

The Theatre of the Absurd

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Abstract: *The theatre of the absurd is as old as the notion of dramatic play, only it was not very explicit until the nineteenth century, because its features did not stand out in the classical theatre. The theatre of the absurd is the expression of the search of the self, of the faith, of the spirit. It is said that once the ancient forms of art lose their validity, new mechanisms must be found. The theatre of the absurd tries to convince the world regarding the reality of its condition. In his theatre, Ionescu does not hide his mechanisms, but makes them as obvious as possible. The way in which Ionescu's concepts are used in a dramatic form closely follows the structures established for each play. The playwright is constantly disturbed by mortality, which is the ultimate paradox of an irrational existence. The exaggerations, the paradox, the contradictions, the crisis of the language, the surreal images, they are all attached to death in grotesque distortions.*

Key-words: *Eugen Ionesco; the theater of the absurd; mechanisms; the theme of death.*

1. Introduction in Eugen Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd

A very interesting fact is that the Theatre of the Absurd is as old as the notion of dramatic play, only it was not very explicit until the 19th century, because its features did not stand out in the classical theatre. According to Martin Esslin's analysis in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, it is a mixture of peculiar features of playwriting. The pure or abstract scenic effects include anti-literary attitudes. For this purpose, there are used rituals or non-verbal forms. Namely, in Genet's stylised action or in Ionesco's proliferation of things, in Beckett's hat routine in *Waiting for Godot*, in Adamov's externalization of characters' attitudes. It is a well-known fact that the theatre is more than simple language. It is an absolute manifest, tricks, acrobatics, processions and many other elements bearing a theatrical effect. These are all mathematical. Friedrich Nietzsche also speaks about the power of actions. The scene always borrowed from the power of clowning. Ever since the beginning, the mimes added colour to theatre while a hilarious clown provoked laughter among the audience. In this sense, it is also important to mention *commedia dell'arte* in the actual creation of the Theatre of the Absurd.

The Theatre of the Absurd is the expression of the search of the self, of the faith, of the spirit. It is said that once the ancient forms of art lose their validity, new mechanisms must be found. The Theatre of the Absurd tries to convince the world regarding the reality of its condition. Thus, one can establish many purposes, among which one would be that the Theatre of the Absurd condemns ironically the absurdity of a life lived without realising the actual reality. Albert Camus mentions in *Myth of Sisyphus*: „At certain moments of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their meaningless pantomime makes silly everything that surrounds them. A man is talking on the telephone behind a glass partition; you cannot hear him, but you see his incomprehensible dumb show: you wonder why he is alive. The absurd is also the discomfort in front of man's own inhumanity, the incalculable tumble before the image of what we are, the “nausea”².

The Theatre of the Absurd does not propose ideologies, does not address to man's actual struggles nor it says a complete story. It transmits a set of poetical images devoid of

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² Camus, Albert. 1991. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Vintage Books, p. 65.

any dramatic alternative meaning. For example, the events in *Waiting for Godot* do not constitute the plot, but “They are an image of Beckett’s intuition that nothing really ever happens in man’s existence. The whole play is a complex poetic image made up of a complicated pattern of subsidiary images and themes, which are interwoven like the themes of a musical composition, not, as in most well-made plays, to present a line of development, but to make in the spectator’s mind a total, complex impression of a basic, and static, situation. In this, the Theatre of the Absurd is analogous to a Symbolist or Imagist poem, which also presents a pattern of images and associations in a mutually interdependent structure”³.

Brecht, Ibsen, as well as others, used the dramatic, narrative, lyrical features in order to give their work a meaning and a purpose, while the Theatre of the Absurd avoids doing this. In the absence of a psychological element and narrative line, there are used with great emphasis lyrical insertions. While Ibsen, Strindberg or even James Joyce tried to explore the human psyche through language, the Theatre of the Absurd barely uses the language. George Steiner believes that the language is drastically reduced in this type of theatre and mentions that, “It is no paradox to assert that in cardinal respects reality now begins outside verbal language. Large areas of meaning and praxis now belong to such non-verbal languages as mathematics, symbolic logic, and formulas of chemical or electronic relation. Other areas belong to the sub-languages or anti-languages of non-objective art and musique concrete. The world of words has shrunk”⁴.

Often, literature needs innovations and new approaches in language, characters as well as the narrative construction. If Brecht contributed to a valid vocabulary by presenting the external reality of the world, the Theatre of the Absurd contributes on the other hand to the internal psychological reality. For those who experience dreams, reveries, fantasies, nightmares or hallucinations, these are significant and terrifying realities as much as any other external reality, and the spiritual element can be as emotionally satisfying as any other external circumstance of the everyday life.

It can be strongly asserted that the Theatre of the Absurd enriched the contemporary drama. Most of the post absurd plays were written in Beckett or Ionesco’s style, with elements taken from Brecht’s tradition. Therefore, one can notice the on-going and predominant influence of the Theatre of the Absurd in a world that can find yet neither its purpose in literature, nor its purpose in the immediate reality.

Eugen Ionesco began his playwright career in a special manner, maybe by simple chance, when he has a revelation regarding the emptiness of language, full of clichés. Willing to learn English, Ionesco analysed a textbook and thus he managed to discover many phrases apparently empty of any linguistic charge that made him realise that he wants to create a play which approaches this little known aspect of language. Hence, he writes *The Bald Soprano* (1948), a parody of a play, an anti-play actually, according to Ionesco, a play where it is described the everyday routine of facts and language which ultimately becomes an insensitive automatism in the inefficient communication. The Smiths use clichés in language while their visitors, the Martins, are complete strangers one with each other. The dialogue between these four disintegrates further in unspeakable sounds. From Ionesco’s point of view, this play represents an alternative reality to the usual audience having a purpose of action and communication. Ionesco vividly enjoyed this theme and he continued to experiment with *The Lesson* (1951), a play representing a tutor and his student whose speeches vary from logical constructions of Mathematics to the less rigorous rules of the language. While the tutoring keeps on, the tutor becomes more and more nervous and ultimately he stabs his student after a discussion regarding the word “knife”. The literary critics found in these circular structures of the plays Ionesco’s own way of expressing pessimism.

³ Esslin, Martin. 2009. *The Theatre of the Absurd*. București: Editura Unitext, p. 403.

⁴ Steiner, George. 1960. *The retreat from the word*, Londra: Listener, p. 14.

In his next plays, Ionesco used more the proliferation of the objects in order to express the absurd of life. In *The Chairs* (1952), an old couple organise a meeting to tell a message which will lead to the salvation of the world. The scene is full of chairs for the non-existent guests, in front of whom the couple kill themselves. In *Victims of Duty* (1953), one can discover the multiplication of the coffee cups while in *The New Tenant* (1957), the furniture in the protagonist's apartment multiplies day by day. The critics saw in this approach an expression of alienation and loss of the identity specific to the modern society. Ionesco himself mentions that "It is not the actual society that I find ridiculous, but the humanity itself"⁵ and instead of the Theatre of the Absurd, he preferred more the idea of the theatre of derisory.

Towards the end of the 1950s, Ionesco wrote various plays where he presented the ordinary character named Berenger, probably his own self's image. The most famous play where one can find this character is *Rhinoceros* (1959), a play where the totalitarian regime transforms people in rhinoceros, excepting Berenger who decides to face them. After receiving in 1973 the award for his literary career in Jerusalem, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* becomes a sublime demonstration of the opposition against totalitarianism. For the next twenty years, Ionesco's works are revolving around the theme of death, such as *Hunger and Thirst* (1964), where the protagonist Berenger tries to escape the death represented as his wife and his child. In *The Killing Game* (1970), an epidemic takes over the population of a city. According to some critics, in Ionesco's vision, death represents the threat of nothingness, the quintessence of the absurd. Many of Ionesco's plays have a dream nuance. People can transform into animals and they can change their identities and Ionesco often values more moods than the general action. These moods are predominant in his late plays, such as *Man with Bags* (1975) or *Journeys among the Dead* (1980).

As a writer, Ionesco was considered ever since the beginning obscure through his references, but his style became famous in time and was internationally acclaimed. Therefore, during his career as a playwright, he received numerous awards and he was chosen as member of the French Academy. In the last years of his life though, Ionesco spent his time exploring painting, as an expression of his confused feelings in some moments of his life and keeps painting until the end of his life in 1994. As a sign of importance of him in the world of literature not only in Romania, but in the entire world, his death was announced by the French Ministry of Culture and not by his family. Ionesco left behind an undeniable literary legacy, witness to all the changes provoked by his genius during his career.

Of all the playwrights who strongly reject the constraints of reason, Samuel Beckett and Eugen Ionesco can be considered the most influential one, because both of them rose from a small group of admirers to the respect of the entire world. To Ionesco, the theatre of realism asked for a coherent and logical universe, denied by experience. The conflict between order and the chaos of existence generates frustrations, shame, and despair. The need of the human being to be overwhelmed with reasonable explanations meets the passive indifference of the universe. The first step to freedom is the removal of the obstacle put by the scientific logic in the human mind in order to live without the support of an almighty entity or a godly reason. If the experiences are determined by an inherited perspective, the perception of thing is surely altered. The emotions experienced cannot be communicated when communication is restrained to logical rules, and a mathematical formula cannot define the inner universe of a human being. The predominant element of the theatre in the first half of the 20th century, realism, is limited only to what the scientific order dictates. The reality cannot be portrayed if the real is unknown and debatable. The theatre is responsible of choosing its own metaphysical reality, without "taking into account our general truths or our fundamental

⁵ Ionescu, Eugen. 2009. *Notes and Counter-Notes*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 104.

obsessions such as love, death, shock”⁶. The human being can be freed of the absurd imposed by the logical relations by discovering the absolute of the human character in the logic of dreams or the unconscious stream. Before joining the rhinoceros, Daisy (in *Rhinoceros*), says “There are many realities. Choose the one that suits you. Escape from imaginary”⁷. In this sense, Ionesco acts against the unreasonable reason and prefers a variety of options in order to choose. His theatre is a means to explore the impossible as well as an alternative and objective reality. This is the fundamental irony of Ionesco’s theatre. The reality of a scientific world is non-existent. “I am searching an essential reality, a nameless and forgotten one, outside which I don’t feel like living”⁸. The characters in his plays are thus grotesque and tragic because they are incoherent and they do not own anything personal except for the unceasing anguish, the regrets, the failure, the emptiness of their own dreams. The characters in *The Bald Sopranos* are interchangeable since the mechanism of repetition strongly denies their individuality.

2. The mechanisms used by Eugen Ionesco in his theatre

The failure of the existent logic in Ionesco’s theatre implies the apparition of the death of language and grammatical constructions, the instruments of the logical communication. The words are reduced to empty sounds and the platitude becomes a revelation of a new-born spiritual perspective. The inherited models of language can only give sense to absurd relations. Ionesco emphasizes triviality, repetitions, incongruity and exaggerations similar to surrealist paintings. When he began writing *The Bald Soprano*, he did not know yet how it was going to end it, but he had in mind the idea of the deterioration of language. The two couples in *The Bald Soprano* start a rhythmical series of spelled incantations by using the letters in the alphabet as a chorus. The language is exhausted and worn, “cut off from life... it is not necessary anymore for it to be reinvented or restored”⁹. The expression tones start a string of platitudes. For the tutor in *The Lesson*, all the languages are identical. The word “cat” is everything Roberts needs in Jacques in order to express the already known concepts. The old man in *The Chairs* welcomes the Emperor with a shy face and a bark. The language is the weapon of a logical world, through which the destruction is moving fast. Berenger, when he encounters the Killer, exhausts all his language mechanisms in order to reason with his enemy who does not answer in words, but in giggles, until Berenger remains stunned, the victim of his own failures. If the sound can induce tragedy, silence becomes a dramatic opposite and their change takes place in a thorough orchestration. Similarly to Beckett, Ionesco also uses incomplete and stranded phrases, monologues and sudden breaks in order to intensify the sensation of emptiness. In what concerns characters, when time and space do not comply with the main plan, they cannot acknowledge their own identity or the identity of others. In *Victims of Duty*, Nicolas D’Eu mentions, “We will escape the principle of identity and the unity of character in order to discover the dynamic psychology. We are not ourselves. Personality does not exist”¹⁰. The names, which in the realist plays represent the honour of family and establish the individuality of a character stop making any sense. Young and old, men and women, they all lose significance. The characters are interchanging, they multiply, and they separate and merge in a similar manner to Strindberg’s reverie plays. The characters become mechanical structures that use the same phrases since the language variations do not

⁶ Ionescu, Eugen. 1958. “Ionesco’s World”. In *Tulane Drama Review*, III, p. 47.

⁷ Ionescu, Eugen. 2017. *Theatre VI - The New Tenant, Rhinoceros*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 72.

⁸ Ionescu, Eugen. 1958. “Ionesco’s World”. In *Tulane Drama Review*, III, p. 49.

⁹ Ionescu, Eugen. 2009. *Notes and Counter-Notes*, București: Editura Humanitas, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ionescu, Eugen. 2007. *Theatre III - Victims of Duty. Amedee. The Picture*. București: Editura Humanitas, p.109

mean also variations in personality. The psychological and emotional differences are removed under the idea of universal fears and the hidden terrors obsess all the characters.

Despite everything mentioned, life was not always so empty and mechanical. Ionesco manages to repeatedly refer to a past full of nostalgia where the communication, identity and vitality of passions were possible. A lost paradise, where there was no requirement of ceaseless logic, where the scientific limitations were doubted. The references of the past give present a darker shaded, almost suffocating. When he discussed an event from his childhood, Ionesco suggested that, "To me that will always be the image of a lost paradise. I have abandoned it to go to Paris, then to Romania. Since then, it has strayed further in time and space"¹¹. This sensation can be encountered in many of his plays. In the opening of *Victims of Duty*, Choubert mentions that, "These are the times when we live; only pressure. Nowadays, people have lost their inner peace they used to have in the past"¹². He wishes to go back in time, but the time long lost cannot find anymore its place in such a present.

A last theme found in Ionesco's theatre is the fear of death and the total lack of sense it has. In *Fragments of a Journal*, Ionesco remarks that, "Someone dies of hunger, someone dies of thirst, someone dies of boredom, someone dies of laughter, someone dies of envy and someone dies every day"¹³. But everyday death torments the real world. The final deliverance is unreasonable because it can come anytime, unsolicited. An entire play named *Exit the King* (1962) is dedicated to the waiting of death and the frustration caused by the final confrontation. Ionesco is constantly tormented by mortality, which seems to be the ultimate paradox of an existence devoid of logic. If life has not meaning, deliverance should be welcomed, but life insists and it has to be protected. In Ionesco's plays, death is not presented in gruesome or tragic terms, but it becomes more and more terrifying when it is considered an element of comedy. The exaggerations, the paradox, the contradictions, the crisis of language, the surrealist images, they are all attached to death in grotesque distortions.

3. Conclusions

In his theatre, Ionesco does not hide the mechanism he uses, but makes them as obvious as possible. Though, he also acknowledges when they become anti-dramatic, because "If there are too many techniques and mechanical moves, there is too little life and it becomes suffocating tragic as it seems that the world became spiritless"¹⁴. The manners in which Ionesco's concepts are used in a dramatic form follow closely the structures established for each play.

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¹² Ionescu, Eugen. 2007. *Theatre III - Victims of Duty. Amedee. The Picture*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 121

¹³ Ionescu, Eugen. 1992. *Fragments of a Journal*. București: Editura Humanitas, p. 35

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