
DECOMPOSED THEATRE: RE-COMPOSING THEATRICAL FORMS IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

JOZEFINA KOMPORALY

University of the Arts, London UK
j.komporaly@wimbledon.arts.ac.uk

KATE O'CONNOR

Independent Researcher and theatre director,
London UK
kateoconnor683@gmail.com

Abstract: This essay reflects on a practice-as-research project at the intersection of stage translation, live performance and documentation, culminating in an audio recording intended for dissemination in the UK and US. Departing from a brief examination of previous English translations and productions of *Decomposed Theatre* by award-winning French-Romanian author Matei Vişniec (also known as Matéi Visniec in an international context), the essay engages with the process of workshoping the text and creating a performance version specifically for radio. The discussion focuses on the importance of fusing the different facets of creative practice with contextual and transcultural considerations, and addresses synergies between theory and praxis. It shows the fluidity between processes of writing, translation, directing and acting, drawing attention to the non-hierarchical ethos governing the collaborations involved. The project, created at the height of the Covid pandemic, came about as a response to the restrictions experienced by live performance, and offered an insight into the ways in which theatre artists tried to adapt to this unique status quo in terms of form, content and their relationship with audiences.

Keywords: Matei Vişniec/Matéi Visniec, *Decomposed Theatre*, translation, adaptation, radio drama, documentation, pandemic.

How to cite: Komporalý, J. and O'Connor, K. (2023), "*Decomposed Theatre: Re-composing Theatrical Forms in the Time of Pandemic*," *Concept* 1(26), pp. 71-89.

Introduction

As most of us recall, the outbreak of the Covid pandemic in 2020 has introduced unprecedented shifts in the operation of the creative industries, and artists world-wide found themselves faced with hitherto unimaginable challenges. For many, survival meant reinventing themselves and imagining novel avenues for connecting with audiences. Given that the pre-requisite for live performance – “the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators”, through their encounter and interaction in a shared space (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, p. 38) – was out of the question during lockdown, most theater artists turned to video and audio-based modes of performance-making, often conducted via Zoom and available to a potentially global spectatorship. Many theaters have also opened up their archives and shared their previous productions online, thus giving rise to a new-found interest in documentation and accessibility, immediately followed by a wave of experimentation in terms of creating new digital content that combined an interest in topical themes with a focus on improving technical production standards.

The Chicago-based Trap Door Theatre, for instance, rightly chose a return to the work of Matéi Visniec as a staple of their post-2020 repertoire, reimagining the playwright's work for the screen rather than the stage, and responding eloquently to the challenges of making theater during the pandemic.

Led by artistic director Beata Pilch, Trap Door has gained a solid reputation for championing European drama and staged several Visniec premières over the years, including *Discourse without Grammar* in 2021 and *Joan and the Fire* in 2023. In September 2020, they created a mesmerising visual version of *Decomposed Theatre* directed by Josiah Davis for the International Voices Project Chicago, following which they serialised the play in eight episodes, each directed by a different artist (Josiah Davis, Marian Masoliver, Nema Lahon, Michael Mejia, Zachary Nichol, Cristina Pronzati, Catherine Sullivan, Nicole Wiesner and Katarzyna Winska). These episodes were available to view online between 3 December 2020 and 4 February 2021, and were accompanied by post-show discussions with the creative team. Jozefina Komporalay was involved with both productions as translator and participant in the conversation, particularly the second project, where the already flexible structure of the play had been substantially reconfigured for episodic format, as she documents for *The Mercurian*:

In this imaginative series, Trap Door decomposes and recomposes Visniec's modular text into a new structure, finding novel synergies between individual scenes and reinterpreting a timeless play written under the hallmark of open dramaturgy for the here and now. This new adaptation boldly explores the play's inherent modularity and permutability, and the dialogues thus established between the various scenes and episodes offer a multitude of readings and associations. (Komporalay, 2021, p. 67)

In parallel with these case studies, *Decomposed Theatre* gained a new lease of life for the radio, too, via the transformation of an original idea for live performance for audio. This collaboration between director Kate O'Connor and translator Jozefina Komporalay was also an exercise in adaptation, based on the principle to zoom in on a representative section of the play and utilise it as a lens for reflection on the turbulent times of global malady and confinement. Departing from the premise that less is more, this pared-down version of the play had the potential to amplify subtle nuances and celebrate the human voice and sound in its broadest manifestations, and ended up as a most stratified collaboration, involving a multiplicity of partners, from the University of the Arts in London to the Romanian Cultural Institute and independent cultural platforms on either side of the Atlantic.

By situating *Decomposed Theatre* in cultural context and addressing aspects of the creative decisions, in this essay we are hoping to demonstrate that Matéi Visniec's play is a truly experimental text, akin to a series of surreal short stories,

which can be edited and rearranged in potentially any permutation depending on directorial vision. Although written shortly after the author fled the dictatorial Ceaușescu regime in Romania to settle in France, the play's treatment of themes such as control and ideology is as topical as ever, which explains its long-standing appeal to directors and theatre-makers world-wide. Moreover, the international presence of this Visniec play, alongside the playwright's other works, significantly contributes to the integration of Romanian and global traditions, facilitating bidirectional contact and arguing for the vitality and viability of European drama in a transnational context.

Decomposed Theatre in Context

Decomposed Theatre is one of Visniec's most widely-known plays, circulating in several incarnations in multiple languages, most notable of which is the French version entitled *Théâtre décomposé, ou l'homme-poubelle*, first produced in 1993 in French and Romanian by Theatrum Mundi and the French Cultural Institute in Bucharest, directed by Cătălina Buzoianu. As customary with this prolific bilingual playwright, *Decomposed Theatre* also has its parallel Romanian version authored by Visniec himself, entitled *Teatru descompus sau omul-pubelă*. This play is a selection of independent scenes that can be combined in various permutations in performance, whereby the playwright offers what he terms a 'modular text'. Through these self-contained monologues and dialogues, Visniec illuminates topical psychological traumas, by conjuring up an atmosphere of anguish and confinement and featuring a constant deployment of menace that blurs the boundaries between actual and imaginary situations.

In English, the play started off with an initial version in American English created by Shari Gerstenberger, followed by a joint translation by Nick Awde and Jozefina Komporalý, published in the first English-language anthology of Visniec's work *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*, edited by Komporalý (Seagull Books, 2015). This British English version has contributed to a significant extent to the international visibility of the play and has been used as a bridge translation to several versions in non-European languages, such as Hindi. This interest is grounded in the playwright's "ability to intertwine urgent existential, political, and aesthetic concerns, and the potential of this work for being incorporated into theatre traditions other than their local context" (Komporalý, 2020, 81). Dragan Klačić is more explicit, stating that "the parabolic features' of Visniec's theater make his work 'more accessible for foreign readers and spectators, who were most likely little informed about the everyday life under the great Conducator'" (Klačić, 2009, p. xviii), and indeed

Visniec denounces the dangers of manipulation through ideology whatever it might be, and charts a history of cultural resistance against totalitarianism of any kind.

This play is among the formally most innovative works by Visniec, allowing theater companies added flexibility towards their artistic vision as the order in which the play's monologues (and a dialogue) can be assembled is extremely versatile. Visniec examines various states of alteration and of moral and physical decrepitude, and the twenty-five disparate scenarios illuminate the psychological trauma of living under totalitarianism, by conjuring up an atmosphere of despondency and featuring an ongoing deployment of menace that blurs the boundaries between actual and imaginary situations.

Characterised by fragmentation, the respective scenes in *Decomposed Theatre* offer an ideal framework for Visniec to detach his protagonists from their alienation and to analyse events through a lens that intertwines the comic with the tragic. The world depicted in the play shows humanity out of kilter, suffering from psychosis and paranoia, where psychological alienation is doubled by physical disintegration. These scenes are evocative of a post-apocalyptic universe, and protagonists include such nameless anti-heroic figures as the gatherer of dead bodies, the animal trainer, the man with the horse and the human trashcan. The titles of the scenes bear Visniec's trademark strategy of naming: they refer to their protagonists through their status, profession or most typical characteristic, such as 'The Man in the Circle', 'The Repairman', 'The Brainwasher', and stand as such for archetypes rather than individuals. 'The Man in the Circle' and 'The Runner' centre on entrapment; in the former the protagonist cannot escape the circle surrounding him, and in the latter a man cannot stop running. Thus, the runner finds himself unable to take control over his body or to convey his state of emergency to anyone; as a result, he is confined to a course with no prospect for escape. For the man in the circle the entire universe is reduced to his own self, without the possibility of engagement with anything beyond this immediate confinement.

By braiding directness and ambiguity in the text, Visniec confounds reality and fantasy. The playwright describes these texts as 'dream-like', and indeed there is a fair offering of surreal imagery as is the case in the scenes which were at the foundation of our adaptation. Most situations resembling everyday life gone wrong are suspended in space and time, and acquire nightmarish qualities, as in 'Quiet Madness':

Butterflies have overrun our town. Gigantic, magnificent, flesh-eating butterflies. We've never seen so many butterflies here before. They're absolutely everywhere, on the streets, rooftops, cars and trees. Anyone who

happened to get caught on the streets when they first swarmed in was devoured.¹

The inability to know how to proceed in hostile circumstances is fundamental to the trilogy composed by ‘Quiet Madness’, ‘Fevered Madness’ and ‘Lucid Madness’ as they scrutinise a gradual process of degradation. As Bogdan Crețu observes, Visniec focuses on ‘common people, confined to a situation they are unable to adjust to, which consequently dehumanizes them’ (Crețu in Magiaru, 2010, 137, 140). Daniela Magiaru (now Șilindean), building on Crețu’s claim, not only endorses this inability but highlights the absence of any intention whatsoever to react to such circumstances, thus instituting ‘negative transformation’ and utter lack of agency as defining tropes. ‘The Man with the Horse’ centres on resignation turning into full submission, whereby the protagonist simply accepts the surreal situation of being stalked by a horse, whereas ‘The Human Trashcan’ celebrates docility and submissive behaviour.

Alongside human protagonists, the play includes an entire bestiary (butterflies, snails, horses, stags, cockerels etc.), thus perpetuating Visniec’s predilection for the trope of animals in plays such as *Pockets Full of Bread* (1984) and *Horses at the Window* (1987) There are numerous scenarios in which hostile animals take control of humans, as in ‘Fevered Madness’:

You wake up in the morning and get out of bed only to find your slippers stuffed with snails. You go to the bathroom to find your sink is overflowing with snails. You can’t see yourself in the mirror because of the hundreds of snails already stuck all over it like gangrene. You go to the kitchen, slice your bread only to find a stink-snail hiding in the loaf. You can’t even heat up some milk or make yourself a coffee without finding a black snail with green horns already sitting in each pot or pan—and they’re highly mobile, too. On every chair, you’ll find a huge great stink-snail perched, staring back at you with a guilty look. They slither unbelievably quickly over the furniture, up the curtains, landing on the ceiling and twirling across at breakneck speed. As soon as you open a book, a tiny, flattened snail will plop out. (‘Fevered Madness’)

This crescendo culminates in the silencing of humanity altogether, seeing that a self-imposed refrainment from speech is presented as the sole form of resistance:

¹ These quotes are from the unpublished performance version of *Decomposed Theatre* created specifically for our collaboration.

To live with the stink-snails, first of all, you need to learn to be silent. For every word you say, there's a little stink-snail that will immediately take its place inside your mouth. ('Fevered Madness')

A further form of degradation, by way of reason being engulfed by instinct, is explored in 'The Meat Eater': in this scene, humanity is reduced to its basic biological coordinates, constantly devouring and regenerating itself, in a remarkable affinity with themes explored in Visniec's poetry where devouring is a core metaphor. Meanwhile in 'The Voice in the Blind Light (I)' language is deconstructed due to excessive usage, as the victim is forced to repeat the same word ('string') until it loses all initial connotations and morphs into an instrument of control, torture and humiliation. In this way, as Georges Banu rightly contends, *Decomposed Theatre* layers the desemanticisation of language with the dismantling of dramatic form and content, decomposition undermining not only the form of theatrical matter but also "its raw material: daily life" (Banu, 1996, 8). To put this in the terms of 'Lucid Madness':

Because the rain-creature also lives in the flesh of us humans, in our blood, in our movements and in our dreams, it has the ability to be absolutely everywhere. It's inside each and every thought, inside each and every spoken word. You can do nothing to hide from it—it knows everything, each moment of the day and night. It monitors all our brains at the same time, because it breathes at the same time in all our brains. And it speaks to us as if it were a second voice inside us.

Visniec's plays have often been described as being in the tradition of the theatre of the absurd, and his veneration of Beckett and Ionesco – to whom he has dedicated plays – continue to fuel such parallels. He draws on key absurdist themes, such as the crisis of language and communication, confinement, estrangement, angst, alienation, however, he generally highlights the role of external (rather than internal) factors and his protagonists are at the mercy of hostile circumstances and regimes. Words make an attempt at expressing the absurdity of the human condition, yet they keep failing and there are no solutions on offer, audiences and readers being invited to search for these themselves. Visniec often points out that in communist Romania, absurd was a reality rather than an aesthetic trend, and he even gets his alter ego of sorts, the poet Sergiu Penegarau to clarify this to the virtual character of Eugène Ionesco in *And Now Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* (also known as *The Feeling of Elasticity When Walking On Dead Bodies*): 'Here, we live the absurd, while, over there, you write it.' (Komporalý, 2015, 391) In this respect,

Visniec emerges as a playwright closely tuned in to actual lived experience, and joins a long line of politically engaged writers.



Illustration by Andra Badulesco for *Decomposed Theatre*, 2013. (c) Andra Badulesco.
Photo source: Visniec, M. (2013) *L'homme dans le cercle/Omul din cerc*,
illustrated by Andra Badulesco and Iuri Isar. Paris: Editions Transignum.

Decomposed Theatre: Inspiration for an Audio Performance

For our audio version, we chose to focus on three interconnected scenes – ‘Quiet Madness’, ‘Fevered Madness’ and ‘Lucid Madness’ – which have presented the most fascinating provocation and conundrum for us. For this occasion, Komporalý retranslated the play in order to fit the creative vision developed with the creative team, director Kate O’Connor, performer Maria Forrester and sound designer Sam Halmarack. Our aim was to amplify the author’s topical vision of three plagues descending on an unnamed town, and to examine how this sheds light on the way we experience crisis and change today. In addition to initial support from the University of the Arts London, we were fortunate to benefit from the support of the Romanian Cultural Institute (in terms of rehearsal space and dissemination) and to collaborate with Trafika Europe Radio’s Theater programme, braiding our recording with a conversation conducted by cultural critic Andrew Singer with the playwright and translator.

Our version centres on a trilogy of fragments that describe a vision of three plagues descending on an unnamed town, each more strange and more insidious than the one before. Through Visniec’s absurdist wit, we have been aiming to reflect on our own current experience of crisis and change, the impact of a pandemic on our everyday lives, media consumption and political reality. As a

play following the principles of open dramaturgy, *Decomposed Theatre* is an invitation to think creatively about the relationship between text-based theater and multiple modes of performance making, and this connection has become even more acute during the pandemic. Matéi Visniec's spot-on commentary on our times has also proved prophetic in the case of his novel *Mr K Released* (translated by Komporaly for Seagull Books, 2020 and shortlisted for the 2021 EBRD Literature Prize at the height of the pandemic): as a work on captivity, this book is the ultimate guide on how to survive confinement and deprivation of freedom, and an ironic reflection on the eerily familiar experience of ongoing deferral.

As it happens, *Decomposed Theatre* also had its fair share of deferrals. We had first talked about a possible collaboration prior to 2020, then imagining a live performance, but in the meantime decided to embrace the play's potential as an aural experiment. We took visual inspiration from the artwork especially commissioned for a bilingual edition of the play (Visniec, 2013), and chose the attached image by Andra Badulesco as our signature/logo. For this occasion, it was also essential to revise the earlier translation into English, bearing in mind the conditions and challenges of an audio adaptation. We also had an agreement that tweaks would be made to the text in the course of rehearsals, to suit the various characters and situations, and to enhance speakability and performability.

Working with a single performer not only didn't limit but actually added to versatility, as Maria Forrester's amazing vocal range brought to life an entire host of diverse characters and situations. Being familiar with the demands of recorded media through having worked extensively in TV and film, Forrester thrived on O'Connor's directions that juxtaposed various performance modes, from a TV news anchor to nature documentaries, liturgical extracts, a press conference in the style of Boris Johnson's coronavirus lockdown briefings or a social media Vlogger. This fascination with multiplicity and journalistic lenses is in close keeping with Visniec's own style and parallel career with Radio France Internationale. It is also a nod to the playwright's other work that we have consulted in the process, such as his topical play *The Man Who Had His Inner Malice Removed* also translated by Komporaly (published in *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion*) that deals explicitly with the question of news reporting and ways of addressing the prospective audience. Sam Halmarack's sound effects, including the David Attenborough-style sounds of nature and the backdrop of a busy street, further added to the nuances and depth of character explored by Forrester.

Decomposed Theatre: Director's Process Diary**BACKGROUND**

I met Jozefina Komporaly in 2019, when we looked at a number of texts she had translated from the Romanian. Matéi Visniec's *Decomposed Theatre* instantly grabbed me. It is a text made up of fragments; some of them dialogues, some resemble short stories, others public announcements. All of them feature characters trapped in surreal scenarios and a pervasive sense of menace; one man starts running one day and realises he can't stop, another is stalked relentlessly by a horse. Visniec's only instruction for a director is 'total freedom', making this text an incredibly exciting starting point for formal and dramaturgical exploration. As a director, in my mind's eye I couldn't help envisioning all the potential for a staged production.

My first step was to discover more about the playwright, whose work I had not encountered before. I was particularly drawn to the themes of ideological control, imprisonment and silencing, sometimes directly focused on the history of communism, but often in a more oblique way which invites reflection also on forms of control in Western democracies. From this early stage I was interested in how British society today might be reflected in this fragmented text described by the author as a 'shattered mirror'.

These two creative elements – formal experimentation and social reflection – became the threads which ran through my work on this project. However, global events overtook us, not exactly in the way I expected!

2020

We began to seek out partners for a production. This is always the most difficult stage of a process, particularly with translated texts; the UK theater industry can be very insular, seeing international work as niche and difficult to sell. There are however certain organisations and figures who encourage and champion this work; it was these routes that we started to pursue. Then, in March 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic changed the landscape suddenly and dramatically. It seemed that working towards a production would be impossible for the foreseeable future.

ADAPTATION & DRAMATURGY

It soon became clear that, whilst live in-person performance was on hold, theaters and artists would seek other ways of making work and reaching audiences remotely. We began to think about ways to adapt this text for our new context, beginning with a conversation with Marie McCarthy, Artistic Director of the Omnibus Theatre, Clapham, who quickly curated a varied online programme of digital work.

This conversation focused on the sharp resonances of three fragments that occur as a triptych in the middle of the text: ‘Quiet Madness’, ‘Fevered Madness’ and ‘Lucid Madness’. These describe three plagues which descend on a town, the first of flesh-eating butterflies, the second of snails with a deadly stench, and the third of a rain creature which invades and drains the soul from all living things. What is distinctive about Visniec’s treatment of these parable-like tales, is his focus on the psychological effect of wider situational changes on the everyday life of individuals; the creeping way in which the surreal becomes normality.

“Here, we live the absurd, while over there, you write it” – observes a character in Visniec’s play *And Now Who’s Going to Do the Dishes?* This quote’s primary reference is to life under the Communist regime in Romania. However, the experience of the far-fetched becoming reality is something that most of us could identify with in 2020. It felt like these three ‘Madness’ fragments in particular would spring to life in performance today, in particular the feeling of claustrophobia communicated by the narrating voice. For me, this sense of being ‘trapped’ was the greatest resonance with our own experience; physically confined within our homes, and at the mercy of the way this ‘plague’ was being reported back to us by politicians, the press and social media communities in a state of intense hyperactivity.

FINDING A FORM AND A PLATFORM

Komporaly first suggested a collaboration with Trafika Europe Radio, an online platform which showcases European literature in translation, and this opportunity was like a very bright spotlight suddenly being shone upon this project. Of course! Radio! The form of the piece as a series of monologues lends itself very clearly to an audio delivery, and the creative challenges of a new medium which would take away all visual elements were extremely exciting.

This idea became a reality following some funding from University of the Arts London (Research at Camberwell, Chelsea, Wimbledon Colleges of Arts), and confirmation from Trafika Europe Radio of their involvement. We were now in a position to pursue the path towards a radio production of *Decomposed Theatre*.

FORMING A TEAM

The challenge we faced was to seek out the usual cues you would follow in a playtext, to find the mode of performance which would provoke the most vivid resonances for an audience; to seek out the ‘drama’ in Radio Drama, specifically in a text which itself questions our notions of the ‘dramatic’.

The first step was to find the artists to go on this journey with us. We were joined by Sam Halmarack, who works as a Composer, Sound Designer and

Video Artist on a range of projects in theater, podcasts and beyond. We were keen to find a Romanian actor to perform the text; it feels extremely important, particularly at this moment of tightening borders, that culture the UK should include and showcase the international artists who live here. We were immensely fortunate to be joined by Maria Forrester, who, coincidentally, had performed in one of Visniec's monologues many years before, when the writer was paying a visit to her school in Romania.

COLLABORATION

The period up to our rehearsal and recording dates included many conversations between the creative team. The aim of these was to focus our intentions to make the most of the time spent together rehearsing and recording in the first week of March 2021. It was through this collaborative process that a 'concept' for our recording emerged.

I found myself going back to key discoveries, resonances and questions from early explorations: How does this text resonate with our political and social situation in the UK today? Although the situation had changed dramatically since 2019, the question remained.

Jozefina Komporaly provided several other pieces of Visniec's work, and also commentaries and an introduction to a recently published anthology of his work. Each of these seemed to reinforce the fact that, beyond an exploration of ideology alone, the playwright is particularly fascinated by the role of the media and journalism in establishing this control insidiously and unconsciously in all of us.

So we decided that the performative style of this piece, the genres we would refer to and borrow from, would be taken from recognisable, popular and influential media sources that occupy our eyes and ears almost constantly today. And we returned to the idea of a collage, as a form that would allow us to represent this cacophony most effectively.

REHEARSAL

This being a time of pandemic, it was difficult to gather in a public space, so we were extremely fortunate to be offered space at the Romanian Cultural Institute in Belgrave Square, London. We had two short rehearsal sessions, and then a day to record the text.

In this limited time-frame, rehearsals were an intensive process of getting to know each other, sharing responses to the text and translation, and joining the dots of our thinking so far. We drew on the context of writing and performance history of the text, which set up a provocation for us to focus on how ideology is distilled into different media of communication today.

Together we produced a list of source materials:

- TV news headlines from anchors in a studio
- TV news delivered by a reporter on the scene
- Interviews with eyewitnesses and commentators in the community
- David Attenborough’s nature documentaries
- Social media influencers/ Vloggers
- Downing Street press conference
- The broadcasting of religious services, specifically the Romanian Orthodox Liturgy

Having gathered these together, we explored different paragraphs of the text in each performance mode, to see where there were exciting echoes and possibilities. These paragraphs and styles would be the building blocks of our collage.

These explorations were fascinating, very revealing and often also very funny. Although the playwright had not intended the piece to be treated in this way, his open invitation to directors and artists had allowed us to explore and experiment in a way that is not often possible with more directive or conventional texts. Moreover, our translator encouraged us to make small tweaks to the text to suit the various characters our performer was creating. For example, the News Anchor would begin their fragment with ‘Good evening’, whilst the Social Media Influencer would be drinking a trendy ‘oat milk latte’ rather than plain coffee.

We were led by the preoccupations of Visniec’s own work and historical context, to find something that will hopefully resonate with listeners from April 2021 onwards.

RECORDING & POST-PRODUCTION

Our day of recording was led by Sound Designer Sam Halmarack, and focused on capturing all footage as cleanly and effectively as possible. As a theater director, this pressure to capture and record within a limited time frame was a learning curve for me; I’m more used to a gradual process of rehearsal, followed by the evolution of a piece of performance across a run with audiences. The challenge can often be how to keep energy up over this period of weeks or months, rather than how to concentrate it all into the work of a few hours.

Maria Forrester was also more familiar with the demands of recorded media, through having worked extensively in TV and film. Over the course of the day we ran through each performance mode (e.g. TV news anchor), dotting

around different paragraphs of the text to capture a clean recording. Once this was complete, we moved from our makeshift studio in a corridor, down to the RCI's grand, echoing foyer. Here we recorded the liturgical extracts, and a press conference in the style of Boris Johnson's coronavirus lockdown briefings. At the end of the day we continued some recordings outside, to achieve the backdrop of a busy street for the characters of the News Reporter and Eyewitness Interview. Finally, some additional recordings were made by Forrester in her home environment, to recreate the context and sound quality of a social media Vlogger.

The final stage of post-production and editing was also led by Sound Designer, Sam Halmarack. Besides selecting the cleanest takes from our recording day and piecing these together, he also composed original music to underscore the piece. He created bespoke sound effects using household materials, for example the 'squelching' of the plague of snails was created through experiments with various foods in a bathtub! The final selection of music and sounds, and the overall pacing and balance of the piece, was decided through final conversations between director and sound designer, before mastering for the radio broadcast.

BROADCAST

The recording can be accessed via the Omnibus Theatre's Youtube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCvhmzXX7L8>

The first broadcast of this audio production of Decomposed Theatre was available at Trafika Europe Radio from Saturday 24th April 2021:

<https://www.trafika-europe.org/trafika-europe-radio/>

REFERENCES

Here are some links to the reference materials we used in our rehearsals for the performance:

David Attenborough documentaries:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czgc56Vfz4w&feature=emb_logo

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-tvA3Ezqjl8>

News anchor headlines: BBC iPlayer or Channel 4

On the scene reporting:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/aug/11/bbc-and-sky-accused-of-dehumanising-people-trying-to-cross-channel>

An influencer/lifestyle vlogger:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kVKg7EfEf9w>

Eyewitness/ Commentator Interview:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/video/2019/oct/06/filthy-piece-of-toerag-boris-johnson-constituent-speaks-her-mind-video>

Boris Johnson coronavirus briefing press conferences:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2020/mar/23/uk-coronavirus-live-news-latest-boris-johnson-minister-condemns-people-ignoring-two-metre-distance-rule-in-parks-as-very-selfish>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Kjc7R1yGMc>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4FyXuCi-rs>

Here are some links to additional background research into the context of ideology and cultural control in the UK today:

Controversy as culture secretary looks to warn charities against ‘rewriting’ British history:

<https://www.thirdsector.co.uk/controversy-culture-secretary-looks-warn-charities-against-rewriting-british-history/governance/article/1707420>

Unions fear government wants museums to ‘airbrush’ UK history:

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/feb/23/unions-fear-government-wants-museums-to-airbrush-uk-history>

New legal protection for England’s heritage

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-legal-protection-for-england-s-heritage>

A Manifesto for Museum Learning and Engagement:

<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/learning-and-engagement/manifesto/>

Migrants in Culture Research Report: What is the Impact of the Hostile Environment on the Cultural Sector?

<http://migrantsinculture.com/hostile-environment-survey/>

Festival UK 2022:

<http://migrantsinculture.com/f-uk-2022/>



Rehearsal of *Decomposed Theatre*, March 2021, at the Romanian Cultural Institute in London. Director Kate O'Connor and performer Maria Forrester wearing coats and hats, with the windows wide open during Covid restrictions.
(c) Jozefina Komporaly.

Conclusions

Decomposed Theatre conveys the essence of living under oppression and confinement in a way that can make people understand its emotional impact on a visceral level, without having had such a direct personal experience. Visniec often foregrounds the social, political and psychological ramifications of confinement, and prisons, hospitals and mental institutions feature prominently in his work – as a code for the limitations to personal freedom, together with an examination of what being free might entail. These aspects were foundational to our endeavour, both before but especially during the pandemic, and they resonate with the wide international interest in the playwright's work.

Visniec's most post-modern writings are modular texts, a cluster of independent scenes that can be combined in various permutations, thus allowing theater companies flexibility towards achieving their artistic vision. This sense of freedom was additionally appealing for us, and making the most of the creative license on offer underpinned our project. Visniec takes pleasure in meta-theatrical experiments and rejoices in improvisation, yet writes with striking precision and focus. He ritualizes repetition and accumulation, gradually divesting words and situations of their original meanings and connotations, to the extent that they lead to a troubling sense of unease. *The Cabaret of Words* (2012) takes readers

and audiences on a subjective journey into a universe where words lead a life independent from that of humans, while *Decomposed Theatre* includes parable-like tales, where his focus is on the psychological effect of wider situational changes on everyday life, and the creeping way in which the surreal becomes normality. It is not a coincidence that both of these texts have re-appeared on stage in recent years, and working on their English translation for these productions only brings their shared preoccupations into a new light.

Visniec spots dramatic situations in an extraordinary variety of mundane circumstances, and has a sharp eye for detail and an uncanny ‘capacity to transform abstract ideas into characters’ (Ghițulescu, 2008, 518). As a playwright, Visniec demonstrates remarkable generosity towards staging practice, and insists on the creative autonomy of theater-makers. Well-versed in multiple literary and dramatic modes of expression, he systematically tests generic boundaries and practices a form that transgresses linguistic, cultural, and stylistic confines. Based on the relative ease of integrating our project into the landscape of English-speaking theater, it is fair to claim that this work paves the way to transnational communication and the possibility of belonging to multiple cultural contexts and traditions at once.

References:

1. Banu, G. (1996) “Matéi Visniec ou la Décomposition” [Matéi Visniec or Decomposition], preface to Visniec, Matéi (1996) *Tbéâtre Décomposé [Decomposed Theatre]*. Paris: Editions l’Harmattan.
2. Crețu, B. (2003) “Situația limită în dramaturgia lui Matei Vișniec” [“The Limit Experience in Matéi Visniec’s Drama”], *Convorbiri literare*, October 2003.
3. Fischer-Lichte, E. (2008) *The Transformative Power of Performance*. Trans. Saskya Iris Jain. London: Routledge.
4. Ghițulescu, M. (2008) “Viziunile lui Matei Vișniec”, in *Istoria literaturii române: Dramaturgia* [“Matéi Visniec’s Visions”, in *The History of Romanian Literature: Playwriting*]. București: Editura Academiei Române.
5. Klaic, D. (2009) “Preface: Retrieved from Oblivion”, in Gerould, Daniel (ed.) *Playwrights before the Fall: Eastern European Drama in Times of Revolution*, New York: Martin E. Segal Centre Publications, pp. xi–xxi.
6. Komporalý, J. ed. (2015) *Matéi Visniec: How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*. Seagull Books.
7. Komporalý, J (2020) “András Visky & Matéi Visniec: Challenging boundaries of cultural specificity”, in *Contemporary European Playwrights*, eds. Maria M Delgado, Bryce Lease and Dan Rebellato (Routledge, 2020), pp. 76–94.
8. Komporalý, J (2021) “Decomposed Theatre” by Matéi Visniec, trans. J. Komporalý, *The Mercurian*, Volume 8, number 4. (Fall).
9. Komporalý, J. ed. (2021) *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion* (Bloomsbury). <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/plays-from-romania-dramaturgies-of-subversion-9781350214316/>
10. Magiaru, D. (2010) *Mirajul cuvintelor calde*. București: Editura Institutul Cultural Român.

11. Visniec, M. (1996) *Théâtre Décomposé*. Paris: Editions l'Harmattan.
12. Visniec, M. (2013) *L'homme dans le cercle/Omul din cerc*, illustrated by Andra Badulesco and Iuri Isar. Paris: Editions Transignum.

Performance references:

1. *Decomposed Theatre* (2020) Directed by Josiah Davis for the International Voices Project Chicago. <https://www.ivpchicago.org/calendar/2020/decomposedtheatre-romania>
2. *Decomposed Theatre* (2020-21) Directed by Josiah Davis, Marian Masoliver, Nema Lahon, Michael Mejia, Zachary Nichol, Cristina Pronzati, Catherine Sullivan, Nicole Wiesner, Katarzyna Winska. <https://trapdoortheatre.com/decomposed-theatre/>
3. *Decomposed Theatre* (2021) Written by Matéi Visniec. Directed by Kate O'Connor, translated into English by Jozefina Komporaly, sound design Sam Halmarack. Performed by Maria Forrester. A Trafika Europe Radio/ Romanian Cultural Institute New York/ University of the Arts London (Research at Camberwell, Chelsea, Wimbledon Colleges of Arts) production, with support from Romanian Cultural Institute London.
4. *Decomposed Theatre* (2021) Directed by Kate O'Connor [Trafika Europe Radio, first broadcast on Saturday, 24 April 2021] <https://www.trafikaeurope.org/podcast/trafika-europe-radio-theater/?c=04007ae3e449>
5. *Decomposed Theatre* (2021) Directed by Kate O'Connor [retransmitted by the Romanian Cultural Institute in New York and London] https://omny.fm/shows/trafika-europe-radio-3/decomposed-theatre?fbclid=IwAR0cj9ZHCzIEjnCskTWd4_nrSNd3ZMErEP8wg54A8w5zeg4DgCt_glHowNI
6. *Decomposed Theatre* (2021) Directed by Kate O'Connor [Omnibus Theatre London]. <https://www.omnibus-clapham.org/engine-room-decomposed-theatre/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TCvhmzXX7L8>

Jozefina Komporaly is a London-based theatre scholar, academic and translator from Romanian and Hungarian into English, specializing in drama and contemporary literature. Her translations, showcasing the work of authors such as Andrea Tompa, András Visky, Árpád Kun, Béla Markó, Cristian Fulaş, Elise Wilk, Matéi Visniec, Mihaela Miroiu, Tatiana Țibuleac, appeared in *Asymptote*, *Baffler*, *Columbia Journal*, *Hungarian Literature Online*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Modern Poetry in Translation*, *Poet Lore*, *The Continental*, *Words without Borders*, *World Literature Today*. She is editor and co-translator of the collections *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays* (Seagull, 2015), *András Visky's Barrack Dramaturgy* (Intellect, 2017) and *Plays from Romania: Dramaturgies of Subversion* (Bloomsbury, 2021), and author of numerous publications on translation, adaptation and theatre including *Radical Revival as Adaptation* (Palgrave, 2017). Her translations were produced by Foreign Affairs, Trap Door, Theatre Y, Trafika Europe, and recently published volumes include *Mr K Released* by Matéi Visniec (finalist for the 2021 EBRD Literature Prize) and *Story of a Stammer* by Gábor Vida (Seagull Books, 2022). Her forthcoming translation *Home* by Andrea Tompa (Istros Books, 2024) was the recipient of a PEN Translates Grant. She is a member of the UK Translators Association. Her website is available at: <https://jozefinakomporaly.com/>

Kate O'Connor is a theatre director with a background in international work. She is a member of Out of the Wings collective (Kings College London), who develop translations of plays from Spanish and Portuguese. In 2019 she directed the English language premiere of award-winning Spanish play *Cuzco* at Theater503 in Battersea. She is currently Associate Director with Frozen Light theater company, and has previously been an Associate at the Gate Theater, Company of Angels, Associate Director on *Travesties* (West End) and *World Factory* (Young Vic), and Researcher on Lola Arias' *Minefield* (LIFT/ Royal court). She trained with Philippe Gaulier and was a finalist in the JMK Award 2012 and 2014. Her website is available at: <https://www.kateoconnor.co.uk/>