

Ionesco Obsessions in Scenic Imagery Signed Gábor Tompa

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Abstract: Among the reference creators in the Romanian theatrical space, but also internationally, the director Gábor Tompa had a constant attraction for the aesthetics of Eugene Ionesco's texts, which strongly influenced his path of perfection and ranking among the most important directors. In 1992, at the Hungarian Theater of Cluj, Gábor Tompa staged the memorable theater play *The Bald Soprano*, a performance that will represent one of the pillars of his later career. Then, in 2003, the theater performance elaborated by Gábor Tompa using the text *Jacques or the Obedience*, at the Hungarian Theater of Cluj, can be called a total one, in which the decryption of the Ionescian message was done with a lot of fantasy and suggestive black humor. In 2014, he rebuilt the *The New Tenant* on the stage of Nottara Theater in Bucharest. The staging was well received by the general public, but also by the theater people, also appreciated by the selection among the best performances in prestigious festivals of 2014. At the beginning of 2020, *Rhinoceros* appears to Gábor Tompa as an extremely percussive text, which determines its staging at the Mihai Eminescu National Theater of Timișoara, enjoying an authentic success. Until now, the stage imagery signed by Gábor Tompa, will remain a reference page of theatrical constructions and Eugene Ionesco's texts, real revelations, owning well-articulated messages on stage, reflecting socio-human realities and concurrently, a real urge to reflect.

Keywords: Eugène Ionesco, Gábor Tompa, *Rhinoceros*, *The New Tenant*, *The Bald Soprano*

The historian and critic John Gassner noted in his work *Form and idea in modern theatre* that modern dramaturgy was born from the interference of several currents, which he calls "Ibsenism and Wagnerianism, realism and symbolism, objective naturalism and antinaturalism both objective and subjective".¹ The theater thus intended to stimulate the fantasy of the unconscious, which realistic art, considered to be obsolete, had rigorously restrained. As we know, the theatre of the absurd appeared as an avant-garde current in France in the '50. It has been called the *new theatre*, the *antitheater*, the *experimental theatre*, the *theater of derision*, but the critic Martin Esslin through his book *the Theatre of the absurd*, published in 1961, calls it the theater of the absurd. The playwright Eugène Ionesco, one of the leading

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¹ John Gassner, *Form and idea in modern theatre*, preface and translation by Andrei Băleanu, Meridiane Publishing House, Bucharest, 1972, p.25.

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representatives of this current, found this label as inaccurate, preferring the theatre of the “unusual”, as he used to call his own theatre. Ionesco perceived the world in his texts as devoid of meaning, and reality as empty unreal, expressing the feeling of unreality through characters troubled by failures, remorse, the emptiness of their lives, beings plagued by the meaninglessness of existence, their suffering sliding, most of the time, into derisory with tragic accents. The theatre of the absurd was an important step made by the playwrights toward the stage, by equipping all the elements that are part of a performance with new, ambiguous, disturbing meanings, transforming them into theatrical signs that have taken on new dimensions. In his conversations with Claude Bonnefoy, Eugène Ionesco states that every work must be a unique thing, a world, a cosmos, the work having value only to the extent that it is unique. Extrapolating, we can emphasize that any performance, any stage structure should be in its own unique way, marked by originality. To this end, the creators of the performance should assume the task of undertaking rigorous theatrical research.

Among the reference creators in the Romanian but also in the international theater space, the director Gábor Tompa had a permanent orientation, a constant attraction for the aesthetics of the Ionesco’s texts, which have strongly influenced his path of becoming, of his completion, of ranking among the most important directors. Born and grown on the land of the theater, as the son of director Miklós Tompa, the name of which is related to the existence of the National Theatre from Targu Mures, whose director he was for 21 years, and of actress Gaby Mende, Gábor Tompa leaves himself vexed by the muses and builds a theatrical career as a director, in parallel to the work of General Director of the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, at the helm of which he has been for 32 years. After 1990 Ionesco’s work was no longer forbidden, which allowed its return to the lights of the ramp in the Romanian theatres. In 1992, at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, conducted by him for only two years, Gábor Tompa stages the memorable performance *Bald Soprano*, a performance that will represent one of the pillars of his later career.

I started with a series of performances, one of them being *The Bald Soprano*, which had the chance to be invited to a great tour in England, after which she took many national tours. The tour lasted six weeks, the performance also received the award for “The Best Foreign Performance in England”, the invitations started to come and so we entered a European circuit. Giorgio Strehler, who saw *The Bald Soprano*, in Paris, in 1994, had already invited us (invitation addressed to the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, n.n) to be members of the Union of Theatres in Europe (UTE), which brought together the European elite theatres, somehow preceding, as a model, the European Union itself. He included in the UTE theatres from countries that are still not EU members, as Russia. We could not enter the UTE immediately, because in the meantime, Strehler left us, and we had to wait another decade.² - says the director who currently has the quality of President of the Union of European theatres.

² Nona Ropotan, *33 de spectacole*, Lebada Neagra Publishing House, Iasi, 2021, pp. 21-22.

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The originality of the stage masterpiece, *Bald Soprano*, besides the novelty of the directorial vision and of the acting play, is also amplified by the scenographic conception of Judith Dobre Kóthay, the performance getting important awards and nominations at prestigious festivals in the country and abroad, among which: National Theatre Festival “I.L. Caragiale” from Bucharest, 1992 edition, Gábor Tompa - The prize for originality in the directorial creation, National Theatre Festival, Szolnok, Hungary, in 1992, where Judit Dobre-Kóthay receives the award for the best costumes, 1993 in the UK at Lyric Hammersmith, London, he received the critics' Award for best performance, and in 1994, at the International Biennial Festival of Theatre “Eugène Ionesco”, Chisinau, received the Grand Prize for the best performance, Gábor Tompa - the Award for Best Director and Miklós Bács - Best actor in the lead role (nomination). This recognition opens the doors of a career that goes far beyond the borders of the Romanian theatre space, so in November 1996, he is invited by the director Silviu Purcarete, to resume the staging of the *Soprano* at Limoges, at Théâtre de l'Union-Centre Dramatique National, and then, in 2000, *The Bald Soprano* is staged again at Athenée Théâtre - Louis Jouvet, Paris, France. The fourth staging of this text, by Gábor Tompa, takes place in the season 2008-2009, also in Cluj, this time at the “Lucian Blaga” National Theatre. The possible reactions related to the originality of remakes do not make sense, the performance being carried out on other stages with other actors, belonging to other theatre schools, even if the director-scenographer team and the structure of the show remain the same.

In *The Bald Soprano*, as is known, there are two couples in dialogue with meaningless words. However, the Smiths and the Martins leave the impression of perfect communication between them, although the dialog appears to be illogical, because paradoxically, absurdity lies precisely in an excess of logical formalism. In the text of the *Soprano*, statements are made very seriously, even if they are talking nonsense. The play begins with the Smith pair and finally restarts with the Martin family, which demonstrates the interchangeably character of the characters. The Smiths are the Martins, and the Martins are the Smiths. They are characters devoid of any substance, of any psychological reality. They're just fancies. Partners are bored to death, have no passions, have no desires, can become anyone or anything, can even be changed between them. The situations remain static, and everything ends where it began. Anything becomes possible, for nothing and no one is what seems to be. Through this play, Ionesco brings into the scene, first, the theme of transforming the individual into one automatically controlled by an outside will, but also the theme of its uniformity, the lack of well-demarcated individuality. Uniformity seems to wipe out even the sexual differentiation within the couple. In *The Tragic Farce*, Romul Munteanu notes that the culmination of the text is represented by the “formal dialog, resulting from a joining of paroxysmal monologues”, especially toward the end, where the replicas are a resumption of the initial ones. A circular structure, the

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impression of cyclicity, of perpetual motion are obtained. The families Smith and Martin resume the conversation in a disarticulation of language. The characters seem to decompose, the words are empty of content, and everything ends with an argument, the reasons of which are unknown, in which the characters throw each other pieces of words, syllables, consonants, vowels, as Eugène Ionesco says, referring to his text:

Words had become meaningless, sounding shells; so, of course, the characters had emptied themselves of their psychology, and the world appeared to me in an unusual light, perhaps in its true light, beyond interpretation and arbitrary causality. When I finished the work, I was still very proud of it, I imagined that I had written something like a language tragedy!³

These ideas are emphasized by Gábor Tompa in his performance, in which the mechanisms of the play are directed by a kind of master of ceremonies, a possible demiurge, who opens the lid of an imaginary box with living dolls. The theatre critic Ludmila Patlanjoglu noted in the year of the premiere in *the Romanian Universe*:

The director uses the metaphor of the world as a puppet theater [...] builds revealing images for the ideal essence of the play. [...] The costumes, the makeup, scholarly composed, with refinement, comment on the grotesque nature of these bourgeois, dehumanized, conventionalized, alienated and alienating existences. [...] the feverishness of these colorful clowns, their meaningless words, gestures, actions mimicking authentic experiences, cut through a delusional and irrational universe.⁴

and Marina Constantinescu said about the participation of the *Soprano* in the National Theatre Festival that it is hard to forget a night when the audience applauded minutes on end, enchanted by a great and extraordinary performance, a band, a director. In the international press it is stated, among other things, that the performance opens a new window to the world, highlighting the actors' play:

The actors possess an extraordinary technique and science, on which the director relies to make a fine choreographic opera that radiates a powerful emotional force even between the rigid walls of a doll house. The strong vision of the performance bridges the borders of the language and makes it useless to be written in English.⁵

³ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p. 190.

⁴ Florica Ichim, *Eugène Ionesco pe scenă în România*, Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, pp. 30-32.

⁵ *Scotland On Sunday*, October 30, 1993.

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The resumption of the staging, some years later, at “Lucian Blaga” National Theatre in Cluj also generated sterling reviews and notable participations in theatre festivals.

Brightly colored human assemblies come to life by simply activating a spring, animating <the tragedy of the language>. [...] Mrs. and Mr. Smith (she, dressed as a geisha, plentifully painted, appears from a huge chest, plays her score in duet, then, at the meeting with the Martins, the couple reappears, he in the lady's crinoline, she takes over the Lord's pants, as a sign of "everything is possible," especially the unexpected), the Martins (a couple equipped in Scottish style clothing – he wears a kilt and she wears a green, fenced outfit), the fire captain (with a gold-painted face and an impressive hose as a size) reveal, through their strange air, through mimics and automatic movements, the mechanisms of a non-figurative theatre, in which the communication function of language is veered and must be ridiculed.⁶

or

The owner of the box with illusions, ambiguous and playful and mysterious, seems to be the Creator himself: the puppeteer of the whole story, the director of this forging of humanity. [...] The scenography signed by Judith Dobre Kóthay closes the entire universe of Ionesco in the box with illusions, aseptic, apparently isolated from real life but whose mirror it is, without declaring it. The strings of puppets pulled by the invisible puppeteer trace the destiny of humanity's derisory drama⁷

and

The director started from the idea that the language is not the main means of communication between the characters (between themselves, but also with the public), he moved the emphasis on color (carefully elaborated and exactly symbolically rendered makeup at the color level) and on the costumes worn by the characters; from the first gong to the last all seem to be in a kind of trance, moving very slow or very fast as if they were devoid of reason and will; comes up with the interchangeability elements [...] Basically, all the performance takes place in a doll house, [...] and at the beginning and at the end, the sound of a musical box is very loud.⁸

⁶ Oltița Cîntec, *Trio with the Bald Soprano*, „Observator cultural”, no. 500, November 12, 2009.

⁷ Oana Cristea Grigorescu, *The concentrated form of the masterpiece – Bald Soprano*, „Agenda LiterNet”<https://agenda.liternet.ro/articol/9835/Oana-Cristea-Grigorescu/Forma-concentrata-a-capodoperei-Cintareata-cheala.html>

⁸ Nona Ropotan, op. cit. , pp. 40-41.

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And the examples could continue, because much has been written about this performance, both in the national and international press. It is and will remain for sure one of the reference performances in the creation of Gábor Tompa, but also a stage landmark for Ionesco's dramaturgy.

Jack or the Submission naturalistic comedy is first a family drama or a parody of a family drama. The characters' language and their attitude are noble and distinguished. But also, here the language discloses, decomposes. The theme is represented by the bourgeois bargaining of two respectable families, that of Jacques and that of Roberta, around a marriage they both want, except for the future groom, Jacques, who vehemently opposes at first, but eventually gives in. In Jacques' family, all the characters except the sister bear the male name - Jacques, and Roberta's parents bear the female name of their daughter. The individual is thus reduced by flattening to a common denominator. The theme of the multiplication of the names Bobby Watson, from the *Bald Soprano* is found again, but a clearer distinction is made here between male and female – Roberta the mother, Roberta the father, etc. Jacques, the family rebel, the unsubmitive young man, who resists accepting the bourgeois patterns of an arranged marriage and a predictably mundane existence without a horizon. "In a world that resembles a huge cage, Jacques finds no way out. But faced with time, and therefore with death, there is obedience to convention. Jacques spreads his nonconformism by submission, by integrating it into the Convention that destroys it."⁹ If Jacques finally obeys his defeat is not an acceptance of the bourgeois logic, for which a marriage is a business, but submission to biology, to the imperatives of the sexual instinct. The language in this play is subject to Ionesco's typical distortions. There are plays of echoes, comic allusions, juxtapositions to contradictory terms, words with subtly wrong suffixes or prefixes, rhymes, assonance and silly alliterations.

Roberta wants to name everything with one and the same word "cat." This is an absence of language, it is undifferentiation, everything is on the same level, it is abdication from lucidity, abdication of freedom before the organic. The play is a state of pressure and ease, of light and darkness. A muddy silence opposes to the luminous silence. When Roberta says she's getting slouching, she's doing it in verbal delirium, notes Claude Bonnefoy in the book about conversations with Eugène Ionesco.¹⁰

The motive of the "potatoes with bacon" in the *Bald Soprano*, mentioned three times in the dialog by Mrs. Smith, plays an extremely important role in *Jack or the Submission*. The acceptance of the "potatoes with bacon" is Jacques' first step in

⁹ Romul Munteanu, *Tragic Farce*, Univers Publishing House, Bucharest, 1970, p.120.

¹⁰ Eugène Ionesco, *Between life and dreams – Conversations with Claude Bonnefoy*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1999, p.133.

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accepting bourgeois conveniences. In fact, Jacques' drama is a metaphysical and universally human one, deeper than that of the young man who rebels against the father, the family and bourgeois stereotypes, pretending to accept and then rejects the vulgar motto: "I love potatoes with bacon". It is the drama of the discovery that human language with its promises, with its exhortations to patience and hope, with the illusions it can create, is only a great lie, by which nothing is communicated, there is no way out except by descent into the earth, into animality, or into death. The performance conceived by Gábor Tompa with this text, at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, in 2003, can be called a total, team one, in which the decryption of the Ionesco's message was achieved with many fantasies and suggestive black humor. The decor, signed by Barta József, completed by potentiating the directorial ideas, having as central element a bed with multiple functionalities, dissection table but also a possible catafalque, and a wall with countless jars with pickles. The costumes and the masks of Carmencita Brojboiu perfectly integrate into the predominantly greenish chromatic of the decor, suggesting a cadaveric, decaying world. Actors of different ages prove the extent of their professionalism, talent, and seriousness, exceptionally coordinated by the director, compose spectacular characters, with emotion, with an inventive play. The performance, another achievement of the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, received a nomination for the UNITER Award for best performance in 2004, also participating in numerous festivals in the country, but also in the European theatre space, including: The International Theatre Festival from Sibiu, the Hungarian National Theatre Festival, Thalia Open Festival - TOPFEST, Targu Mures, The Romanian Drama Festival in Timisoara, participations that brought prizes both for acting performances and for costumes and decor and Gábor Tompa receives again the Award for Best Director in 2004, in Timisoara, at the Romanian Drama Festival. He also received praise from the well-known art critics:

The director Gábor Tompa has such a rigorous, clear, and intelligent way of deciphering a play and putting you in contact with the truth [...] that even if you happen to disagree with his conclusions, you can't fail to admire the coherence of his speech. It has such a fruitful way of working with actors that they become "visible" even when playing minuscule roles. He has such a subtle way of combining the depth of reading with the accuracy of stage expression, that his performances speak equally to the mind and senses – which he delights with the novelty and elegance of forms.¹¹

or

The director conceived the stake, the evolution of the characters, according to the laws of classic music, of a sonata. [...] Tompa makes us participate in this articulated performance as in an experience lived in strange

¹¹ Alice Georgescu, *Despre plăcere, la teatru*, „Ziarul financiar”, January 27, 2004.

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way [...] A show about embarrassment, strange, funny, comical unusual, restless unusual, and in which, in the end, the comic turns into the unbearable tragic.¹²

or

In an episode of high sensitivity, communication seems to be restored. For a moment, the two agree on the marriage, savoring the moment of intimacy. Mold quickly invades everything, greening the atmosphere (a strong allusion) from the decor to the costumes. Faces are covered with masks and a crowd of unicorns advance toward the proscenium, following the command of the fiercest of them – Jacques, the former rebellious.[...] the opening of the background to the mirrors that comprise the spectators in this sinister metaphor is of great effect.¹³

and

The final scene is a real dramatic, emotional and shattering climax, although calm, unostentatious, but straight, tough, very different than the scenes before. This final scene reveals remarkably the subtext of Ionesco's play, the alienated/alienating universe of heroes. With the exception of Roberta and Jacques, sitting at height, on his bed, in a triumphal picture of "parents/gods", all the other characters appear in the scene wearing monstrous masks. They are a kind of rhinoceros, returned to the stage of offensive primitivism.¹⁴

Martin Esslin noted that Eugène Ionesco is experimenting in the *Theatre of absurd*, the challenging of the conventions and formulas of traditional theatre, the crisis of language, insinuating the absurd into existence, the blurring of the tragic by the absurd comic, the loss of the identity of the character who became a puppet, emphasizing that, "The great themes that come back in the works of Eugène Ionesco are those of the solitude and isolation of the individual, of the difficulty of communication, of our anxiety and of the certainty of death."¹⁵ In the play *The New Tenant*, a text that was staged a few times, an elegant individual moves into a new home, refusing decisively the services of the Portress. The transition into the absurd is gradually made, through the bellmen who bring into the scene more and more objects, the repetitive theme of the proliferation of matter, and the space, empty at

¹² Roxana Croitoru, *După legile muzicii clasice*, „Teatrul azi”, nr. 1-2, 2004, pp. 83-85.

¹³ Doina Papp, *De la Cortina de fier la teatrul fără perdea*, 2nd edition, Academia Romana Publishing House, Bucharest, 2013, p. 115.

¹⁴ Claudiu Groza, *Jack or the submission*, in „Tribuna”, no. 32, January 1-5, 2004.

¹⁵ Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the absurd*, version in Romanian by Alina Nelega, UNITEXT Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, p.71.

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first, gradually fills with pieces of furniture, which end up suffocating the room and, later, the entire street. The home-shelter thus becomes a tomb, in which the tenant accepts, even conducts his “funeral”, being practically buried alive. But the room can also be a place full of memories, the history of an existence, the proof of a failure, of a fiasco, or a real vault for tortuous secrets. *The New Tenant* is the metaphor of a funeral ritual treated in a dramatic manner, which was mentioned by the author from the first didascalies: “At first the play must be very realistic, as well as the decor and the furniture to be brought. Then, almost imperceptibly, the rhythm will give the play a certain ceremonial character. In the last scene realism will prevail again.”¹⁶ For the creator Gábor Tompa *The New Tenant*, a text written in only 3 days, because of the experience of the author’s move with his family, in the last residence of Montparnasse, is a special text inside the entire work of Ionesco, with multiple stage indications, similar to the detailed Beckettian didascalies. “It seems to me one of his most poetic plays, in which there appears that breath of death that pervades all his texts. [...] The play seems minimalist and even repetitive at some point, but that’s where a special musical structure comes from” - confessed the director. The text is the move from one world to another, the last move, the objects being both memories and memos accumulated in this life. The only things that remain at the end of life are mostly memories, memories that follow us, about a world that changes, because while we inherit traditional cultural objects, libraries, collections of art objects from ancestors, from father to son, there is a danger of ending this tradition, as in the case of Chekhov. *The New Tenant* and *The Cherry Orchard* are related, Ranevskaya and the Lord seem similar, by their ontic connection with the past.

Staged for the first time by Gábor Tompa, in 2004, at Northern Stage Ensemble Theatre, Newcastle, in Great Britain, with the actor Francisco Alfonsin in the role of the Lord, in the scenic space created by the scenographer Helmut Stürmer, the performance was successful, and the presence in festivals, in the Romanian theater space, in Cluj or Sibiu, confirmed it. That is why, ten years later, in 2014, he recreates *The New Tenant* on the stage of the Nottara Theatre in Bucharest, in the same decor signed by Helmut Stürmer, with the costumes of Corina Gramosteanu, keeping in the role of the Lord, as an idea of the character as a stranger, the Spanish actor, Francisco Alfonsin, who knew Romanian to a certain extent. Interpreting in a strange way and using several languages – Spanish, French, English, Romanian – displaying a majestic rigidity, releasing mystery, with a continuous oscillation between agitation and serenity, between calm and nerves, the actor projects you into Ionesco’s unusual. The two bellmen, Ion Grosu and Gabriel Rauta, recall through their illustrative play the Beckett’s characters, Didi and Gogo, from *Waiting for Godot*, a tribute that the director pays to Samuel Beckett, as well as his portrait suggestively added to the

¹⁶ Eugène Ionesco, *The New Tenant*, in *Theatre*, vol. VI, translation from French and notes by Vlad Russo and Vlad Zografî, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, p. 7.

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multitude of furniture and memories. The staging was well received by the public, but also by the theatre people, appreciated by selecting among the best performances of 2014, in prestigious festivals such as the “I. L. Caragiale” National Theatre Festival from Bucharest or the “Interference” International Theatre Festival from Cluj. The scenographer Helmut Stürmer wrote in the *Notebook of the Nottara Theater*, referring to the design of the decor: “After all, my compromise was called: a concrete space that forgot its biography. More specifically: a gray juice temporarily covers realism. Objects and furniture are hidden characters (wrapped in semi-transparent plastic *à la Christo*). You don't know when they're going to get revenge, when they're going to come, like an avalanche of memories, over you. But they will come, you will see!”

In the first part of Ionesco's text, the Lord's silences contrast with the expansive talk of Portress, in the chatter of which several symbols are masked. She may represent the earthly incarnation of a deity who welcomes the dead or those who are about to die. As a psychopomp character, the Portress welcomes the character of the Lord on his way to eternity, offering him a loaned bed, as an allusion to the image of the coffin, which the Lord refuses, thus rejecting the idea of death. Besides, it is the only piece of furniture that is missing from the crowd of furniture that suffocates the scene. But the bed also reminds of the conjugal bed and, thereby, of the re-encounter with the mioritic theme of “wedding in death.” The proliferation of matter by the multiplying furniture is related to the character's unconscious. These Ionesco's obsessions are well cut off by Gábor Tompa, in his stage construction, as noted in the chronicles.

The performance of Gábor Tompa seems an antechamber of the disappearance, if not a staging of a "live death", boosted by the crowding of unnecessary objects, until the invasion of parcels falling from above into the space of the room, [...] Everything is placed in the places indicated by the New tenant, with gestures of conductor, demiurge of an unseen orchestra. [...] If we carry the demonstration further, dotted by elements of Helmut Stürmer's inspired scenography, the enclosed space, apparently only a rental apartment, could become a passage room, a kind of purgatory in which the tenant is first besieged by testimonies of social life, which he will leave going to another place, through a narrow passageway, as the end of the performance could be *read*. [...] The Portress, excellently performed by Ada Navrot, with whom the multilingual newcomer enters dispute, trying to make her disappear from the passage room, can also be a Charon-woman, a young woman whose identity seems to change from monologue to monologue.¹⁷

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¹⁷ Victoria Anghelescu Polyglot protagonist and transcendental absurd in “The New Tenant”, „Cotidianul”, October 25, 2014.

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The omnipresence of poetry, which shows itself without shyness in the entire scenic discourse, confirms the specific note of Gábor Tompa's theatre. Seduction works, the tenant weaves his spider web only to wake up its prisoner, illusion and defiance go hand in hand, forms are composed all the time, indefinitely, but in the absence of meaning they come to decay. The traveler, the unknown, the stranger, the archetype that the 20th century dramaturgy explored and exploited to the full, is materialized here in the character of the tenant. Francisco Alfonsin plays a role with personality, of a strangeness that brings a plus to the whole staging. [...] His language is a combination of idioms (Romanian, Spanish, French, English), his speech comes from another world, the movement does not resemble the everyday movement, the contact with objects is guided by coded principles.¹⁸

The word, notes Eugène Ionesco in *Notes and Counter Notes*, is only one of the shock elements of the theatre.

The theater has its own way of using the word, and this is dialog, it's the word of struggle, of conflict. There are means to transpose the word into the theatre, leading it to paroxysm, to give the theatre its true measure, which lies in the lack of measure; the verb itself must be stretched to its ultimate limits, the language must almost explode, or be destroyed, in its inability to grasp the meanings. The word is continued through gesture, through play, through pantomime, which replaces the word when it becomes insufficient, the material stage elements can amplify it in turn. Everything is allowed in the theatre: to incarnate the characters, but also to manifest anxieties, inner presences. It is not only permissible, but also recommended to make the accessories work, to make objects live, to animate the decors, to concretize the symbols.¹⁹

The impossibility of communication, its obsession, also appears in the *Rhinoceros* play, in which the central hero, Bérenger, are cut off all the valid ways of human communication, by transforming the “others” into rhinoceros, both at the ideological and language level – bellows, onomatopoeia, etc. A man helplessly assists in the transformation of his world, against whom he can do nothing, he does not know whether he is right or not, he struggles without hope, he is the last of his species. Bérenger finds himself alone in a dehumanized world where all individuals wanted to be like others. They dehumanized themselves, depersonalized themselves, precisely

¹⁸ Dana Ionescu, “The New Tenant“ or the return of Tompa Gabor to Bucharest, “Yorick.ro”, September 23, 2014.

<https://yorick.ro/noul-locatar-sau-intoarcerea-lui-tompa-gabor-la-bucuresti/>

¹⁹ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p. 57.

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because they wanted to be like others. People gave up their humanity, their own life, their personality, finding in this abdication a certain joy, a certain animal happiness. When speaking of the sources that inspired his play *Rhinoceros*, he says that the purpose of the play was to describe the process of Nazification of a country, as well as the reaction of the one who, naturally against contagion, witnesses the mental metamorphosis of his collectivity. Originally, "rhinocertis" was a Nazism.

Rhinoceros is undoubtedly an anti-Nazi play, but it is, above all, a play against collective hysteria and epidemics that hide under the cover of reason and ideas, but which are no less serious collective diseases, for which ideologies are but alibis: if we realize that history is going crazy, that the lies of propaganda come to mask the contradictions between the facts and the ideologies that support them, if we look at the actuality in a lucid way, it is enough to be prevented, to succumb to irrational "reasons" and to get rid of all the dizziness.²⁰

Another source of the text, often quoted by critics, and not only, is undoubtedly Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Kafka's oneirism, however, differs from Ionesco's grotesque and ludic humor, consisting of logical-illogical plays rooted in surrealism. Eugène Ionesco's play is conventionally allegorical, containing a message that is only a model of understanding of a social phenomenon, of a social-ideological disease with extremely serious historical effects and a call to resistance. Eugène Ionesco said that the heroes of the play, apart from one, turn under the eyes of the spectators into wild animals, into rhinoceros. Against this transformation, he said he hoped the public would feel a sense of disgust when seeing it. The play is a faithful dramatization of the story *Rhinoceros* that appeared in *Lettres nouvelles* in 1957, a story that it contains in the text of the play in the form of sequential quotations. The play could also be described as a textual mosaic with pieces detached from the story. In his Journal pages of the *Present Past, Past Present*, Ionesco notes:

One could say that there are two human races: the man and the new man. The new man seems to me to be not only psychological, but also physically different from man. Imagine that one morning you notice that the rhinoceros have taken the power. They have a morality, philosophy, and universe of rhinoceros. The new mayor of the city is a rhinoceros who uses the same words as you and yet it's not the same language. Words have a different meaning for him. How can you get along? It is not a new language, but a skillful manipulation of the terms, to create confusion in the spirit of their enemies.²¹

²⁰ *Idem*, p.209.

²¹ Eugène Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present*, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1993, p.83.

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This delusional fanaticism exists, unfortunately, even today. The disease of the characters of the play is a psychological-ideological epidemic, a contagious collective mental mutation, a case of mass hysteria, with obvious references also to the political-ideological situation existing in Romania in the 40s. There are also references to the ideology of the Legion or of the Iron Guard – the greenish skin, even dark green, that the characters under metamorphosis acquire. Jean is not feeling well, he is about to turn into a rhino, he has a lump above his nose, he is hoarse – hoarseness is already the first sign of damage of disruption of the normality of human communication – his skin turns greenish. The term “rhinoceritis” is introduced in the third act, by the lawyer Dudard, who came to visit Bérenger, and soon himself becomes a victim of this epidemic, the problem of communication, namely the impossibility of communication, arises again, only as a naive and at the same time dangerous solution. The metamorphosis of people in rhinoceros also occurs at the level of language, communication possibilities, rhinoceroses come to make only unintelligible sounds, some bellows accompanied by the clapping of hooves, rhinoceros being able to communicate and understand thus only among themselves, a phenomenon of great complexity, although the consequences are simple – entering the herd, an ever-growing herd of rhinoceros. Bérenger truly becomes a hero in the final moment of the play, when he remains alone, precisely because he finds the strength to accept total loneliness, this last resort of the human being who does not want to give up his humanity.

Gábor Tompa, who has repeatedly stated that he had proposed to build a Ionesco integral, a project still unfinished, creates in the season 2005-2006, the first stage representation of *Rhinoceros*, in his career, at the “Radu Stanca” Theatre in Sibiu, with Marian Ralea in the role of Bérenger and Ofelia Popii playing Daisy, a performance with few representations, unfortunately. About that staging, whose decor was conceived by Helmut Stürmer, and the costumes by Carmencita Brojboiu, the theatre critic noted:

In Tompa's performance, Ionesco's dowries are all in their place (at the place of the other staging with Ionesco's plays from the artistic life of the director): the ritualistic movement that hides in reality the mechanism (from the hatch of the prompter, it (this) becomes, from the conductor of the chorus, a species of manipulator, of conscious puppeteer), the deformed masks (just as the clown's hats in the plays of Beckett) and the deformed coats down to the feet, deform.[...] In *Rhinoceros*, everything is smoky gray, tern, identical, and pyrographed (everything, beyond the green-embroidered pajamas of Jean

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in the process of transformation into rhinoceros accepted as another mandatory element of the existence of “comme il faut”.²²

Faithful to the team of creators, which he keeps completely (scenographer of the decor, Helmut Stürmer, scenographer of the costumes, Carmencita Brojboiu, composer, Vasile Sirli, masks, Ilona Varga Jaro), Gábor Tompa rebuilds *Rhinoceros*, a few years later, in another European theatre space, at the National Theatre in Prague, in 2012. Here he develops the concepts suggested in the performance in Sibiu, through a deeper approach of things with particular focus on the idea of globalization, the spirit of the herd, a society in which manipulation becomes a mark of the civilization of the superficial. About the performance, the theatre critic Oltita Cintec stressed:

Tompa Gábor adds an extra ironic humor to Ionesco’s text through directorial inventions rooted in the author's letter. The actors he worked with are very good. They play naturally, balanced. The director distributed some in several roles (the old gentleman is also Dudard, the Housewife is also Mrs. Boeuf, etc.), [...] to develop the suggestion of uniformity, of appropriation through mechanical imitation. The idea of globalization, of taking on behaviors, of Americanization is inspired by Daisy's portrayal of Marilyn Monroe, with whom she looks strikingly physical, and through the McDonald's bag, the standard food, introduced into the scene. The farce, the absurd humor you find abundant now of the black cat’s funeral, bringing bad luck, flattened animal, literally, the burial taking on grotesque proportions thanks to the choir of mourners accompanying the small ultraluxos coffin.²³

At the beginning of 2020, *The Rhinoceros* appear to Gábor Tompa as a text extremely percussive, much stronger than in the previous years. A perfect stage symphony, which speaks of a world divided into people transformed and not transformed into rhinoceros, in followers or enemies, speaks of a society in which cowardice and opportunistic obedience have replaced civic courage and aspiration toward truth. The rhinoceros of today is the man brainwashed by ideological currents, which spread faster than any virus. The world is at a crossroads in many ways: moral, economic, cultural, perhaps at the height of globalization, a divided and manipulated world, depersonalized, in which the demonetization of dialog is at alarming levels and replaced by ideological discourses, without true exchanges of views, anamnesis transposed on the stage, crystallizing Ionesco’s obsessions and authentically planetary

²² Iulia Popovici, *Cică niște rinoceri umblau liberi prin oraș*, in “Ziua”, March 6, 2006.

²³ Oltita Cintec, *Tompa Gábor and his Rhinoceros. In Prague*, "Observator cultural", no. 636, August 10, 2012.

<https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/tompa-gabor-si-rinocerii-lui-la-praga-2/>

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obsessions. Aspects which lead him to appreciate as welcome the resumption of the message of the *Rhinoceros*, this time on the stage of “Mihai Eminescu” National Theatre from Timisoara, together with the same: Helmut Stürmer, nominated for the decor of the performance at the UNITER Prize for scenography, in 2021, Carmencita Brojboiu, the designer of the costumes, choreographer Florin Fieroiu, composer Vasile Sirli and video designer Sebastian Hamburger. The scenic space from previous staging, as we also note in the article *Man, above the Rhinoceros – the Rhinoceros at the FNT, 2021*, knows some new configurations, such as the added tables, which become either the office, or the home of Jean or Berenger. The space of the performance in Timisoara is a closed one, characteristic of the theatre of the absurd, a gray one from which one cannot escape, from which there is no escape, only to pass into the world of rhinoceros, an abyss not at all saving, in which the characters collapse. The wall with the cutouts of some doors, placed at different heights, through which it can hardly penetrate inside, and within which performers appear as in the window, divides the two worlds, the one in which apparently normal people still live, and the other, of the rhinoceros, the contaminated ones, infected with "rhinoceritis". As in a horror production, next to the doors, the elastic canvas of some rectangles takes, from time to time, the threatening shape of the people transformed into rhinoceros. Tables and chairs build the plans of the action, spaces where the characters also go backwards, dance in circle or as robots, drawing imaginary trails in the decor. The appearance of the rhinoceros is underlined by increasingly frightening bellows, by the strange musical fragments imagined by Vasile Sirli and the video projections, signed by Sebastian Hamburger, of a world that is sinking “progressively”. The expressiveness, the plasticity of the movements, designed by the choreographer Florin Fieroiu, are completed with the elegance of the costumes, which refer to the 50s, the period of the outline of this current, and the collective character’s cloaks, the people transformed into rhinoceros, as well as their masks, suggestively imagined by Ilona Varga, bring the depersonalized, uniform world of those who are regimented, subjugated by oppressive, dictatorial systems of globalization.

The authors of the theatre of the absurd often compose texts that have the appearance of indisputable scores, see *The Words and The Music or Cascando*, by Samuel Beckett, or the verbal mess of the last part of the *Bald Soprano*, in which each reply itself has a nonsense, the replies always contradict the previous replies. That is why Gábor Tompa renders, in the first part of *The Rhinoceros*, the paradigm of an orchestra, ruled by a conductor, Judith Reinhardt, a possible feminine divinity, in which the performers acquire the functions of instruments, and the replicas, the authenticity of some measures, a symphony with soloists and choir. The theme of the world directed by a demiurge appears obsessively in the creations of Tompa based on the Ionesco’s texts, and not only. About the musicality of the replies, the director says that at Ionesco the plays have a musical structure almost perfect, like symphonies that

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can be directed. In the first act, the distribution functions as an orchestra, with different musical instruments, each having its own hue or individuality, but also functioning as a whole. There is no evolution of the characters, there is only its own musical motive, as in a classical symphony. The performance from Timisoara enjoyed an authentic success, and the online theatre, discovered during the coronavirus pandemic, opened wide the doors to the public who, using the means of technology, could watch it, including in the two theatre events in which it participated: The “Interferences” International Theatre Festival in Cluj, in 2020, and “I.L. Caragiale” National Theatre Festival in Bucharest in 2021, both transmitted online. We do not know if the director Gábor Tompa was thinking about Ionesco’s integral, but what he has achieved so far will remain a page of reference to the theatrical constructions of Ionesco’s texts, true revelations, with well-articulated messages of the language tragedy, of the obsession of death, of depersonalization, manipulation, of the overthrow of value systems, reflecting socio-human realities, a genuine call to reflection. For Gábor Tompa the theatre remains a spiritual adventure with a wide spectrum of possibilities, in signaling the truth still untold.

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