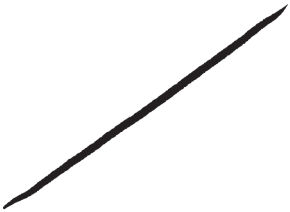


**THE PROCESS OF
REVISITING THE CLASSICS
IN MATEI VIȘNIEC'S THEATRE.
OR ABOUT THE FRAGILITY
OF SEAGULLS
IN CANONICAL DRAMA**

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Abstract: Dramatic rewritings—adaptations, updates, additions and hybridizations of genres—have the role of dynamizing the literary substrate and framework, often configuring a bridge between history events or episodes through which a society passes across eras. Matei Vişniec deconstructs and recomposes Shakespearean or Chekhovian characters, reworks the material of classical authors' plays in a new form on a seemingly improvised frame, contextualising both hypotext and hypertext. Through these returns, a constant dialogue with memory is operated, with the revitalization and remembrance of important moments in the becoming of a culture, a theatre or an artist. Textual improvisations also show themselves as a way of productive reception. Our analysis¹ will focus on texts that go through the process of rewriting the classics of universal literature, from *The Chekhov Machinery*, to *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* and *Why Hecuba*—these are plays that revisit texts and characters, melting them into the mould of the present with tragi-comic, grotesque, derisory accents. In a perspective beyond spatial and temporal landmarks, the playwright creates a palimpsest from fragments about humanity across eras, about the great errors West to East of Europe, and themes that cross literary, theatrical and creative borders.

Keywords: Matei Vişniec/Matei Visniec, dramatic rewriting, William Shakespeare, ancient tragedy, Chekhov, postmodernism.

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Motto: « J'aime la littérature, que je l'aime d'une façon déchirante,
 au moment même où elle dépérit. »
 "I love literature. [...] I love it in a harrowing fashion,
 at the very moment when it is dying-but precisely."
 Roland Barthes^{2*}

Introduction

Revisiting the works of the classics is a process that authors resort to as a valve that brings fresh air into literature and is also integrative. As long as a relationship is created between the writer and the historical, social and cultural context, rewritings, updates or adaptations, more or less faithful to the model, become signs of the individuality of an author or a generation. And the magnifying glass that canonical literature provides, through its universal themes, through its familiar

1 Article presented in the conference "Relevance of Matei Vişniec's dramaturgy in the context of interdisciplinary artistic research," organized by I.L. Caragiale UNATC in Bucharest on the playwright's birthday – January 29, 2023 – as part of the event of awarding the title of Doctor Honoris Causa to Matei Vişniec (January 30, 2023).

2 ° "Deliberation" in *A Barthes Reader*, 1982, ed. by Susan Sontag, London: Cape, p. 493. [editor's note]

score, is an intrinsic weaving between the moment of writing and the wider context. The return to the great texts of the European stage (and beyond) also functions as a mirror either of a moment in an author's biography – a thought, a feeling, an attitude to events on the social scene – or as a reflection of a need to rediscover sources of inspiration. While the etymology of the word adaptation brings together the idea of coming to – the particle *ad* – and the capacity for the message to be conveyed – the word *aptus* – the term *revisiting* covers a wider range of formulations. As Patrice Pavis observes, the system of meanings is the structure that offers the possibility of adaptation rather than the text as an abstraction or generality. Pavis also questioned the distance or boundaries between meaning transfer and interpretation (considered to be a second plan of adaptation) (Pavis, 2020, p. 6).

Folding the actual and personal discourse back onto the hypotext, the author is actually operating an interpretation, composing a dialogue between overlapping layers of realities, within and alongside the fable of the basic text. In addition to the four categories (1. simplifying and explaining; 2. resuming the text; 3. quoting or rewriting; and 4. transposing into another context), there are also types of adaptations (transposition, free interpretation, travesty, imitation, pastiche, hybridisation, deconstruction, recycling) (Pavis, 2020, p.6). On the other hand, Julie Sanders talks about a distinction between adaptation and appropriation. She also defines the former as a simple desire to make texts relevant or comprehensible to today's viewers and readers by an approach and adapt method. She considers that classical literature in particular falls under this angle of incidence, with Shakespeare undoubtedly taking the lead (Sanders, 2005, p. 9). Adaptation, in her view, does not consume the original text, but preserves it in effigy, memorizing it. Sanders argues that assimilation is the action that “frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain” (Sanders, 2005, p. 9).

Being among the formulas most often used by postmodern authors when it comes to melting spatial, temporal or cultural boundaries, revisitations of classic works are sensitive terrain. These need to be worked on patiently, cleverly, so that the new references can also bring out the richness of the original writing. Through the relationship between hypo- and hypertext (Genette, 1982, p. 12) a new shape is in fact opened to the public, that of a truth revealed from subjectivity. But this repositions the mirror in front of us and, from it, we perceive our mixed but seemingly more relevant figures. Towards the end of his career, Roland Barthes had a project whereby he proposed to rewrite the great universal works, finding them too dark and tiresome. He did not put it into practice, though his desire endured. Nevertheless, the need to practice ideas in palimpsests was conscious

and reflected his vision of literature as a living structure. The past revalued itself in the present and at the same time became present. For the French author, literature was directly linked to freedom and memory. With all the metaphorical appearance of this formulation, the immense body of writing is perceived as a red thread drawn from the canon – of which fragments remain – towards the present text, understood as a composite, revitalizing body, the result of creativity.

For Matei Vişniec, postmodernist writing has often led him down the path of hybridising classical models. Mircea Cărtărescu describes hybridisation (seen as one of the important features of postmodernism) in words that are almost perfectly in line with Vişniec's. According to the critic, there is a "Co-planarity of all times, areas and values, recycling of all possible forms in a fractal replay; once and for all, postmodernism goes beyond the closed categories of classical aesthetics" (Cărtărescu, 2011, p. 102) [our translation].

Thus, from ancient tragedies to figures belonging to the Middle Ages, through the filter of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Beckett, to Dada cabaret and references to Eugène Ionesco's theatre, the Romanian playwright's work is a poetic but dynamic dialogue intended for the audience. Fundamental chapters of theatre history are rethought on a new level, the perspective lengthened, and the well-known plays, positioned in a different light resonating with us in the present. Depending on the elements that are highlighted, the gesture of revisitation can result in pastiches, a kind of bricolage, as in the case of Matei Vişniec's texts. The machines mix events, destroy and recompose characters, the laboratory's retorts, in which the playwright works with precision and freedom, transform the characters' bodies and thoughts. In the same way, in this seductive theatre haunted by uncertain but powerful contours, echoes and reference lines, the actual valences of the tragic and dramatic, the ghostly presences of Richard III, Nina *Zarechnaya*, Treplev, Hecuba, Lysistrata and many others move. The Romanian playwright recomposes the memory of the texts. They thus breathe in another dimension in which time floats in the rhythm of the 21st century, even if their lungs carry the DNA of previous centuries or decades.

Furthermore, in the case of Matei Vişniec, the action of revisiting classical writing is *per se* a poetic art, as an unfolded map, revealing how a dramatic text is produced. It is also a continuous discourse on the art of theatre, the social impact, the interiority, the intimacy of how the stage act is shared with the audience. Theatre is understood in this creative exercise as a modular, participatory surface, to a certain extent, from which both modern dwarfs and ancient giants feed. Meanwhile, the poet, in the clothes of a director, takes a little distance and moves with his gaze, like a character in a Tarkovskian film, fragments from side to side, characters, contexts, historical events. At the same time, Vişniec places himself in

this puzzle sometimes as a character, sometimes as a peripheral profile, sometimes ironically, sometimes ambiguously or imprecisely, the text becoming metafiction, one of the basic characteristics of postmodernism.

From Text to History and Back Again

Roland Barthes talks about the link between the writer and his century:

Writing, free in its beginnings, is finally the bond which links the writer to a History which is itself in chains: society stamps upon him the unmistakable signs of art so as to draw him along the more inescapably in its own process of alienation. (Barthes, 1970, p. 40)

Beyond the fact that there are plays with a main theme anchored in the process of Eastern European history, there are also texts that carry this theme in effigy, in a secondary plan. Devastating though. In *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes from Meyerhold's Life* the emphasis falls almost less on restructuring the Shakespearean text than on revitalising the biography of the Russian director, a biography that has otherwise long been ignored. Criticism of the totalitarian system springs acutely from tones, references to the present, intertwining with the image of evil offered by Will's character. *Nina or About the Fragility of Stuffed Seagulls* is another example of this. Even though *Zarechnaya's* fate is traced in a framework of postmodernist commentary, the intention to have set the action at the dawn of the Bolshevik revolution is by no means accidental, the effect on the audience being to resurrect the collective memory. On top of that, there is a broad reference to the purpose of the art of theatre in times of conflict or extreme politics. The layers of writing overlap and intersect, and poetry is always a guiding thread, sometimes barely felt, sometimes obvious in the results that emotion irritates the fine membrane of the texts. We can only invoke the observation, as simple as it is valid, of the critic Ion Bogdan Lefter regarding the intrinsic dialogue between drama and poetry: "Poetry has always accompanied the other, the playwright..." (Lefter, 2001, p.8) [our translation]. There is also a personal questioning, a return to that Hamletian "Who am I?" positioned within the History lived before and after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

In *Richard III Will Not Take Place* Matei Vişniec creates a composite world, like a body of different fragments, thoughtfully put together so that the whole work-leaves a vague impression of bizarreness. In a nightmare in which there is no longer any possibility of setting boundaries between reality and illusion, Vsevolod Meyerhod endlessly rehearses a performance after the historical Shakespearean

play. The hypotext becomes intertwined with the mundane, to the point where, in a surrealist key, it becomes the new reality. A perfect fold is achieved between the notion of the paper character and the actor playing Gloucester. On top of this, like a shell that dresses and brings the dramatic construction into thematic unison, the major idea of the artist and his artistic vision in an oppressive system is of great importance.

The revision of Shakespeare is both formalistic and fully integrated into the main discourse, that of the status of art in communist doctrine. The rehearsed performance – incidentally an attempt by the Romanian playwright to reconstruct, to some extent, Meyerhold's mode of working – gradually gives the text a crescendo of pace and the invasion of the unreal into the seemingly real action. Multiple and diverse are the ways in which Richard III is used as an infiltrated text from the frame to the cellular plan. Initially the actor who plays Gloucester visits the director and his wife unexpectedly at night, expressing his fears about the way his role is approached – far too boldly, unfaithfully to the demands of the Communist Party. The comic and the tragic inevitably meet. The unusual emerges quickly in a universe in which hilarious images, caricatures and puppets are piled on top of each other, loud noises that we don't know whether they are the death squeals invoked in the Shakespearean text or the cries of those tortured in Siberian prisons. The way the imaginary Meyerholdian mishap unfolds brings the artist's mother to the moment when she questions her son:

Why do you want to show us a painful page from the history of another era, in costumes from our era? Imagine that I am the working class. Imagine that the working class is here in front of you and asks you this...
(Vişniec, 2012, p. 97) [our translation]

A proponent of suggestive imagery in the theatre and of updating, Meyerhold has bequeathed to the European stage his own understanding of Thalia's art. Moving away from realism, and therefore from the ideas of communist propaganda, he focuses on essentialisation. Richard is the symbol of evil, but there is an overwhelming desire to give him a positive aura in order to highlight the greater evil of ideas that seduce and deprive societies of freedom. The history of the theatre and the history of people interfere, constituting themselves as subjective fragments, rather, of time, doomed events and haunting moments of loneliness.

Actualisation, one of the possibilities of rewriting a classical text on stage, can be seen as a bridge between moments of history, similar but also different, joined by their very nodal points. Theatre has the power, as Matei Vişniec tirelessly

tells us, to awaken our attention and vision to the risks of repeating the mistakes of the past. In fact, it is just an observation, and each spectator has the capacity for further analysis. Arriving in detention (or maybe he was already there), the protagonist learns that Shakespeare has a file. An entire scene is devoted to a parallel between the bard's biography and the censorship board's method of interrogation. There is a photograph in Shakespeare's file, which the protagonist has to recognise, and the lack of authenticity of the portraits attributed to Will is then discussed. And what is more, absurdly none of the information on the documented pages gives the impression that it can be accurately verified, nor that, where there is certainty, it is for the benefit of propaganda. The universal author is reduced to a few features. And this restrictive thinking nullifies humanity beyond culture, identity or general values.

The chairman of the committee: To put it like this, this person must be a ghost (...) What if it turns out that this individual who is known to have been a petty bourgeois from Stradford was not the author of the plays attributed to him?

Meyerhold: Well, what can I say... He's still the most performed playwright in the world... (Vişniec, 2012, p. 97) [our translation]

In the upside-down universe, where we no longer know why we laugh or cry, obvious lines like Meyerhold's are no longer heard. Logical arguments are obliterated, and all that is left of man is perhaps a shell in the Chekhovian acceptance. From time to time, as if shivering, words emerge. Combining black humor with a sense of bitterness, Vişniec gives us a distorted image, reconstructed through acute irony, of the presence of classical literature in communist ideology. Every human quality disappears. Annihilation takes place within the cells of words. The artist receives a lesson from a new human exemplar:

Meyerhold: And if you can, tell my wife to send Shakespeare's plays too.

The head guard: But who is this Kechspeare?...

Meyerhold: A snitch. He sold me out... (Vişniec, 2012, p. 132) [our translation]

Richard III Will Not Take Place echoes Lucian Pintilie's *The Government Inspector* (by N. Gogol) and *The Tempest* (by W. Shakespeare) directed by David Esrig. *Richard III Will Not Take Place* is itself also the sadness and chilling of these lines that Meyerhold put down on paper in 1939, while in prison: "When the interrogators began to apply their methods of physical action on me, as an interrogatee, adding

the so-called ‘psychological attack’, they both caused me such terror that they bared my being to the bone” (Meyerhold, *Prison Letter* in Barba & Savarese, 2018, p. 312). Who am I?

Perhaps Vişniec was looking for an answer in *The Chekhov Machinery*. The volume opens with a letter from the Romanian playwright to Chekhov, a monologued introduction expressing the argumentative need to return to the model: “your plays fascinated me not so much when I read them, but when I saw them staged at a time when I myself was imprisoned in the Communist madhouse” (Vişniec, 2008 a, p. 5)[our translation]. History and references to life or to the context before December 1989 are the landmarks that the Romanian author establishes. The explanations accumulate even further, through self-referentiality and a constant relationship between past and present, between the Chekhovian subtext and its interpretation in the Eastern European space: “I personally discovered the theatre of the absurd first and foremost in your plays. This is because, thanks to the directors of my youth, the Chekhovian universe became a replica of our own imprisonment in the madhouse of communism” (Vişniec, 2008 a, p. 6) [our translation].

The testimony at the end of the letter represents the conscious search for oneself through classical literature, a literature initially perceived as an intertextual, cultural, initiatory resource, and later as a mirror of the author’s ego in fragments:

Having fallen madly in love with your character Nina, I allowed myself to write another Chekhovian play, in which I tried to carry forward, around the revolution, her destiny. In this way I felt the need to pay homage to you, my dear Master, and to try, by writing myself, to understand better the inroads of a work and a universe that never leave me alone for a second. (Vişniec, 2008 a, pp. 8-9)[our translation]

And indeed a perpetual search for the self takes place in *The Chekhov Machinery*, along the lines of *The Last Godot*. Infiltrating Pirandellian reflections, Matei Vişniec unfolds a panopticon of characters from *The Seagull*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Ivanov* and *Uncle Vanea*, among whom the author is. It seems that, this time, it is not the characters who are in search of the author, but the other way round; Chekhov is the one who would like to be among them, to take care of them and, at the same time, to be protected (maternally or medically) by the sisters or the doctors he has created for the stage. Major themes drive the mechanism: loneliness, illness, unfulfillment. And the contradictory atmosphere, at times sensitive, at times cold and tense, is created with the skill of a poet-director.

The ways in which the literary canon is transposed are various connections, *mise en abyme*, retexturing of frames, bricolage or fragmentarism. Unexpected connections refer us to Henry Troyat's biography, Chekhov's letters and memoirs, enriching the construction and giving it an eclectic nuance. The 19th century is changing, the dawn of revolutions is in sight. Time is no longer made for people, and a marginal character from *Three Sisters* – Bobik – is introduced towards the end. Our theatre of emotions, words, symbols and essences is dying out to make way for the trunks of cut cherry trees. We decipher a nostalgic air of uprootedness from the human landmarks of man himself in the monologue of the child who survived, although in *Three Sisters* we knew he was ill, and grew up. Bobik is a witness to the decades that Prozorov's daughters do not know whether or how they passed through. Nearing death, or perhaps already on the other side of the barrier, Chekhov accidentally discovers Bobik and, not recognizing him, asks who he is. In the meantime, the revelations strike him, and at one point the remarks with reference to the history of Europe at the beginning of the 20th century intervene:

And then came the war... I don't even know how it all happened... First there was the war and then there was the revolution... And the old Russia disappeared... How such a thing could happen, I for one never really understood... (...) That's why the Bolsheviks never succeeded in their so-called revolution. The problem with us Russians is that we are sucked into the endless expanse of Russia like quicksand. (...) This is the Russian spirit. Drowned in the endless expanse. (Višniec, 2008 a, pp. 81-82) [our translation]

In the museum of wax statues, populated with characters and authors and through which a passer-by repeats his infinite movement in search of Nicola station, frost settles in. Not only as a state, but also as a metaphor. And the ending of *The Chekhov's Machinery* is just an open door to *Nina or About the Fragility of Stuffed Seagulls* a text that starts as a remake on the direction of a happy ending of *The Seagull*, but migrates towards the problematics of Europe of the last two centuries. In a house “at the end of the world” where he lives almost like a hermit Treplev with his thoughts, Nina appears after fifteen years of absence. The image of the panopticon is projected here too, as the country house is criss-crossed by spectres like Ranevskaya's orchard or the walls of Elsinore – another way of saying that we are in a smaller theatre within a larger theatre. An unreal heavy snowfall wipes away the contours and the frost hardens the snow so that doors and windows could not be opened. The confinement is an obvious sensation. In this tomb or box of memories from other times, a discourse on the meanings of theatre

is outlined and the main ideas guiding the relationship with Eastern European history are glimpsed again. The apocalyptic winter that blocked access to the roads and scattered the world is also the winter of history in which the dawn of the 20th century is darkened by the Bolshevik revolution. Trigorin creates, in his own style, the seething outside:

Our army is deserting and wants to make revolution... Three days ago, in St. Petersburg, the garrison fired into the crowd, but the next day the soldiers switched to the side of the revolutionaries... I believe that as we speak, the Tsar is preparing to abdicate. (Vişniec, 2008 b, p. 133) [our translation]

The larger theatre looks scary, it is troubled by the demons of communism, while the smaller theatre is protective and humane. The pragmatist Trigorin completes his idea later, when he looks back at the course of history and prophetically slips in forecasts of a future of collective failure:

Our country is also beginning to become a huge battlefield... Europe is about to sink, too, except that, as far as I can see, it cannot sink at all without Russia... It can only sink with Russia... (...) Revolutions have never led to anything. The only revolution that humanity should make is to convince people to be more human. (Vişniec, 2008 b, p. 146) [our translation]

But how quickly do we forget essential human values? The bloody wars that have torn countries apart in Central and Eastern Europe, or the even newer imperialist utopias that are destroying lives very close to our borders, have shown. Like Anya and Trofimov (from *The Cherry Orchard*), Nina and Treplev imagine that revolution can bring about what they have dreamed of for more than fifteen years: new forms. No more emptiness, no more violence, but the enthusiasm of the moment seems to have taken hold of the heated capers. Nina exclaims with an ardour that could be motivated by her overexcited state of mind:

The boulevard theatres have closed, but others are opening... proletarian theatres are opening, revolutionary theatres... I want to play, Kostia, in front of all these hungry people, in front of these humiliated and obese people who are making revolution. (Vişniec, 2008 b, p. 159) [our translation].

This strange, incomprehensible appetite, in which a mad thrill of going beyond the limits at any cost has crept in, makes the aristocratic Trigorin, the old-fashioned writer, smile persuasively. In his attitude we find the attitude of conservative intellectuals directly affected by the outbursts of youth. Except that neither Nina nor Treplev are necessarily young any more: “And what are you going to play there in front of the Soviet committees? Your hermetic monologues that no one understands?” (Vişniec, 2008 b, p. 162) [our translation] He then recommends the two to go to Switzerland where the Dada movement had already appeared, considering that the genre, the nihilistic tone, undoubtedly suits them. With Matei Vişniec, the characters never go all the way in the tone of expression. One can’t help but wonder how sad or ironic or sarcastic the successful author, now of considerable age, is in his remarks. In fact, the lines are a mixture of feelings, some contradictory. Like Chekhov. When it is unclear what exactly to read in the famous “I’m a Seagull”: greed, morbidity, obsession or excessive fragility? Or maybe something else.

As in *Richard III Will Not Take Place*, there is a kind of pleasure in the awareness of evil. The protagonist in *The Seagull*, reminiscent of the voices in the naturalistic drama, incites her childhood friend to kill her partner whom she considers guilty of sacrificing the last fifteen years of her life. The instigation is complemented by an observation that refers to a reality during the revolution, but which has continued in other times of armed conflict, when ideologies have led people into battle. Nina’s line opens up the land of mass graves, of unmarked cemeteries from our continent’s first, second or any other war, large or small. With indifference or, perhaps even the opposite, with ironic pressure and bitterness in her voice, the woman thinks that after Trigorin dies in the duel, he could be buried in the edge of the forest, because: “So many people have died in the last three years in Russia that no one, absolutely no one, will fret over his absence from the universe” (Vişniec, 2008 b, p. 145) [our translation]. Her words leave a brackish taste, reactivating the history of human error. Nina after her career in the theatre is rather a disillusioned world. Victim and guilty of silence at the same time. Incidentally, the synonymous line at the level of representation is given by Meyerhold’s imaginary father in *Richard III Will Not Take Place*. He combines in his words the grandiloquence with the grief of a century in ruins. Does the character believe everything he says? Hard to answer. The tone seems to be critical, explaining to the son what the correct view of the universal playwright should be “For the audience might come to ask you: is this scenery through which Richard wanders a battlefield or a newly discovered mass grave? Or Shakespeare...” (Vişniec, 2012, p. 107) [our translation]. Can the theatre answer with certainty? Hard to say. Even more for an artist.

A text less frequently staged³ in the Romanian space at least, *Why Hecuba* is a rewriting both in terms of referential intersections (characters from ancient tragedies, passages from the *Iliad*, sequences of myth) and in terms of the ways in which the structures are fluidized. It is a broad prose poem, with carefully studied musicality and heartfelt rhythmicity. *Why Hecuba* is more than a glimpse of the writer at the edge of the sea, between the beach dotted with ancient relics and the smoky horizon of the contemporary. History, landmarks and repetition, commonplaces also represent evolution, and the combination of dramatic forms. These are found through the postmodern course and overlap, different but so similar in substance. Tragic poetry and the poetry of the present, minimalism, essentialism and the thrill of suffering that crosses our line of humanity, become Siamese compositions under the flow of Matei Vişniec's ideas. The diffuse Homeric portrait, the chorus, the group of gods, the mournful queen of Troy are presences that find their freshness in the polyphony and polysemy through which the word is transformed. In theatricality, in hybridisations. Euripides' score (the tragedy of *Hecuba* or *The Trojan Women*) is the skeleton on which the theatre of diffuse contours and of lines with an echo in the present is built. In a recent interview, the Romanian playwright confesses about the text that it is the content of what events on a European scale make us witness and participate in. The theatre of the world engulfs the smaller theatre behind the curtain. Matei Vişniec says, summing up the entire referential surface of the play:

Democracy is defeated by the violence around it. Violence is breaking out like an outbreak at the gates of Europe, what is happening in Ukraine is worrying. Europe is caught up in hotbeds of violence, and what is happening in Iran and Iraq has ramifications all over the world, through attacks, through networks. In France the nightmare of attacks is very common. What does Hecuba tell us? That the new generations must not repeat the mistakes of the past. (Chişan, 2022) [our translation]

And yet reality always contradicts our expectations. The sense of powerlessness in the face of a destiny drawn over people's heads, from somewhere in the sky or on earth, is powerful and devastating. The grieving queen is a lament in itself, a symbol of suffering. A voice that sums up all the voices of mothers whose children have always perished on the battlefields. And the gods – abstract and theatrically profiled – are silent or, when they respond, do so with indifference

³ It was staged by director Anca Bradu in 2014 at the National Theatre Radu Stanca in Sibiu. Abroad, the play was staged in Japan and Brazil.

or in a caustic tone. But there floats throughout the scenes with Polydorus or Polyxena, the re-enactment of the siege of Troy, the mute cry of Hecuba. This is explained in a caption, “Hecuba will continue to ‘speak’ and ‘shout’, addressing the Trojans and even the spectators, but her words remain ‘silent’, her mouth opens and she ‘shouts’ without a voice” (Vişniec, 2014, p. 212) [our translation]. Taken from Edward Munch’s famous painting, the expression of despair is the expression of the helplessness of an entire world in the face of evil. And the mute cry is joined by other landmarks in particular that mark absent presence – non-existent scenery, but also unanswerable questions:

and yet something is wrong with the universe... If everything that exists is born of love, thanks to Eros, why are there so many wars and so much sadness? There’s something going on here that I don’t understand... Why so much pain, if everything springs from the power of love? (*Hecuba punches the air with her fists. The noise caused by her blows is deafening*) Why? (Vişniec, 2014, p. 264) [our translation]

A mark of the vacuum of meaning, of logic, of humanity, the silence of the stage is equivalent to the silence of the spectators and of an entire socio-political context of any century.

Conclusions

Intertextuality could also be a way of reinventing the productivity of literature. It is an internalized action that could give meaning to the artist’s inner search, because, as Roland Barthes, himself in need of finding definitions and meanings, says that writing is a creation, and a practice of procreation. A way of fighting, of mastering the feeling of death and total suppression (Barthes, 1987, p. 22). Matei Vişniec, from the generation of Cenuaclub de Luni to the artist who founds cultural institutions, will remain an observant writer, a playful, attentive and sentimental commentator of his age.

The act of reading and rereading on stage is a meaning by which the process of germination becomes visible and, having reached the addressee, the message continues to evolve. Whether the characters of *On the Sensation of Elasticity When Walking Upon Corpses* or those in *Dada Cabaret* are speaking to us, we will recognise the great literature of Eugène Ionesco, the imprint of Tristan Tzara or other avant-garde writers. The 20th century will always be a theme in the spotlight, with its bad, troubled episodes, but also its moments of hope. And within this framework, literature – from Chekhov to Beckett – will be the fabric on which, like a tapestry, the reliefs of our history will appear. The spectator will run

his fingertips over these rough edges, or penetrate the spots of light to recognise his face in the mirror of theatre. In the mirror of time. Matei Vişniec's revisiting of the canon of European literature through theatre is a call to the viewer to introspection, critical thinking and belonging.

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