such, there is no longer a logical sequence of events, but instead an agglomeration of facts of life trying to depict the nightmares of a disoriented society. In its turn, the intrigue is almost completely absent, the characters' behaviour and conversations seem not to be triggered by anything in particular, and the viewer himself has to account for what is going on on the stage and, more often than not, the possible explanations he may come up with are contradicted by the play's development. In Vişniec's pseudoabsurd theatre, intrigues start getting shape, even if they are reduced to the bare minimum, causality is restored, and the characters' reactions are accountable for: in *What About the Cello?* The characters end up crossing their paths because of the rain they try to get shelter from, in *The Teeth* one fact happens on top of the other after a soldier is found alive, the only one so far, the love story in *The Beautiful Journey of Panda Bears Told by a Saxophone Player Who Had a Girlfriend in Frankfurt* starts after the night that the protagonists spend together at a bar opening, the encounter between Kate and Dorra in *The Woman's Sex – Battlefield in the Bosnian War* takes place after the rape, used as a weapon in the interethnic war. And the examples may go on.

In point of the topic choice in the tragic farce, it is confined to a limited set of aspects, mostly related to the limit-existential states of the alienated individual. Mircea Cristea identifies four of them [6] which were also found in Ionesco and Vişniec [7] as: language derailment and character automatism (*The Bald Soprano*, *Gufy's Land*), object proliferation

(*The Lesson, What About the Cello?*), the tragicomic dimension of certain situations the characters are caught in (*The Chairs, Old Clown Wanted*) and the death obsession (*Exit the King, The Ceiling Hole*). If most plays by Ionesco may be included in this classification, it only covers a small portion of Matei Vişniec's playwriting as the majority of the plays, especially those pertaining to the latest period, do not concur with the characteristics of the tragic farce.

Language. Resurrection. Silence

Language is a defining element in the theatre of the absurd because, even if it is completely annulled as a means of communication, it ends up subjugating beings, bringing them to their knees. From the expression point of view, Ionesco's plays are in fact a succession of linguistic clichés, specific to the so-called wooden language. The words become completely void of meaning, turning into empty shells, exclusively pertaining to a primary semiotics. Most of the times Ionesco's plays eventually turn into uncontrolled accumulations of lines, uttered faster and faster, words turning into screams (as it happens in *English without a Teacher*). Words are just spoken, without being lived [8], understood, assumed; they lose their basic function, i.e. communication instruments, in order to become automated dictations generated by the schizoid mind of the characters. In Vişniec's theatre, language is gradually regaining its metalinguistic function, turning back, despite the syncopes, into a communication code. In plays like *The Beautiful Journey of the Panda Bears Told by a Saxophone Player Who Had a Girlfriend in Frankfurt* the dramatist identifies language valences that not even the classical theatre put to use, not to mention the absurd. The level of interrelation reached is one that Ionesco's readers could never have suspected, as it goes beyond words, towards a superior communication, by silences, pauses, thoughts:

“ *SHE: Say a to wish me welcome.*

HE: a.

SHE: Say a to tell me good-bye.

HE: a.(...)

HE gets up and pours himself coffee. The sugar spoon in his hand and his hand in mid-air.

HE: a?

SHE: One cube, thanks.

HE (offering his cigarette packet): a?

SHE: No, I have my own.(...)

SHE: Say a to yourself as if you'd say you'll never forget me.

HE: ...

SHE: Say a to yourself as if you'd say I'm beautiful.

HE: ...”

If in Ionesco's case there is a language anarchy, the same cannot be said for Vişniec. An essential issue still stands out: the absurd, just like the surrealism before it, only destroys the normal communication system in order to re-invent it; in this context, the quotation above is a clear instance of the resurrection of the language, which becomes fresher and stronger than ever.

An important role is played by coinages, issued either from the ludical sense defining the individual, or from the loss of human attributes, among which the ability to re-invent language: the author plays “in a serious manner” with the word forms and meanings, practising all language registers: terms such as “bumburoiul”, “săbăuța”, “zgăbăgiul”, “țucălitoarea”, “măsfălugul”, “balțachinul”, “mucăloaia”, “ruțimigul”, “zbătoaga” [9] alternate with plays-upon-words and puns: “patru capre nasc un cal, doua babe fac o iapă, zece bube trag o luntre nou ieșită de la bal, moare-o gură într-o gușă, care dinte n-are gură,

orice parte are carte, nu-i capușă fără moarte, orice ușă are casă, nu e moarte fără coasă, orice luntre are plasă, nu e apa fără punte, orice coadă are sapă, unde-i capra să o roadă, orice coadă se înnoadă și din orice cărbuș iese zborul ca un duș..." [10]. The latter situation is also found in Ionesco's plays, where even the presupposed viewers are contaminated by the sickly rhetoric of the other characters and start re-inventing words, adding chaotic suffixes: "feculos", "flutizant", "admirizant", "floriferic", "nebunaticos", "formidabilos", "eugenionește" [11] (*Politeness Formulas*). The final term perfectly describes the play's atmosphere and Ionesco's dramatic language in general.

An equally sickening alternative to the uncontrollable flow of words emptied of meaning which exhaust the characters and the viewers alike is, for Eugène Ionesco, silence. The teacher in *The Lesson* kills his students to make them silent. But first of all, language – an essential component of living beings – has to be corrupted and then definitively destroyed itself: "In the regiment we had a mate, a viscount, who couldn't say f. Instead of f he said f. (...) He said fat instead of fat, Firmin instead of Firmin, fiddlehead instead of fiddlehead" (our transl.) – nonsense is therefore transferred from the factual level to the expression level. Silence may also be a form of self-defence, a deliberate form of protest against human degradation, as seen in *Jacques, or The Submission*. The protagonist refuses to surrender to the altered communication imposed by his family, at first through silence, then by inventing a new language together with Roberta II. In fact it is a linguistic system reduced to only one term, *cat*, resulting in the sudden metamorphosis of the protagonists, who start miaowing and croaking in the darkness that falls at the end of the play. Thus the dramatist demonstrates the word's power to create or destroy an entire universe.

In Vișniec's case silence is a form of character identification which proves essential in the semantic architecture of the play. In *The Teeth*, the soldier found alive by the two thieves does not speak a word, but, on disappearing, takes with him the souls of the two, leaving them float confused between life and death. The silent saviour in *The Spider in the Wound* undoubtedly is the main character concentrating around him the others' voices and thus building the entire dramatic structure. The Man with the cello in *What About the Cello?* utters no words, just plays his instrument, as if hypnotised by his own music, driving his occasional listeners mad, as they cannot think of or speak about anything else; his disappearance will leave them completely empty inside, with nothing to talk about. But silence can also be a sign of absolute grief, the refusal to communicate of a world crushed by the implacable war machine. In *The Woman's Sex – Battlefield in the Bosnian War* Dorra does not answer Kate and ignores all attempts at creating communication channels. Her first words, uttered at a very late stage in the play, are in fact a scream to the others, to an absent and absurd God, to a world she refuses to belong to anymore.

Type. Archtype. Stereotype

The theatre of the absurd may well be considered as meaningless, and its heroes may well be generically called "anti-heroes", in which case they should be mere empty masks, but not even Ionesco abides by this rule. In his theatre, just like in the Bunraku theatre [12], the masks which are uncomplicated at first sight hide in fact an extremely complex mechanism, as well as the symbolism of a human archetype. The old man in *The Chairs* is the image of failure and frustration, emphasised by the presence of the Old Woman who aims at being an ambitious housemaker and frivolous hostess, the two families of Londoners in *The Bald Soprano*, Smith and Martin, stand for the degradation of human relations, the individuals' inability to communicate, while Jacques is an alter-ego of the dramatist, expressing his own anguish and confusion. Nevertheless, the characters' behaviour is most of the times unstable, their reactions are out of control, swinging between weeping and laughter, often turning into hysterical laughter. Sympathetic transposition becomes impossible and that is why the viewer watches the play dumbfounded, completely devoid of empathy, and his sadness or joy are

replaced by confusion. It is a natural reaction in front of the nonsense brought on stage by the lack of logical relations at a factual level, the incongruity between the situation and the characters' attitude, and the puns pushed to the extreme.

In Vişniec's case there are no masks in the true meaning of the word, but there are absurd individuals and revolted, archtypal heroes. The former are passive, not aware of the lack of logic or aberration as they are part of their internal structure, they exist in the absurd and do nothing to escape this meaningless world. Such people are the inhabitants of Gufy's Land, Macabeus and Paraschiv in *The Ceiling Hole*, the stereotyped characters in *What About the Cello?* or in *Horses at the Windows*. The revolted characters are different, they are aware of the absurd and reject it, trying to escape the trap; if they are successful or not in their attempt is less relevant. Lulu and Robderouă in *Gufy's Land* are such rebels. The same may be said about Beckett and Godot (in *The Last Godot*) or the Traveller in the Rain from the play with the same title, who are eventually defeated by the daily automated routine: the former are the eternal actors of the same play, puppets that had the illusion of autonomy for only one brief moment, and the Traveller is forced to give up his journey and ends up dying slowly in the "the room upstairs" in the station building.

Regarding the typical characters, they are present in Ionesco's plays, even if the theatre of the absurd has tried to deny them. The most salient type is the 'shrew', manipulating and censoring the male character: The Old Woman in *The Chairs* directs the grotesque show of death with dozens of imaginary guests, the Maid in *The Lesson* controls and determines the teacher's killings, she is the "dictator behind the scenes" as she was called by Marian Victor Buciu [13], Mama-Jacques terrorizes her son with her requests (*Jacques, or The Submission*), and then Roberta transforms him into a breeding machine (*The Future Is in the Eggs*). In Vişniec's plays the feminine character is far more substantial [14], making it almost impossible to identify a pattern. It has to be mentioned however that there are a couple of hyeratic, fragile presences, like Nina in the homonymous play or Ioana in *The Traveller in the Rain*, representations of the beautiful Makta in the poetry volume *The One-Inhabitant City*.

Another example is turning the spectator into a character, his entering the stage and active participation in the play becoming commonplace in the past few years. It is also a common occurrence in Eugène Ionesco's *Politeness Formulas* and in Matei Vişniec's *The Death-Sentenced Spectator*. Creating such a type of character is motivated by the author's desire to prove that the theatre and real life are intertwined, mutually influential, and also by his attempt to increase the affective involvement of the real viewer.

In conclusion, Matei Vişniec's playwriting acknowledges the fact that last century's absurd has evolved towards a new type of hybrid theatre, the pseudoabsurd, which is only apparently similar, and where one may easily detect surrealist, neomodernist, postmodernist elements, having as the defining features language resurrection and the character's reinvention.

Notes

- [1] "Pseudoabsurd" is used here to designate the type of theatre practised by Matei Vişniec which, even if originating in the theatre of the absurd, differs from it in a series of elements to be seen comparatively in the present article
- [2] Marino, A., *Dicţionar de idei literare(A-G)* [*Dictionary of Literary Ideas (A-G)*], Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1973, pp.434-435
- [3] Balotă, N., *Literatura absurdului* [*The Literature of the Absurd*], Teora, Bucharest, 2000, p.43
- [4] Cristea, M., *Condiţia umană în teatrul absurdului* [*The Human Condition in the Theatre of the Absurd*], The Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 106
- [5] Ionesco, E., *Note şi contranote* [*Notes and Counternotes*], Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p.61
- [6] Cristea, M., *Condiţia umană în teatrul absurdului* [*The Human Condition in the Theatre of the Absurd*], The Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 107
- [7] Only one representative play belonging to the two dramatists was selected here, for each discussion topic
- [8] That places us in disagreement with Marian Victor Buciu, who states that in Ionesco's theatre words "are not just spoken, but lived in speech" (Buciu, M. V., *Ionesco*, EuroPress Group, Bucharest, 2007, p.12)
- [9] Untranslatable noun coinages aimed at sonorous and/or comical stylistic effect

- [10] Untranslatable extended play upon words making use of rhyming patterns and free associations
- [11] Untranslatable coinages — invented adjectives and adverbs with fanciful suffixes
- [12] A form of traditional Japanese theatre using puppets.
- [13] Buciu, M. V., *Ionesco*, EuroPress Group, Bucharest, 2007, p. 14
- [14] The extent to which this fact is determined by the different vision of the two playwrights on literature or their biographies is debatable

References

- Balotă, N., *Literatura absurdului [The Literature of the Absurd]*, Teora Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000
- Buciu, M. V., *Ionesco*, EuroPress Group, Bucharest, 2007
- Cristea, M., *Condiția umană în teatrul absurdului [The Human Condition in the Theatre of the Absurd]*, The Didactic and Pedagogical Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997
- Ionesco, E., *Note și contranote [Notes and Counternotes]*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002
- Ionesco, E., *Teatru [Theatre]*, vol. I-X, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003-2008
- Marino, A., *Dicționar de idei literare(A-G) [Dictionary of Literary Ideas (A-G)]*, Eminescu Publishing House, Bucharest, 1973
- Vișniec, M., *Teatru [Theatre]*, vol. I-II, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007
- Vișniec, M., *Omul-pubelă. Femeia ca un câmp de luptă [Rubbish Cart Man. The Woman's Sex as a Battlefield]*, Cartea Românească Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006
- Vișniec, M., *Frumoasa călătorie a urșilor panda povestită de un saxofonist care avea o iubită la Frankfurt. Femeia-Tinta și cei 10 amanți [The Beautiful Journey of Panda Bears Told by a Saxophone Player Who Had a Girlfriend in Frankfurt. The Target-Woman and the 10 Lovers]*, Paralela 45 Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009
- Vișniec, M., *Istoria comunismului povestită pentru bolnavii mintal [The History of Communism Told for the Mentally Ill]*, Paralela 45 Publishing House, Bucharest, 2007