

# Matei Vişniec - successor of the human faced Absurd in Postmodernism

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**Abstract:** *Vişniec's theater is a synthesis theater in which the parody, the lyricism, the ontological, the grotesque, the fatality merge into a compact form, maintaining a balance that gives authenticity to the dramatic writing. The ordinary, the ordinary fact, what surrounds the contemporary man naturally becomes the subject of an introspective analysis of existence, translating them into dramatic situations. You cannot speak of a mere copy of the trivial. The playwright captures the facts by passing them through the deforming filters of the absurd, through which the often grotesque attitude of the characters takes on an air of normality. If in Chekhov, the heroes are aware of their fate and in this way they motivate their non-combatant attitude, in Vişniec they only find it and they simply submit without conscience processes.*

**Key-words:** *Matei Vişniec; the synthesis theater; the absurdity of Vişniec; dramatic writing.*

## 1. Introduction

Ever since his childhood, Matei Vişniec found himself fascinated with the rigorous rituals of the important events, such as weddings, christenings, funerals, that took place in his grandparents' village. Reaching adulthood, Vişniec understood that "the sacredness is a source of my love for the theatre"<sup>2</sup>. Matei Vişniec began to write plays when he was only a student. A character in one of his plays is 20th Century itself, caught doing the inventory of the negative deeds inflicted to humanity. His text was rejected on the basis of not being able to highlight positive facts. The innovative perspective concerning realities was not in accordance with the expectations of the totalitarian regime. His sarcastic humour, slightly gentle, could not avoid the fast sliding into tragic. The lyric prior to theatre proves affinities with drama, a fact acknowledged also by Matei Vişniec in a dialogue with Valentin Silvestru: "My poetry had and still has a dramatic core, meaning that every poetic text I produce is sometimes a little parable, a tension between two or more characters. I believe that I own a dramatic perception of the world. As experience clustered in time, lectures have clustered as well and poetry slid into theatre"<sup>3</sup>. Having come through the experiences adjacent to playwriting as his predecessors and being a poet and publicist in the period of expansion of the Communist regime, Matei Vişniec's trajectory requires a thorough analysis in the context of his establishment as playwright acknowledged and claimed by the Romanian culture as well as the country of adoption, France. The artistic destiny of this author, whose work is still relevant today, is somehow related and heavily influenced by Eugene Ionesco's dramatic inheritance. By choosing the same path as Ionesco, the path of exile, Vişniec continued his career by writing plays mainly in French, but also in Romanian. One may find it difficult to describe Vişniec's literary style as unitary, his works being put between avant-garde and postmodernism. He took some influences from the 80s' movement, where he also shaped himself as a playwright, such as the subversive manner of writing poetry and dramatic plays.

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<sup>2</sup> Ines Hristea's interview with Matei Vişniec. Nov. 2018. In "Formula AS", no.1343 NOTE: *Something happens with my soul...*

<sup>3</sup> Vişniec, Matei. 2004. *The history of Communism told for sick people*. Bucureşti: Editura Litera Internațional, p. 328.

If in poetry, the danger of being decrypted and received by a large audience did not disrupt the censorship of those times, playwriting was another thing. This might be the reason why for so many years when he wrote theatre in Romania (1977-1987), none of his plays was represented on a stage. Vişniec's texts, while wearing the mask of parable, of allegory, and trying to approach naive topics, were meant to dismantle and reveal the mechanisms of totalitarianism. The absurd of his creations, especially the early ones, was not rooted in Ionesco's absurd, where the purpose of words was to express the lack of sense of the existence. Vişniec's absurd has roots in the reality of the author's own existence.

This is the actual reason why the plays written during this period of time (*The Prompter of Fear* - 1977, *The Door* - 1978, *The Man Speaking Alone* - 1979, *The Teeth* - 1980, *Pockets Full of Bread* - 1982, *The Spider in the Wound* - 1986) circulated in facsimile. The fear, the anguish, the waiting, the illusory hope found in his plays, even though they were not directly expressed, were transmitting an emotion that created discomfort for the censorship of the system. The grotesque world imagined did not fit in with the thematic guidelines proposed by the Communist system. Vişniec's plays, where the parable and the philosophical meditation were turning real had a strong and disquieting impact. If authors such as Marin Sorescu or Teodor Mazilu were managing to outwit the censorship filters, Matei Vişniec had only an attempt of stage representation of his texts in 1987, at Nottara Theatre, when, a day before the premiere, the actual representation was banned.

The exile was the manner that allowed Vişniec to free his creative energy and bring his artistic unrest in his dramatic work which in Romania was condemned to remain forever unknown. Vişniec's exposure in the francophone space of the absurd where his predecessor, Eugen Ionesco was already renowned and acclaimed was made with the help of the cultural influences brought from the Romanian culture. There can be identified in his plays elements of language and situations specific to Caragiale if one would take into account the couple Marţafiţa - Gufi from *Gufi's Land*, whose angst remind of the nocturnal dialogues between Efimiţa and Leonida or the character of Bruno in *The Prompter of Fear* who using as space of manifestation the brewery from Bucharest, removes his neurotic loneliness in a failed dialogue with a mute character through a grotesque verbalization of imagining plots. Vişniec discovers that the world of nonsense is a rich field for the manifestation of mutiny. By applying the rule of the lack of sense, he materializes in the aberrant confession of his characters the ontological fear, a theme also found in Sorescu's plays. The fear and the turmoil became supporting elements of the author's premonitions, delivered via characters. In order to support this statement, Mircea Ghiţulescu, literary critic, notices the visionary side of Vişniec: "While being more like visions than actual plays, his texts can be considered structures of fear, but it is the fear of the soul tormented by the never-ending secrets of an ontological and indecipherable script the French existentialists were calling angst"<sup>4</sup>. His philosophical-meditative attitude also reveals the influences that Marin Sorescu had over the Romanian theatre through his poetic and dramatic work. There are areas of interference in the work of these two authors where there can be found the inclination towards a meditative style, eccentric compared to the traditional theatre. In Sorescu's work, as well as Vişniec's, the comic and the tragic coexist in parabolic compositions. The avoidance of the dialogue structure, the lack of interest in defining specific spaces and the circumvention of the temporal dimensions are themes found in many creations of these two authors. In a parallel between *The Third Stake* and *The Spider in the Wound*, one can discover similarities not only regarding the image created by the author in the situations exposed. The stakes of the two condemned men, separated by the stake of the one expected (reference to *Godot*) are replacing here the two thieves crucified while in the middle is a Jesus as absent as the empty stake

<sup>4</sup> Ghiţulescu, Mircea. 2000. *The History of Contemporary Romanian Drama*. Bucureşti: Editura Albatros, p. 510.

separating Sorescu's characters. The historical myth reminding of Vlad the Impaler's justice is replaced in Vişniec's play by the biblical myth of the crucified. One can also discover in language, especially in the author's early plays, a certain linguistic verve which reminds of Băieşu's lashed out phrasing but also of the play with words in a style similar to Preda or Urmuz, especially in the case of the characters from *Gufi's Land*. If in the Romanian lineage, Vişniec borrows from Caragiale-Urmuz-Sorescu-Ionescu, in the European drama, the author found his roots in Chekov-Beckett or Adamov-Genet.

## 2. The absurdity of the human face in post modernism

Vişniec's absurd is not about a purely metaphysical aesthetic, as one can notice while acquainting with the veritable absurdist playwrights. He takes over the red string of Ionesco's absurd and adds influences from Pirandello, with a language that wavers between slapstick and poetry. Vişniec's abstract relies on a bizarre fundamental realism, where the language seems to follow and the words do not intend to shape the action. Their role is to substantiate ideas where the real is filtered and this is resulting in dramatic situations that seem extracted from an everyday life touched by poetic. In order to support these statements, Valentin Silvestru mentions regarding Vişniec's dramaturgy that he, "(...) invented an absurd theatre that could be distinguished from that of some famous predecessors in the branch and he invented a grotesque so overwhelming through torturing obsessions, where at the end remained only hope"<sup>5</sup>.

Vişniec's theatre is a theatre of synthesis, where parody, lyricism, ontology, grotesque and fatality merge in a compact form while maintaining a balance that gives his work authenticity. The usual, the everyday fact, what surrounds the contemporary man in an obvious manner, they all become a subject of introspective analysis of existence and ultimately become dramatic situations. One cannot speak about this as a simple act of copying the ordinary. The playwright captures the facts while putting them through the warping filters of the absurd where the usually grotesque attitude of the characters seems proper normality. As in Chekov, Ionesco or Beckett's plays, the characters are anti-heroes condemned to inactivity. If in Chekov's plays, the heroes realise their fate and this is what makes them justify their attitude, Vişniec's characters only state the matter and simply obey without any train of thoughts. The dynamic and surprising language that many times becomes deluges of word resulting in meaningless phrases cannot save them from being puppets populating the universe of the author identity. In contrast to Ionesco, whose dramatic construction is subjected to a specific static structure, Vişniec is always looking for new forms to correspond to his need of constant experiment. He does not intend to let himself directed by strict rules of playwriting and considers himself provoked by the magnetism of the topics that attract him in the slipstream of the story: "There comes anger, a joy to write, a passion, a struggle. Sometimes I write a play in three months, other times I write it in three days, but it can wait for three or more years until I find a proper ending, let's say it. The text is alive"<sup>6</sup>. He fragments the dramatic structure and thus offers freedom of interpretation for the scenic representation. By using the technique of the counterpoint, Vişniec develops an unusual dynamic to the alternation of scenes by putting his characters in unexpected situations.

All these searches have the property to approach from various angles the postmodern man, the contemporary man. If the established absurdist playwrights found the man as being irreversibly condemned, Vişniec's plays always keep a wave of hope alive. Even though he keeps the linearity and inability to progress, the character acting like an undefined sketch shows a vitality often lacking in the absurd creations. The author empathises with his

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<sup>5</sup> Vişniec, Matei. 2007. *The Hole in the Ceiling*, Bucureşti: Editura Cartea Românească, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> Dărămuş, Lucia. April 2005. „Matei Vişniec face to face with Emil Cioran”, column in *Dacia literară*, no.6, p. 4.

characters and gives them a second chance, be it illusory. The metaphysical terror is diluted through the intervention of the sudden comic which slightly slides toward the grotesque, thus creating an undefined area of grey where tragedy and comedy coexist in an unstable balance. Moreover, the novelty of Vişniec consists of a reshaping of the relationship between man and himself, as well as his values, in a rapport where the absurd, the comic, the warped reality, the oneiric and the angst are in perfect compatibility. Vişniec's dramaturgy cannot be classified in a certain thematic. Unlike other playwrights who tended to follow a single direction, Vişniec chose to explore an entire universe capable of mirroring the actuality without a chronologically defined program. There is a certain tendency of avoiding pinning in a certain register. Vişniec, loyal to French and Romanian culture, wavers between diverse registers, changing thematic directions, making time and space leaps. He writes in Romanian as well as in French and by retroversion, he finds new nuances and meanings for the text. In his vast work where the stylistic forms are intertwining, one can trace a few directions in order to classify somehow his plays.

The poetic deformation is manifesting constantly its influence especially in the early period of his career, when he could not show the concrete through his way of expression. To support this statement, Ion Bogdan Lefter concluded, "Vişniec 'patented' a personal recipe by transferring in the space of the poetic discourse the mechanisms of the Absurd Theatre: austere narrative, simple setting reduced to a few lines, lost characters, judgemental conceptualisations, a parabolic atmosphere"<sup>7</sup>. This is precisely why Vişniec creates a universe where allegory and metaphor prevail as ways of revealing the truth. In this category, there can be mentioned, *Horses at the Window*, *The Prompter of Fear*, *The Hole in the Ceiling*, *The Door*, *Gufi's Land*, *Pockets Full of Bread*, plays with a profuse poetic meaning where one can discover an alienated world, emptied of human emotions, where the lack of initiative, the passiveness offers them the role of puppets. These plays are short, excepting *Gufi's Land*, where, even though the structure of the text follows the classic direction, Ionesco's influence is strong and the language disintegrates in various scenes when the characters, like broken machines, start series of Dadaist words and expressions. If Ionesco destroys the coherence of language in order to express the alienation of the human being, Vişniec uses expressionist overtones to communicate through seemingly naive word games, what could not be told. The native cultural influences from the 1980s were becoming a way of expressing, they intermingle in Vişniec's work with the dismantling tendency of the absurd, and this results in heterogeneous texts where is illustrated a mysterious and vexing universe. Thus, Matei Vişniec starts a process of searching a personal identity of expression where the accumulation of the avant-garde tendencies from the European space is filtered in a unique manner. Gabriel Coşoveanu mentions that, "Vişniec's originality resides after all in the capacity of absorption of the dramatic lessons preceding him, until the personalization of fabulation relating to the poetic of postmodernism. The logic and linguistic binder is usually the metatext"<sup>8</sup>. The lyricism, the oneiric, the parody turning into grotesque define through language a way of expressing the reality of the contemporary man, a tragi-comic world where waiting, nothingness, and death are the main themes for meditation. Vişniec's texts are extrapolations of the everyday life transposed in a poetic form, scenes that describe fragments of the life of certain characters lacking psychological foundations. They are made to slide in surrealist situations where the dialogues border the absurd.

Another area explored by Vişniec is the one relating to time as a formula of existence for the characters stuck in a continuous present reminding of Beckett, where the characters live their angst, their uprooting and by wishing to express themselves, they find monologue as way of communication. In this matter the representative plays are those from the cycle

<sup>7</sup> Lefter, Ion Bogdan. 2001, March, 20 - 26. *Cultural Observer*, year II, no. 56, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> Coşoveanu, Gabriel. November 1997. „An attack toward the comfort of the spectator”. *Ramuri Magazine*, No. 11, p. 10.

*Decomposed Theatre or the Human Trashed*, where Vişniec, while trying ceaselessly to find new formulas of expression creates a series of twenty-five monologues without a logical relation between them and gives his reader the freedom to find himself his own logic and coherence.

In this regard, the author invites his readers to an experiment of creating their own architectonic vision of text where the common factor is a post-apocalyptic world where the remaining ones have the chance to express their own inner self. Even though the way chosen by Vişniec is the monologue, it achieves dialogue valences because of the way to expose the communication since the character begins an intimate relationship with the reader or the spectator. In this way, the one who receives the message has the chance to break into the intimacy of the characters' own thoughts. Thus, through this procedure, communication cannot be satisfied anymore through dialogue and the only way to interact with the world is the monologue.

Vişniec is interested in the great personalities who have become topics of his work thanks to their person or their work. His motivation to choose them in order to be used as mobile of his creation can be found in an interview with Ovidiu Şimonca: "Each one<sup>9</sup> of them created history. Cioran is very close to my soul, he is Romanian, he became known in Paris, he demolished in his books all the susceptible ideas in order to save humanity, all the dogma, all the preconceived ideas, and all the hopes at the same time"<sup>10</sup>.

### 3. Conclusions

Therefore, through these plays, Vişniec suggests a game of provoking the subjects where great authors are invited in an imaginary dialogue. In this suggested experiment, the characters in the works of the writers or the writers themselves become subjects of the dramatic writing. The heroes of the texts are: Chekov, who appears in two of Vişniec's plays: *The Chekov Machine*<sup>11</sup> and *Nina or About the Fragility of Stuffed Seagulls* (play written at the suggestion<sup>12</sup> of the Japanese director Yoshinari Asano); Meyerhold through the Shakespearian magnifying glass in the play *Richard the Third Will Not Take Place*, Samuel Beckett, to whom Vişniec pays tribute by creating the character Godot in *The Last Godot*; Emil Cioran in *A Paris Loft with a View on Death*, a creation with fragmentary architecture that approaches the turmoil of existence of the philosopher in the apocalyptic world of the existence placed under the mark of death. Not even this attempt to create clear paths in order to classify Matei Vişniec's works can satisfy his prolific creation which has the capacity to not let it be pinned in a single genre. Vişniec always tries to relate to the present and he is eager to adapt to the accelerated changes of the human society. In this sense, he wavers between movements and tendencies, passing from oneiric to concrete a universe of the absurd, where any translation is possible.

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<sup>9</sup> The question Ovidiu Şimonca asked was: Why Chekov, Cioran, and Meyerhold are characters in your plays?

<sup>10</sup> Şimonca Ovidiu. 2005, April 22. *Observator Cultural Magazine*. Retrieved August 8, 2019, from <https://www.hotnews.ro/stiri-arhiva-1231121-matei-visniec-noua-generatie-regizori-descopera-piese-mele.htm>.

<sup>11</sup> This approach is inspired from Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine* from 1977.

<sup>12</sup> (Yoshinari Asano asked me if I would like to write for him a play with these three Chekovian characters based on utopia. What Asano said through his translator was vague: "Nina, Treplev, Trigorin, utopia". What connection was between these three and utopia, I wouldn't know, but I promised I'll try to reflect upon it. And at some point, I saw the light. I told myself: Chekov who died in 1904 at 44, did not witness the Revolution. Thus we don't know how he would have approached the new reality, the Bolchevik order, the terror installed by Stalin. Somehow, Chekov was lucky, he died young but literary fulfilled and he wasn't forced to compromise in the Communist era, to play a double role, to send hidden messages. So I came with the idea to transpose the three characters, Nina, Treplev, Trigorin in the Revolution from October. If Chekov died in 1904, we can imagine that what happened in *The Seagull* took place around that time, in the early 20th century. Why wouldn't I bring Nina to Treplev 15 years later during the Revolution? Thus, the three character face the *concrete* utopia). - Excerpt from the author's biography in work.

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