

A Theatre of Inquietude

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Abstract: The present paper aims at putting into discussion several ways of dramaturgically and scenically embodying the state of inquietude incorporated in Eugène Ionesco's dramaturgy, placing emphasis mainly on the plays *Jack, or The Submission* and *The Chairs*. Ionesco conceives *dynamic psychologies*, introduces *contradiction into noncontradiction*, creates *the presence of the absent presence*, which inhabit the character projecting it into the past. From this perspective, his theatre has its source in the human anxieties and, in this respect, we note the manifestation of various ways of unmasking conventions, of materializing the state of uneasiness, of incarnating a world which is on the thin edge between the unreal and the real, the poetic and the trivial, the oneiric and the diurnal.

Keywords: inquietude, unreal, chaos, invisible, memory

What might we understand by the anxiety of the playwright or actor or director? What face might it have? How might it manifest itself? From our perspective, we could notice that it might be the state that accompanies him throughout the entire creative process, a search reminding of *a walk on the street, which can be a disturbing experience as during which he experiences temperatures, colours, sounds, perceives silhouettes, actions, gestures, collecting, from an apparently chaotic universe, a disorganized material, random associations, an excessive data, which he subsequently transcribes into notes; gradually he identifies structures in these materials; a minimal configuration of bodies and sonorities to which he gives a name and on the basis of which he thinks a dramaturgy of the deep*¹. We could say that the artist strives to identify his anxiety, aims to enter into dialogue with it, to extract its essence or the name of it, a process which is in continuous transformation.

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¹ Romeo Castellucci, "Gather and Burn", translated by Joseph Cermatori, *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2014, pp. 22-25

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Therefore, the anxiety of the playwright / actor / director seems to be the sign of a search, the state he allows himself to be penetrated by when he tries to (re)discover his own work, as “The work of art we give birth to was already potentially within us. It was only waiting the right moment to appear”². Anxiety seems to be, beyond everything, that necessary imbalance that shatters his premature certainties, forces him to give up mannerisms and recipes for building up his plays / roles / performances. Anxiety takes the actor out of his comfort zone, keeps him in a state of alertness, makes him attentive to what is going on inside him but also in relation to others.

Undeniably, the work of the theatre practitioner presupposes exploration, questioning, doubt, sometimes stagnation, sometimes revelation. More specifically, we deal *with extracting the difficult from the difficult*, which is “the attitude that defines artistic practice. This personal attitude decides the incisiveness and the dense nature of the result as well as the moments of obscurity, exhaustion, intuition, disorientation and sudden reorientation which make up the process. It is easy to read *creative precondition* and *collaboration with chance, storm* and *meticulousness, confusion* and *complexity, accumulation* and *waste* as formulas for extracting the difficult from the difficult. It is also easy to imagine how, in the repetitive daily reality, they are experienced as doubt, discomfort, sense of loss and sometimes despair”³. This process in which the investigation of different levels of reality takes place is inhabited by the anxiety of the actor or director in front of the unknown, in attempts to overcome his mental, psychic, physical limits, in order to create scenic expressions characterized by originality.

Ionesco speaks about that theatre which has its source in the human anxieties: “Yet another kind of theatre is possible. Of a greater strength and richness. Not a symbolist theatre, but a symbolic one; not allegorical, but mythical; having its source in our eternal anguish; a theatre where the invisible becomes visible, where ideas become concrete images, reality; where the problem becomes flesh; where anguish is there, a gigantic, living proof”⁴. A theatre that aims at revealing reality as *reality of the imaginary* that appears to us “more convincing, more significant than everyday reality”⁵, a theatre

2 Eugène Ionesco, *Notes On My Theatre*, translated by Leonard C. Pronko, *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1963), pp. 126-159, p. 149

3 Eugenio Barba, *On Directing and Dramaturgy. Burning the House*, translated by Judy Barba, London, Routledge, 2010, p. 87

4 Eugène Ionesco, op. cit., p. 149

5 Eugène Ionesco, *Între viață și vis. Convorbiri cu Claude Bonnefoy*, traducere de Simona

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endowed with a *primitive, disturbing power of action* capable of awakening the spectator's senses, of intensifying his emotional experience. In fact, as Ionesco states, we deal with attempts *to express the inexpressible* or what is often hidden behind an idea, a word, an action: "I wanted to express the difficulty of being, the separation between man and his transcendental roots [...] I wanted to express the unusualness of our existence"⁶. Through exaggerations, exacerbations, distortions, reversals, shocking associations, paradoxes, deconstructions-reconstructions of the dramaturgical language, Ionesco creates concrete ways of embodying the invisible, the unutterable, *the absent presence*.

*Chronometrable, you are chronometrable*⁷ are the key words that unsettle Jacques bringing to the surface the problematic of death, the awareness that the life of the individual is finite, "subject to the working of time, subject to the law of the clock"⁸. The awareness of one's end generates profound anxiety, for death is a given that cannot be avoided. The anxiety induced by the ineluctable end can take countless forms of manifestation, for the fear of death generates in the individual the need *to hide* either in a personal or in a collective fiction / illusion. Man has the impulse *to postpone his own death* or to be part of the perpetuation of human species in order to remain, at least, for a while, in the family memory. This is also the case of Jacques's family which, while confronting Jacques, who dreams of his freedom, makes use of various procedures to convince him to accept to fulfill his destiny as perpetuator of human species. An entire strategy is put to use by the family whose members are all called Jacques, thus "revealing their renunciation of individuality in the same way the family of Bobby Watsons symbolized the conformity of petty-bourgeois existence in *The Bald Soprano*"⁹. They provoke a hysteria, a hallucinating, nightmarish atmosphere, making use of both imploring requests, temptations, promises and threats, screams, sarcasm, insults. Sometimes the anxiety caused by the imminence of death is so strong that any attempt to take refuge in memory or dream is doomed to failure. The spectator / reader experiences a feeling of uneasiness at the end of the

Cioculescu, București, Humanitas, 1999, p. 145

6 Eugène Ionesco, *Antidoturi*, traducere de Marina Dimov, București, Humanitas, 1993, pp. 77-78

7 Eugène Ionesco, *Four Plays: The Bald Soprano, The Lesson, Jack or the Submission, The Chairs*, translated by Donald M. Allen, New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 86

8 Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. 97

9 Ibidem

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performance / play *Jack, or The Submission* when “The darkness increases. On stage, the actors utter vague miaows while turning around, bizarre moans, croakings”¹⁰. The scenic space is invaded by ghostlike characters, controlled by pure instincts, spectral figures which manifest themselves through animal sounds and ridiculous, embarrassing dance movements, waddling along in a circle that might be perceived as the vicious circle of life, making the spectator feel both amazement and doubt: “To what hidden core of theatre does the encounter with the ghost lead us, if not to that gap in the performance out of which doubt arises? A doubt about the truth of what we see, a doubt generated by deep anxieties and fundamental questions: what is this indefinite territory in which the presence is intertwined with the absence? And what are these apparitions whose nature is almost impossible to identify? But it may be that it is precisely this openness to a space of anxiety that gives us the opportunity to understand the essence of theatrical experience and of theatre itself: trying to overcome doubt, building faith, trust; the defeat of death, that, however, never completely erase the heartbreaking pain of separation; the ever-recurring play of appearances / disappearances”¹¹. A play played in the scenic fiction where everything is possible.

For the student theatre production *Jack, or The Submission*, together with the student actors, we sought to create the atmosphere of strangeness and anxiety that pervades the entire play, causing tensions between actions executed organically and actions executed robotically, between the realistic character and the character behaving like a machine, between the natural way and the automatic way of uttering words. Starting from Ionesco’s statement, “The language of the characters as well as their attitude are noble and distinguished. It is just that this language dislocates, decomposes”¹², the student actors’ play was conceived in terms of a collage of actions, movements and sounds to generate the sensation of disarticulation, decomposition, but also of *shame* and *awkwardness*. The walking, actions and movements of the characters were executed with unexpected interruptions aiming at stirring hilarity and stupefaction. At the same time, we worked on creating a scenic language capable of communicating beyond words, as, ultimately, “All the differences between people of all classes, nations, beliefs, religions can be

10 Eugène Ionesco, 1958, op. cit., p. 110

11 Monique Borie, *Fantoma sau îndoiala teatrului*, traducere de Ileana Littera, Iași, Polirom, București, Unitext, 2007, p. 315

12 Eugène Ionesco, *Note și contranote*, traducere de Ion Pop, București, Humanitas, 1992, p. 204

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penetrated, explained, therefore understood. You always end up communicating and knowing *why*; each of you can tear the so light, so thin, so insignificant veil of apparent or immediate nonunderstanding. You understand all languages, despite their differences. You understand even the language beyond language, the metalanguage”¹³. Today I can say that our goals were that every spectator should “be able to recognise in each fragment, in each detail, in each micro-action, an erratic relic of a uniquely individual knowledge, saturated with information, but endowed with a new energy which elicits unusual mental associations”¹⁴. The performance aimed to produce strong emotions in the spectator confronted, on all levels of organization of the performance, with the problematics of a family drama and, at the same time, to highlight the crisis of any language reminiscent of *The Bald Soprano* in which “language finally explodes into silence and non-comprehension, it is distorted, decomposed, only to reconstitute itself in another way. A purer language on the frontier, on the edge of silence”¹⁵. A language of dissolution, tending to make one think of the primordial chaos.

If in *Jack, or The Submission* we deal with a parody of a family drama which ends in a grotesque dance of the characters, “waddling along, in a sort of ridiculous dance, embarrassing, in a vague circle”¹⁶, in *The New Tenant* we deal with a drama of solitude, in which apparently the character withdraws from the world to prepare the last scene of his own life, the death scene. The spectator / reader witnesses what appears to be the character’s suicide that presents itself as an act of crossing from the animate universe to the breathless, objectual universe, from the universe of sound to that of silence. The tenant’s objects bring to mind Winnie’s objects from Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days*, both representing the characters’ existential universe. The outer space is consonant with that of the character’s interiority. It is as if the objects that inhabit a space are a reflection of a way of living. Objects that reflect mental-physical-psychical states, anxieties and failures evoking the space-time conceived by Robert Wilson in *Einstein on the Beach*, a mystical farce that speaks about the absurdity of the human condition¹⁷. Objects that highlight the

13 Eugène Ionesco, *Căutarea intermitentă*, traducere de Barbu Cioculescu, București, Humanitas, 1994, pp. 26-28

14 Eugenio Barba, *Theatre. Solitude, Craft, Revolt*, translated from the Italian by Judy Barba, Aberystwyth, Black Mountain Press, 1999, p. 248

15 Eugène Ionesco, 1994, op. cit., pp. 26-28

16 Eugène Ionesco, 1958, op. cit., p. 110

17 Arthur Holmberg, *The Theatre of Robert Wilson*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 9-10

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anxiety and loneliness of man aware of the imminence of death. If “Wilson is essentially a painter who paints in motion” and who “with this work he is launching the theater into the unknown and unknowable, in a way that makes our contemporary domestic plays look like ancient artifacts of a forgotten age”¹⁸, Ionesco is a painter of human states and dreams, of *dream after dream*, for “life itself is but a dream onto which others are grafted”¹⁹, of the irrational, for, as Edvard Munch remarks, *nature is not only that which is visible to the eye, it is also the inner images of the soul*. As regards *The New Tenant*, before our eyes a play of proliferations, accelerations, paradoxes, accumulations, which reveal the existence of the individual based on *to have*, surrounding himself with objects or even being suffocated by objects, is played. The ballet of the furniture suggestive of the ballet of the chairs, generates, despite the self-control of the tenant, a strange feeling of anxiety. Whether we witness a retreat from the noisy world into total isolation, a choice of a way of being, or the necessary preparations for a suicidal act, the behaviour of the tenant intensely disturbs by referring to a reality that he calmly and methodically changes.

In the case of Ionesco’s dramaturgy, what unsettles the spectator / reader is both the character who behaves like a machine, reduced to automatic behaviour, based on verbal and behavioural clichés, and the character who does not give up his human consciousness. We are gradually revealed the coexistence between rational and irrational, designed to contribute to intensifying the dramatism of the situations. Theatre cannot place itself exclusively at the service of rational discourse, just as each individual does not consume his existence only on a rational level. Ionesco’s character is either acting in the vicious circle of existential routine or sets out on a quest / journey that sometimes entails series of metamorphoses. Metamorphoses in the time that leaves its mark on the being, for “the poisonous ingenuity of Time in the science of affliction is not limited to its action on the subject, that action, as has been shown, resulting in an unceasing modification of his personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended as a retrospective hypothesis. The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and

18 Robert Brustein, 1977, “Drama in the Age of Einstein” in *The New York Times*, pp. 121-122, at <https://www.nytimes.com/1977/08/07/archives/drama-in-the-age-of-einstein.html>

19 Blaise Pascal, *Cugetări*, traducere de Maria și Cezar Ivănescu, Studiu introductiv de Marian-Cătălin Avrănescu, Oradea, AION, 1998, p. 329

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multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours”²⁰. Past and future coexist in Ionesco’s characters who betray a continuous tension, manifest contradictory behaviour, a contradiction between what they say and the actions they execute, a state of confusion emanating at the intersection between what they were in a past impossibly to be relived and what they want in a future that can be foreseen, most of the times, where “the human condition usually opens up to a peculiar experience of temporality. Peculiar, in the sense that it implies precisely a mental escape from the lived time, in favour of the imagined one. The present hurts us, because it is the moment when we have to be ourselves, to face the anguish of finitude. That is why man prefers to live in the future, that is, in the realm of imagination and desire, of appearance. Through anxiety, man is driven to the non-being which he vainly tries to avoid”²¹. Undoubtedly, many a time, the human being lives acutely or in his memories or in his projections of the future, and this tension between the past and the future is what takes the place of the present.

So, the journeys to the past, in search of memories, of which only blurred images have remained, turn out to be devoid of substance, concreteness: “I only remember various forgotten souvenirs! If I may say so. Bizarre: faceless ghosts, holes in being, shadows, things that curl and dissipate in the night, but which are nevertheless always, always, there, faces without names, names without faces, voices of discarnate spirits, gasps, souls? Echoes of I do not know what, I do not know who... Transparent faces surrounded by oval frames. Hollows, surrounded by oval frames”²². Beyond any doubt, with regard to the past, we always deal with truncated memories, for the past can never be preserved exactly the way it was experienced. Naturally, the individual’s memories are full of voids, lacking consistency, distorted, altered, creating the feeling of unreality, evoking a world of *absent presence* similar to the world sometimes perceived by Ionesco: “The world appears to me at certain moments as if it is empty of meaning, and reality – unreal. It was precisely this feeling of unreality, of searching for an essential, forgotten, unnamed reality – outside of which I do not feel like being – that I wanted to express through my characters who wander in incoherence, possessing nothing but their anxieties, their remorse, their failures, the emptiness of their lives. Beings drowned in meaninglessness can only be grotesque, their suffering can

20 Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, New York, Grove Press, 1978, pp. 4-5

21 Marian-Cătălin Avrămescu, *Studiu introductiv* in Pascal, Blaise, 1998, op. cit., p. 16

22 Eugène Ionesco, 1994, op. cit., p. 30

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only be ridiculously tragic”²³. I realized how difficult it is to reach *the grotesque, the ridiculously tragic suffering* when I worked on the role of the Old Woman in *The Chairs*, a performance directed by Radu Teampău, which premiered in the Făget Forest near Cluj. Having played the role of Mrs. Smith in *English Without Teacher*, an *Ars Amatoria and Sons* production, I already had some studies on Ionesco’s theatre from which I started the work of visualizing the role of the Old Woman. What I experienced as an actress playing Ionesco’s character, I later realized, was similar to what I experienced when I played Winnie, Beckett’s character, as in my intimate creative laboratory I explored concrete ways of embodying “a disembodied and nameless ghost which will take a vague shape, have a vague consistency only in the continuous and vague flow of words uttered by a voice which remembers the past, a voice also anonymous, also lacking spatial and temporal landmarks”²⁴. We rehearsed both indoors and in the woods, during the night, by the light of lit torches. Together with Adrian Maticoc, who played the role of the Old Man, guided by the director, we explored possibilities of establishing relationships with the *absent characters*, experimented with ways of uttering words, taking into account Ionesco’s instructions, namely that the Old Woman’s *laments* must be like those of “a mourner from Corsica or Jerusalem”²⁵ and that everything must be “exaggerated, caricatured, embarrassing, childish, without finesse”²⁶. Ionesco urges the director and the actors to go to extremes, to overcome their limits, to give scenic expression to *the ontological void*: “With the means of language, gestures, play, accessories, you have to embody the void. Embody the absence. Embody the regrets, the remorse. The unreality of the real. The original chaos”²⁷ suggestive of the idea that “what man discovers deep down is a fundamental absence: he discovers himself as potentially absent from the order of things. In short, man reveals himself as mortal. This discovery is accompanied by a disturbance of the spirit. As man is by nature a mortal being, this disturbance produced by the contact with the void within his own being is an essential mark of human life, in general. Therefore man experiences *inquietude*”²⁸. I felt intensely the state of inquietude at the end of the first performance which took place in the forest, when the sounds of the Orator ceased to be heard, and the spectators were

23 Eugène Ionesco, 1992, op. cit., p.197

24 Monique Borie, 2007, op. cit., p. 317

25 Eugène Ionesco, 1992, op. cit., p. 198

26 Ibidem

27 Ibidem, p. 202

28 Marian-Cătălin Avrămescu, 1998, op. cit., pp. 15-16

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revealed the ending of a world or rather fragments of a world that “perish in smoke, in sounds and colours that fade [...] Or they melt into darkness. Or into a bright, dazzling light”²⁹. The director decided on bright sunlight, visualizing a new beginning of a world reaching the threshold of the end, and, from this perspective, treated the performance as a possible act of salvation of the human being.

In conclusion, we note that Eugène Ionesco’s theatre, and here we refer, in the first place, to *The Chairs*, which has its roots in the anxieties of the human being, in the unreality of the real, in the unseen dimension of existence, requires the identification of concrete ways of scenic incarnation to symbolize a double hypostasis, that of the actor inhabited by the character and that of the character inhabited by those *many others* who were part of his life and who emerge in a present of remembrance.

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²⁹ Eugène Ionesco, 1992, op. cit., p. 202

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