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THE FACULTY OF COMPOSITION, MUSICOLOGY, MUSIC
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THE DRAMA DEPARTMENT**

**Summary of Doctoral Dissertation
MATEI VIȘNIEC
OR ISSUES RELATED TO CONTEMPORARY
MAN
(*Scenic Aspects*)**

Domain: Theatre

Field Of Research: Art of the Theatrical Performance

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I. ARGUMENT

As undergraduate students in the second year of college, we first became accustomed to Vişniec's work while staging an excerpt from "*Decomposed Theatre, Or Man As A Garbage Can*" that we had come across in "Avanscena" magazine. Later on, I and several other students wrote the author in the hope of receiving some more of his texts. He promptly replied by sending us about six other plays of which, after a thorough lecture, we chose "*The Spectator Sentenced to Death*". We staged it and went on a tour with it in Great Britain. One year later it was the turn of another play to see the light of day: "*But, Mom, They Are Recounting With The Second Act What Happened In The First One*". This production also brought us a UNITER Prize.

Other such scenic renditions of his work followed. They were all what actors would call fortunate encounters – not with a director, but with an author that was the middleman between us and success. What we found exciting was the highly unusual liveliness of his writing, the room for interpretation that it left for the performer, a sort of creative complicity that could be established between the actor and the author while the former was approaching his part. In Vişniec's texts, one can identify a subsidiary, yet authentic approach of the issues of the contemporary man. The author's philosophical constitution, his comprehensive overall view, his love for wisdom, his affection for his neighbours, for the generic man, his hope, maybe, to offer at least possible answers to the qualms and flusters of modern man, these are all endless sources of the playwright's appeal to us. In our endeavour, we considered comparative study and text analysis to be the most appropriate research methods.

We are well aware of the difficulties brought about by committing ourselves to analysing an author in full development, with an ever-growing, evolving work which could still undergo drastic changes in style and approach. However, our doctoral research aims to approach, on the one hand, the way in which Vişniec found it appropriate to aesthetically tackle the profile of contemporary man, and on the other hand, the manner in which the writer of these lines transposed his work on scene. Seeing matters from the interpreter's standpoint, I have been seduced by Vişniec's ability to suggest an artistic partnership to the creators of performances, thus conjointly developing the most direct form of art, one that would make no sense in the absence of an audience - the theatrical performance. This is how I regarded his work while interpreting: as an invitation to a creative partnership. This is also how we approached the parts we received and the performances we staged.

II. MATEI VIȘNIEC, A WISE POET IN THE WORLD OF THEATRE

II. 1. Appetence for the Dramatic

Vișniec made his artistic debut as part of the Romanian movement of the 1980s, approaching poetry and dramaturgy concomitantly. His poetic activity disclosed the germs of his other passion, dramaturgy, since his poetry is marked by certain features very similar to those of theatrical performances. The poems that Vișniec writes are essentially mini-scripts, with the structure of a dramatic play and exhibiting visual qualities. Similarly, his dramatic writings display a certain well-tempered lyricism, as well as poetic rhythm and musicality. Critics from both fields, that of literature and that of the theatrical performance, have equally acknowledged this interweaving of the lyric and the dramatic in Vișniec's works.

One can discuss Vișniec's need for theatre from two different perspectives. Being an enthusiast of the theatre of the absurd, the artist felt that no other area of written literature could better express his manner of thinking. Due to its characteristic dynamism, this theatrical formula enhances the aspects of reality that it mirrors, giving them a tragic touch. Vișniec's philosophical formation ensured his ample vision over existence, over its distinctive elements.

The second reason why the poet feels compelled to progress from verse to dialogue is his particular appetite for images, for visualising the discourse. Vișniec is easily recognizable by the descriptions integrated both in his dialogues and in his scenic directions. This sort of an imagination requires a spatial representation to match it, a full-fledged dramatic space where the plastic component is of primary importance. When writing, the dramaturge takes into account the requirements of the staging process, the same way he considers his "partnership" with the director and the actor.

II. 2. Influences and Originality – Between Aesthetics of the Absurd and Absurd Reality

A post-ionescian, post-beckettian, even post-modern author in certain respects, Vișniec naturally embraces the artistic movements characteristic of the second half of the 20th century – the theatre of the absurd, and not only. In his plays, one can detect influences of past centuries' avant-gardes, thought they are subtly filtered by an author that has had the creative ambition to steer clear of the rigidities of a certain tendency and to leave his personal mark on his writings. In the end, every author is the cultural product of his own age, incapable of shunning the main themes, preoccupations and approaches that characterize his time. However, Vișniec's input remains substantial even the observer is stricken by certain formulas, types of dramatic structure or characters that resemble those of the past. Placing this playwright at the end of a list containing the more sonorous names of the new waves that the past five

decades have seen would be crassly underestimating his work. The author stood out and imposed a personal profile that has acted as a melting pot on all these influences, thus creating an original and easily recognizable work.

II. 3. Eugène Ionesco and Demolition of Classic Principles

On analyzing Vişniec's work, the specialist easily identifies correspondences between the playwright's fictitious world and that of his illustrious forefather, Eugène Ionesco. While they are both serving the same type of artistic expression, Ionesco and Vişniec are different when it comes to the manner in which they approach their absurd-stricken universe. The absurd in each dramaturge's works has distinguishing qualities. Eugène Ionesco's plays reflect the concrete world as seen through a grotesquely distorting and amplifying mirror. The condition of the individual is presented with the acuteness of an alarm signal meant to sober up modern man from the hypnosis he is under. The works of Ionesco are intended as antidotes to the numbness that seizes human beings when they are confronted with the incomprehensible.

While Ionesco is fascinated by the qualities of words seen as an instruments that disintegrate logics, thus cultivating a poetic of language turning against its user, Vişniec confers words a double role: they are both devices of the expository and vehicles of non-communication. In the latter's writings one frequently comes across deadlocks in communication and other obsessions of Ionesco's, but these areas of intersection, these common preoccupations do not imply that one dramaturge is imitating the other. There are clear differences to be noticed, mainly due to Vişniec's theatrical poetics that impose him as a distinct author.

II.4. "Rewriting" Beckett

Though Vişniec is no epigone of Samuel Beckett's, there is not denying the influence that the Irish playwright has exerted on the Romanian one.

There are multiple affinities between Vişniec and Beckett. Both writers reconstruct a universe of misfits, a type of human marginality, brought to metaphysical despair. On an in-depth analysis, one may notice in their plays a destructuralisation of reality created either through constriction or surcharge. The writings of Samuel Beckett and, to some extent, those of Matei Vişniec sensibly track down the tragicomedy of everyday life. The characters of both authors sink in a state of bleak, trance-like expectation that deduces them to a condition of mere passive witnesses of events and, more generally, of history itself.

While Beckett acts within the confines of a self-imposed perimeter, respecting the artistic rules of thumb that he considers to be sacred, Vişniec allows himself to unveil the formulas behind the theatrical act, thus desecrating

them. Our compatriot pushes forward this dismantling of patterns, creating numerous methods of escapism from within the frames of traditional theatre. The artistic performance advances off the scene and towards the audience, giving the spectators the chance to get involved effectively in the metaphysical exercise that the theatrical act voluptuously cultivates.

II. 5. Overcoming Models. “Re-humanising” Characters

Although treading a pre-existing path, that of writers who have cultivated the theatre of the absurd, Matei Vişniec has the ambition and drive to distinguish his creation from theirs and to impose his artistic individuality. While tackling themes already proposed by the pioneers of the absurd (incongruousness, void, crisis of language, estrangement, angst, alienation, grotesque), Vişniec manages to come up with new methods of exploiting them; he approaches them with new attitudes and from surprising, unfamiliar standpoints.

Obviously enough, his works can be systemised and grouped under different thematic and stylistic headings. At the very core of Vişniec’s theatrical world lies contemporary man. This man is a revitalized, re-humanised one, unlike the creation of his predecessors, who was rather a non-representational symbol, labelled and reduced to a sum of generic qualities. Vişniec’s is a not a sanitised version of the human being, but a specimen that is very much alive, more so than in the case of other dramaturges of the absurd. How does the author manage to do that? To begin with, he looks around him. He pays attention, spotting from among those who surround him the characters that are invested with a dramatic strain and who can face dramatisation. That is why Vişniec’s theatre reaches the members of the audience even physically. The playwright is a friend of his characters’, he treats them gently. He only murders them on stage if death is the only possible solution. By reinvesting his characters with human qualities, Vişniec redeems them from their Nemesis, he is giving them a second chance.

III. THE ISSUES OF CONTEMPORARY MAN AS SEEN IN MATEI VIŞNIEC’S DRAMATIC CREATION – THEMATIC RANGE

III. 1. Incommunicability

Our contemporary world suffers from a breakdown in communication at a particular, individual level, as well as at a larger, societal level. This topic was bound to come up in Vişniec’s plays. When reading them, one gets the feeling that everything is emptied of meaning. The linguistic messages are articulated, yet they lack substance.

There are other manners of expressing the collapse of communication than the strictly verbal ones. As far as the expressive function of communication is concerned, Matei Vişniec resorts to a series of elements characteristic to nonverbal communication. The people in his plays have blank stares, they avoid eye contact or are blind from the very beginning. Looking someone in the eye is a form of human bondage that individuals refuse. They only laugh sardonically, bitterly or wryly, never with conviction or credibly. Instead, they sigh and moan, and the facial expressions and gestures suggested by the scenic directions characterise them as estranged even when they say nothing.

In Vişniec's works, communication problems become a symptom of states such as estrangement, isolation and angst.

III. 2. The Constant Expectative

Matei Vişniec generally prefers strictly outlined settings, taken right out of the surrounding reality. These are spaces that enclose and constrain, that impose strict, almost predetermined attitudes on the characters. Such theatrical spaces foster isolation. There is little communication with the blurry, suspended exterior, and when a connection is established, that only happens through a narrow, equally constraining medium: the window – shut, ajar, with the curtains drawn; the door – closed, locked, massive. Choosing a waiting room as a favourite theatrical setting only naturally causes one to analyse its symbolical meanings. The entire universe can be considered a structure made out of an endless row of waiting rooms.

The constant expectative is the starting point for alienation in Vişniec's plays. On the route that unites expectative, fear of the unknown (angst) and alienation, the last stop is disappearance, death.

III.3. Alienation

The existentialist philosophers were the first to coin the term “alienation” when referring to the condition of modern man. With no strong standards to judge reality by, troubled by inner flusters, enduring a never-ending oscillation between the possible discoveries that all the games of the mind reveal and an ever-decaying tangible space, confused by messed-up meanings and by all-empowering chaos, Vişniec's characters are perfect victims of the expectative - alienation formula. These last two elements determine one another, leaving man incapable of influencing his own destiny. Isolation and existential estrangement can come in the extreme form of definitive alienation or suicide.

The absent air, the trance that the characters are under, their confusion regarding their own identity are elements that avow the seclusion that Vişniec's

characters feel. As one character very succinctly expresses it: “Something has collapsed inside them”.

III.4. Angst

The first to define angst as a *fear of the unknown* was the Danish thinker Søren Kierkegaard. However, apprehension as a literary theme only gained popularity after Sartre’s “*La Nausée*” that introduced the concept through the accessible means of the novel. Angst, anxiety, spleen and stress became distinctive traits of present-day man. The mixture of pseudo-actions and pseudo-ideas that Vişniec’s characters exhibit are signs of the fundamental modifications that occur in one’s manner of thinking when one is confronted with extreme conditions. From this space of incertitude one can imperceptibly slip into anxiety. Apprehension first hovers about, and then it downright attacks whenever one isn’t given a choice or a second chance, when there is no alternative. Characteristic of the tragic farce, angst is a feeling with hazy contours.

Anxiety encourages abdication and nihilism. It imposes itself and its own rules on Vişniec’s characters, who are manoeuvred by unseen and unknown forces, impossible to elude. “Why, it’s the end of the world, haven’t you heard?” How is one not to be anxious?

III.5. Fighting Oneself and the Others

The perpetual battle that contemporary man is engaged in takes the form of *the inner struggle*, that is, with oneself, and *the exterior battle*, with the others. When it comes to the latter, one can distinguish even further between *confronting the others* as part of various types of competition and *war*.

The absurd has become the nightmare of present-day humanity itself. If Camus, for instance, would allow his characters to revolt, Vişniec leaves no room for rebellion, since that could do nothing else but spawn ever more anxiety. The only point of mutiny is to amplify the existing evil, to waste energy and to augment estrangement. It has nothing to do with salvation. When fighting oneself is not enough, characters move on to confronting one another. The mere act of existing is a competition where chance and chance alone decides who wins, at least in Vişniec’s plays. This not only annuls the dignity of his characters, but it is also an assault on the innermost manifestations of their ego. What one is left with is an egoless ego, abandoned in total estrangement.

III.6. Playfulness, the Seed of Delusion

In the first stages of individual development, playing is of elemental importance for the intellectual and emotional progress of children. Seeing as it is associated with pleasure, the act of playing stops when those engaged in it cease to find it agreeable. Playfulness is a recurring dramatic technique in Vişniec's work due to its structural and cultural value. Role interpretation, playing for high stakes, gambling are means through which the author emphasizes on the existential absurd, the hazardous, the anxiety, and the powerlessness of man in front of fate. Thus, games gain an ontological meaning.

The games in Vişniec's works are by no means relaxing or pleasant. Their finality is transformed: they are simply ways of passing the time, of postponing the unavoidable, of increasing the tension created by fortune, of deluding oneself. In competitive games, one either wins or loses – there are no in-betweens. In all cases, the ultimate champion remains the absurd.

III.7. Renouncement and Death

Through his plays, Matei Vişniec tackles the “tragic feeling of life” in all its complexity. Age-old values, even the moral ones, are emptied of meaning and questioned. Courage, stoicism, sacrifice are all belittled as foolish acts. Matei Vişniec, as others before him, dilutes the notion of sacrifice. In fact, some of his texts have *the mockery of sacrifice* as the central theme. What once used to be a heroic, character building, liberating mission is now seen as useless nonsense. Death on the battlefield is silly, soldiers sacrifice their lives in vain, without anybody remembering what they had fought for, and Homeland could not care less about them.

If dying for the others is a senseless act, since it cannot save them, then can one save oneself through suicide? To this metaphysical question, Vişniec answers in the same spirit: nothing can save you.

Irrespective of its nature, death becomes the ultimate expression of renouncement in Matei Vişniec's works.

IV. SCENIC RENDITION – BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

IV.1. The Theatricality of Vişniec's Theatre

What gives life the feeling of theatricality is the uncommon, that which catches the eye. Transposing such facts three-dimensionally is what completes the structure of dramatic works. By imagining a universe where the apparent ordinariness of life inconspicuously slides into the atypical, dramaturgy stands out as a powerful nurturer of theatricality. It encompasses a multitude of

elements, varying from realistic or oneiric to post-modern and absurd components, all of them distilled in a unique dramatic formula.

The proposals addressed to the interpreters or to the director are full of surprises and solutions equally; far from insipidly repeating the intention of the text, these directions round it off and in doing so, they betray Matei Vişniec's need for having his plays staged.

The playwright proves he is equally apt at writing and at making theatre; these two qualities combined increasing his chances of being chosen for staging.

IV.2. Elements of Dramatic Poetics

Owing to their mystery, Vişniec's dramas claim scenic rendition. They encourage one to "transform" into an actor or a director, at the same time as intentionally challenging the receptor to use his analytic sense through a formula that neighbours introspection. One needs to perceive the essence of the dramatic situations, to overlap one's own nature and that of the characters so as to subjectively understand their manner of thinking and acting. From this standpoint, it would be fair to say that the multitude of possible scenic renditions is seriously motivated by the need of clarification that characterizes Vişniec's plays.

The playwright's dramatic poetics is oriented according to the directions dictated by the theatre of the absurd. Consequently, its distinguishing elements, and those that make Matei Vişniec's works stand out, are the ontologic, the oneiric, the grotesque, the parodical, fatalism or nihilism and lyricism.

IV.3. Means of "Pressuring" the Interpretation

Gifted playwrights permanently assess their works by comparing them to other creators in the field of theatre (directors, actors, scenographers), imposing their ideas and, at the same time, accepting the interpretations put forward by the others. They also claim signs and clues of the viability of their own plays. When such proof comes out, and Vişniec's example is illustrative, the relationship between the two parties will have reached its full potential. His scenic directions are nothing but the author's vision. One can infer that Vişniec is powerfully preoccupied with theatrical practices, given that his plays all offer elaborate mechanisms for adapting the written play for the stage.

The author suggests a certain musical background for nearly all his works. The scenographic formulas also have a particular, poetry-filled resonance.

In accordance with the topics or themes tackled, Vişniec's texts can be either "generous" or "tyrannical" to the director that has to stage them.

IV.4. Personal interpretation of Matei Vişniec

IV .4.1. Character Description

THE INVESTIGATOR from *Decomposed theatre, or man as a garbage can* (*Voices in the dazzling light*), improvisation exam,

Keeping in mind the nature of the conflict presented in the excerpt we were given for our improvisation exam – a man forced to withstand the ridiculous doggedness of several interrogators – we considered that multiplying the evil would enhance the value of the author’s idea. I was interpreting the part of one of the nine investigators. Essentially, I was carrying out my task as an improviser, that of placing myself in an imagined or experienced situation and discovering the most natural way of thinking and acting in the given context.

THE JUDGE from *The spectator sentenced to death*, on tour in Liverpool, Great Britain, on the Brouhaha International Street Theatre Festival, , August 1995

In 1995, “George Enescu” University of Arts from Iași had received an invitation to the prestigious *Brouhaha International Street Theatre Festival* in Liverpool. I was an undergraduate student in the third year of college and, as all my colleagues, was in search of new challenges. The festival was one such dare. Finding the text was easy, since I had developed a spiritual bond with Vişniec after our other theatrical “encounters”. I found *The Spectator Sentenced To Death* to be a charming play and a suitable text for Liverpool. What determined me to choose it was the mobility that it offered, keeping in mind that the festival deals with *street theatre shows*. The improvised judiciary process targeted at a person randomly selected from the audience could easily be taken off the stage and into the street, in an *agorá* of contemporary civilisation.

GRUBI from *But, mom, they are recounting with the second act what happened in the first one*, “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre, Iași, October 1995

Playing the part of Grubi coincided with my passage from college to the professional stage. This character was born in an Actor’s Art class in my third year of college, only to become a part my Bachelor of Arts degree performance, held at the Studio Room of the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași.

The success of the performance is confirmed by the prizes it obtained in several theatre-related manifestations.

THE SON, THE FATHER, THE HUSBAND from *Horses at the window*,
“Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre, Iași, March 1996, director: Cosmin
Chivu

Avidly reading whatever we received directly from the playwright, we came across *Horses at the window*. Ever since the very first reading we had envisioned the spatial projection of the play. We realised a trilingual performance with this very special text. The French version was taken over by the French Cultural Centre in Iași for a permanent theatrical season at the „Benjamin Fondane” Hall, the Romanian version was performed at the Studio Room of the “Vasile Alecsandri” National Theatre in Iași and as part of various national festivals, while the English formula was performed at the *KO Festival of Performance* din Amherst, Massachusetts, SUA.

IV.4.2. Staging Matei Vișniec’s Plays

Paparazzi, or chronicle of an aborted sunrise, Bachelor of Arts performance of the 4th year, Acting Class of 2003, “George Enescu” University of Arts (“Luceafărul” Theatre, May 2003)

In the performance presented by 4th year, Acting Class of 2003, “George Enescu” University of Arts we set as a goal to respect the author’s intention of signalling the ticking bomb that humanity is founded upon.

Convinced of the generous finality of the project that quickly started to materialise, the students offered to help with everything needed in order to develop the performance.

What about the cello? (Tătărași Iași Athenaeum, February 2008)

Keeping the promises I had made (mainly to myself), due to my close professional ties with Matei Vișniec and pursuing the natural trajectory of thoroughly studying his work, I undertook the staging of yet another play that I had been brooding about in my subconscious - *What about the cello?*

As with Vișniec’s other texts that express the issue of the estrangement of human beings remarkably, *Three nights with Madox*, *The pit in the ceiling*, *The door* or *Hiring a clown*, I believe I have successfully tackled, on the occasion of this theatrical adventure, the complex crisis of our contemporary world.

V. CONCLUSIONS

Although the source of Matei Vișniec’s creations is indeed to be found in the works of the great representatives of the theatre of the absurd, the Romanian-born playwright rapidly created and imposed his personal style,

which is a clear expression of his dramaturgic talent. One can easily detect in his plays perfectly natural marks of his Romanian origin, but also signs of his continental spirituality. Matei Vişniec has a keen sense of the dramatic, easily identifying characters or situations that can serve the cause of theatricality. The absurd cultivated by the author is a light, velvet-like one, and the characters, as well as the contexts they find themselves in are a most authentic expression of the flusters and issues of contemporary man. By cultivating the *logic of the paradox* with nearly unprecedented perseverance and grace, Vişniec succeeds in projecting his own vision in an aesthetic area where everything worth saying seemed to have been said already. After noticing a disquieting series of flaws that hang over our present-day world and then passing them through the filter of his own personality, the playwright converts his impressions in artistic matter, thus sharing them with the others. In the field of theatrical aesthetics, where direct communication with the audience is essential, Matei Vişniec is apt at finding the perfect wavelength to connect his works both with the theatre-makers and with the lovers of the dramatic act.

The man in Vişniec's works, far from being a free one, is an anxiety-stricken alien incapable of communicating with the others that takes refuge in his inner universe. The absurd, the farcical and the trivial loom over the character's life and destiny. All change is stifled by predetermination, so that his terrestrial trajectory is nothing but a journey spent groping towards a lost and impossible to locate Eden. Despite the fact that Vişniec's dramaturgy offers no solutions, the author incites the receptor to look for them. This is a peculiar type of dramatic suspense, not unfamiliar to the tragic farce. In fact, this is what has won our sympathy and attention: the special way in which the playwright manages to reflect our contemporary universe with depth, empathy and tenderness.

Another aspect of Vişniec's work that makes it so appealing is the paradox it fosters regarding the freedom of creation. Although he has a penchant for giving detailed scenic directions, his plays are open enough to leave plenty of room for imagination to the directors staging them, who are conquered by the modular formula, the character outlines, the large availability of dramatic situations, the multiple endings, the humour that neighbours the grotesque, the trivial and the parodical. In Vişniec's case, playfulness becomes a palliative for despair, the valve through which tragedy is converted in the tragicomic. This tragic impression broadens the fictional room that artists have for their own creativity. To these one must add up the strong hold that our compatriot's plays have on the public. Explanations for his appeal to the public are to be found in numerous places, among which one could point out the playwright's mastery in writing, the specific theatricality, the lyrical touch, the penchant for the surprise-element, the spectacular twists and turns of the plot.

As an artist, actor and director, this is how I have come to know the artistic world of Matei Vişniec. Ever since I was a college student, our theatre-occasioned meetings have been fortunate ones, bringing me my first and greatly sought after successes. My common spiritual affinities with Vişniec have

developed naturally, supplying my appetite for his creations. Theatre, as an expression of the absurdity of the world we are living in, has become a familiar and rather comfortable perspective. In addition to that, the two levels that his texts are built on - the surface one, which is discovered after a preliminary reading, and the deeper, metaphysical one, with its profound, yet easy to comprehend nature - are other compelling arguments.

The characters generated by Vişniec's imagination and penmanship have the substantiality that any actor could ever wish for. Being generous offers as far as theatrical qualities are concerned, they tempt and provoke, thus challenging any interpreters' creative resources. The same happened to the author of these lines, whose "confrontation" with Vişniec's non-heroes only gave birth to concrete and valid characters. The creative transfer was reciprocal. I was the scenic incarnation of what was only virtual as Grubi, The Judge, The Father, The Blind Man, with the input of my own resources. The creativity transfers would take place night after night, performance after performance and continued off the stage towards the members of the audience that could, to various extents, identify themselves with what they saw. An outcome that any artist would want for his creations, perhaps even when "the purpose of theatre is to disquiet and not to relieve", as Matei Vişniec honestly admits.

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