

The Nameless Star or Chekhov's "Moscow"

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Abstract: This article focuses on Mihail Sebastian's play *The Nameless Star*, staged at the "Elvira Godeanu" Drama Theater in Târgu Jiu, and offers a reflection on suspended time and human fragility, in a subtle encounter between the worlds of Mihail Sebastian and Chekhov. Marin Miroiu, like Chekhov's characters, lives in a reality weighed down by routine, finding refuge in astronomy, a space where ideals can breathe. Mona's appearance disturbs this stagnant balance, like the arrival of the soldiers in *Three Sisters*, revealing the hidden vulnerabilities of the small community. Miss Cucu, the student, Udrea, and the entire provincial world carry Chekhovian echoes, oscillating between rigor, dreaming, and the need to escape. In counterpoint, the elderly couple introduced in the staging becomes an image of the possible destiny of Mona and Miroiu, a poetic and degraded projection of their unfulfilled love. The character Ichim, an inner vibration of the show, tries in vain to awaken the spirits of the others, reminding them that time can be both a prison and a gateway to miracles.

Keywords: intertextuality, connections, Chekhovian influences, Mihail Sebastian's theater

"Miss Cucu, have you ever been to the seaside? (...) In a provincial town like ours... the train station is... the sea. It is the port, the unknown, the distance."¹ Through this line spoken by Marin Miroiu, the central character in *Steaua fără nume / The Nameless Star*, Mihail Sebastian establishes the connection between his dramaturgy and the mirage of the unknown, of escaping boredom, as proposed by Chekhov in *Three Sisters*. In fact, from a certain point of view, Chekhovian inspiration in Mihail Sebastian's dramaturgy can often be glimpsed in *Steaua fără nume*, but also in other writings by the author. The two authors meet in their work not only thematically, but also structurally, in terms of form. Some of Sebastian's scenes retain the structure of some of Chekhov's dramaturgy; for example, the scene with Miss Cucu and Mona in

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¹ Mihail Sebastian, *Teatru*, Editura Minerva, București, 1987, p 113.

the third act bears the mark of the atmosphere and the type of language focused on subtext found in the scene with Sonia and Elena Andreevna in *Uncle Vanya*.

The star, a central symbol in Sebastian's play, makes a subtle reference to Chekhov's *seagull*, which we can associate with the idea of aspiration, sacrifice, and the constant attempt to surpass oneself by freeing the spirit into the unknown. The character Marin Miroiu gives himself the freedom to travel beyond human limits, beyond the edges of the visible, into a world that can satisfy and fulfill his unhappiness in the concrete world. Like Chekhov and his characters trapped in a narrow circle, Marin Miroiu tries to find a way out of the boredom that surrounds him.

We will focus our attention both on the elements connecting the two authors and on how these were applied in the play *Steaua fără nume*, produced with the team of the "Elvira Godeanu" Drama Theater in Târgu Jiu. The show is built not only around the play that gives it its name, but also on several dramaturgical structures found in Mihail Sebastian's diary and novels - *De două mii de ani / Two Thousand Years* and *Cum am devenit huligan / How I Became a Hooligan* - structures of particular theatricality that we have merged into the whole.

In *Laughter, Tears, Silences...*, Alexa Visarion, quoting Elena Saulea, emphasized: "the universe of the play: the city with its two significant spaces, the train station, the train, like a phantom, but also the reality that gives hope, brings the new, the surprise, and allows the connection between worlds, a modern vehicle from which the good fairy descends into the abandoned world of the province and, on the other hand, Miroiu's room, a miniature of intimacy with secrets and spiritual treasures that can only be revealed at night."²

In the version proposed together with set designer Șteff Chelaru, choreographer Victoria Bucun and lighting-designer Vlad Lăzărescu, the train station remains the central element of all three acts. Miroiu's house, a universe devoid of electric light, where poverty greets him with a laid table, retains the imprint of this initial space. The unique set is transformed into the professor's home with just a few domestic objects, enough to suggest that he lives in a place of transition, not in just any world. Miroiu is not a character anchored in the concrete, but one who, in the fever of his searches, brings the unknown ever closer to this small space where water does not flow, no light bulb shines, and the street is not paved. And yet, right here, in this insignificant room, in a corner of the world, miracles happen.

² Alexa Visarion, *Râs, lacrimi, tăceri...*, Editura Junimea, Iași, 2024, p. 171.

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What remains essential is that Miroiu, through his boundless power to transcend the world in which he lives, manages to transform everything. The Milky Way, analyzed and understood in detail by the astronomy professor, seems to descend imperceptibly over the provincial town, giving it new, unexpected meanings. The railroad tracks become axes of calculation of the sky, extensions of the cosmic equator, and stars are born in the earth that covers the entire scene. In that black, almost swampy soil, the nameless star makes its way—a symbol of the restless search for clearer worlds, populated by transparent people, fulfilled desires, and an imponderability that does not frighten, but becomes the very substance of life.

Mona's arrival turns into a veritable collective psychosis, in which everyone suddenly realizes that the limited space in which they live is only a tiny part of a vast and unknown universe. Her appearance opens a crack in the seemingly stable order of the city, allowing the mirage of an infinite world to penetrate for a moment. Just as in *Three Sisters* by A. P. Chekhov, where the arrival of soldiers causes an upheaval of emotions and an abrupt awakening to reality, Mona also becomes a disruptive element in *Steaua fără nume*, a catalyst for change. She symbolically encompasses figures such as Tuzenbach, the bearer of the idea of progress and the future; Versinin, who revives the dream of a big world, the "Moscow" of every provincial existence; and Solioni, who brings with him the danger hidden in his heightened sensitivity. In the urban community where she arrives by chance, Mona brings erotic tension, spiritual openness, vitality, and melancholy at the same time. Through Chekhov's soldiers, as well as through Sebastian's Mona, the world outside the province begins to breathe within it. These outsiders become catalysts of desire, dreams, and disintegration, an impulse toward change and, simultaneously, a painful reminder of its impossibility.

Life in the small town drifted in an organized drift, whose only compass remains Miss Cucu, the woman of rules, the one who imposes a jerky rhythm of existence and buries emotions, considering them the source of all disappointments. In this universe, suffering is replaced by rigor, and discipline becomes a screen behind which everyone's intimacies turn into burdens that are increasingly difficult to bear. The two women at the station, living only in anticipation of trains and dreaming incessantly of departure, waste their chance to see the city as it is and to truly leave it. Perhaps any resident would have been able to cross the invisible boundaries of this place, but they all miss their chance precisely because of a lack of courage.

However, Marin Miroiu has the ability, in the silence and darkness of his room, to transcend the boundaries of concrete life and live, for a few moments, on

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another plane, one where desires are fulfilled and the limits of the real world disappear. Nevertheless, Mona's appearance gives society a new, authentic inner rhythm. Emotions, previously hidden in fragile shells, begin to come to light. Miroiu opens up for the first time, allowing himself to feel passion for a woman. Miss Cucu, sensing Mona's presence, also allows herself, in her own rigid way, to suffer and let loose, revealing glimpses of her own vulnerabilities. The student sees Mona as a role model, a projection of her own future - a woman who, if she finds the courage to break away from the community that holds her back, can reach another world, more generous than the one she knows.

Mona's appearance thus becomes the spark that disturbs, transforms, and reveals: a possible freedom and an inner world much larger than that of the small town. What proves essential is that the meeting of these two worlds, two opposites equally restless and inexplicably unhappy, offers them the chance of mutual revelation. Through the presence of the other, each discovers their vulnerabilities and opens their eyes to a reality that, until then, they had ignored.

Mona, accustomed to the superficiality of a comfortable and elegant existence, discovers that the true value of life lies in small things, in sincere gestures, in human fragility. At the same time, Miroiu, caught up in his astronomical research and his flight towards an abstract future, realizes that he is missing the present moment - life itself, which offers infinitely more than mere hope for "what will be." Obsessively building a distant goal, he understands that he has lost the very essence of existence. And this encounter, however brief, becomes a form of awakening for both of them.

Sebastian's characters in *Steaua fără nume* carry within them fragments of Chekhov's universe, subtly meeting many of Chekhov's characters. Like Astrov, who is passionate about forests, Miroiu stifles his personal unhappiness in his passion for stars, a passion that becomes almost a saving obsession. For him, the nights are more alive, more real; but with the dawn, he returns to the routine of a teacher viewed with suspicion by others, considered by the school community and even by the students to be an eccentric isolated in his own shell.

The stationmaster reproaches her for her absence from community life, because she does not join the ordinary men in poker, in the pub, or in the small social rituals of the town. In Miss Cucu, we find echoes of Natasha from *Three Sisters*: she rules an entire town with rules and order, just as Natasha takes control of the Prozorov estate, forgetting her own femininity in the name of responsibility. The student echoes the voice of Anya from *The Cherry Orchard*, who still has the chance to break the

cycle of stagnation; she is also an Irina from *Three Sisters*, an idealist dreaming of a better life, feeding her hope by leaving the small and suffocating community. Mona is, at the same time, a modern Elena Andreevna: she emotionally destabilizes everything she touches, without realizing it. She disturbs Udrea, shakes up the banality of the train station, and puts its boss in a difficult position. She provokes Miroiu, awakening instincts and emotions he has never allowed himself to feel. She even surprises Ichim, who, in our version, follows her with a flashlight to decipher her features, as if she were an inexplicable phenomenon in the small world in which he lives.

Mona's presence clouds and overshadows Miss Cucu's femininity, who rediscovers her fragility for the first time. Mona thus becomes that Chekhovian spark that reveals everyone's vulnerabilities, shaking, by her mere existence, the entire emotional ecosystem of the small town.

But let's return to the show staged at the „Elvira Godeanu” Theater in Târgu Jiu. Mona, this chimera who arrives in a provincial town by pure chance, is actually the event we all need in our lives. There are stories that are born at night and whose spell is broken at dawn, when the sun prevents the light of the other stars from reaching us. I believe that these love stories can be born and disappear at lightning speed. They happen all the time and will continue to happen in the future, because these things are part of the natural development and trajectory of every human being. Equally relevant is the incongruity, in the light of day, between two natures and two identities from opposite worlds. Because, above all, Mihail Sebastian speaks of the impossibility of building something lasting, perhaps love, on an uncertain foundation, born exclusively from dreams. This one-night love does not have the strength or power to break the barrier of reason that appears with the morning. Mihail Sebastian actually offers us the opportunity to abandon ourselves to our desires to such an extent that, for a moment, they become reality. What is truly relevant is that each of us needs to believe in an ideal.

Mona takes on the form, the body of a woman that Miroiu could never have dreamed of, she later becoming a name, a memory on the border of reality. As for Miss Cucu, she is often seen as a woman devoid of feelings, inflexible, almost tyrannical. But her harshness is, in reality, her deepest vulnerability. Behind any rigidity lie deeply human feelings and experiences. In our stage reading in Târgu Jiu, we focused, at least in her case, on a hidden, discreet, but powerful femininity. We did not consider her to be the frightening teacher who finds pleasure in annihilating the dreams of youth, but rather a being who dreams in secret, never allowing herself

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to reveal her desires. In her dialogue with Miroiu, when he asks her if she has ever seen the sea and if she can understand the idea of the unknown, of the boundless, Miss Cucu betrays her hidden sensitivity for a moment. Deep down, she longs for distance, for the unknown—for that is how one might define the platonic love she keeps inside her. However, upon discovering the possible relationship that blossoms in a single night between Miroiu and an unknown woman, Miss Cucu decides to leave town. For her, aspiration, hope, and meaning are not found elsewhere, but in Marin Miroiu himself. She does not need to cross the borders of that town because her deepest desire is right there.

The version I proposed in Târgu Jiu is unique in that the female universe becomes extremely present. In almost every character there is a latent, dreamy "Mona" who longs to escape boredom and monotony. Using dialogues from *De două mii de ani* and *Cum am devenit huligan*, I constructed two female characters with an almost Chekhovian structure, constant presences at the train station, who want nothing more than to escape from the place that has stifled their femininity. The only presence with a real chance of salvation is Miss Zamfirescu, the student who watches the trains with serene curiosity. She hopes that one day the train that stops will absorb her and carry her away to the unknown.

On the other hand, we introduced a couple that functions as a counterpart to the possible relationship between Miroiu and Mona, an aged version of the same unfulfilled story. A man cares for his wife, whose memory is gradually fading; he repeats, almost mechanically, Miroiu's confession about the star he discovered, but finds the "star" in domestic actions and daily care. The dialogue between this couple becomes the mature, fragile reflection of the moments of confusion in which, in the play, Miroiu reassures Mona. Because, in fact, we often lose ourselves, losing the ability to manage our emotions and make lucid decisions about the future. *Steaua fără nume* captures precisely this moment of oscillation between instinct and reason, between desire and possibility. Mona weighs her existence between two worlds and, like many of us, ultimately chooses rationally, not instinctively, choosing what, in the harsh light of morning, seems appropriate, possible, acceptable.

The matching couple directly refers to Mona and Miroiu, but it is a variation that comes either from another time or a matured or degraded form of their relationship. A lost Mona, a Mona of another age, a woman with a dubious memory, wanders obsessively through the train station, in a continuous search for her own lost past. In this aged couple, we glimpse fragments of the story of the two young people, as if their history had settled into a sadder, more cumbersome form. This presence

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also offers a grotesque image: a degradation of the ideal, a shattering of the dream of love, and a distortion of the romantic contours that Mona and Miroiu embody at the beginning. They cannot be together; their worlds are too different, their trajectories too distant. Nevertheless, the show proposes an image of old age: an elderly Miroiu who patiently cares for his lost wife, constantly trying to bring her "home" through the same dialogue that once bound the two young people together. Finding the star in an album over two hundred years old becomes the turning point, the emotional core to which the two old people constantly return. The scene is repeated obsessively, precisely to reassure the one stuck in a suspended moment of the past—an eternal attempt to rebuild what time has shattered.

In *Steaua fără nume*, there is no time. People measure their existence not in hours, but through the events, sometimes insignificant, sometimes decisive, of the community. They live their lives within the parameters of a quiet functionality, between the small habits of each mundane day. And in this suspended universe, the descent from the train of an almost unreal woman has the power to disturb the entire city. The stationmaster becomes, for a moment, the official who holds Mona's destiny in his hands. Miss Cucu exercises her authority through the satisfaction of surprising the students at the station. And the cinema, the city's space for socialising and dreaming, becomes a central pivot. In our version, the film that the community watches is, in fact, the story that begins to unfold between Mona and Miroiu.

The passing of trains becomes an essential sequence: almost a collective hallucination, a succession of images passing at breakneck speed, like the destinies that cross our lives without giving us time to understand them. Our show is built on multiple temporal loops. The costumes, although they may seem contemporary, are placed in a reality that is possible at any time; they do not belong to a specific time. The clock in the station stands still – one of Miroiu's obsessions. But his time is not our time. In *Steaua fără nume*, time refers to the essential, to that unique, necessary event without which existence has no meaning. This is the time in which the action of our show takes place: a suspended, interior, poetic time, in which reality and dreaming overlap, and the entire community becomes witness to a moment that has the power to change the trajectory of life.

As in Chekhov's theater, time also seems suspended in Mihail Sebastian's work. The elderly couple we present in the show becomes proof of this interruption: their present is only a prolonged echo of the past, a reverberation that spreads without any concrete relevance. The characters live in the shadow of what could have been,

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in a present emptied of force and meaning. Udrea's symphony will be realized someday, but never now.

Daytime is a time of suffocating banality, leaving the night to bring, at least for a moment, the transformative illusions of desire. The night solves nothing, but it reveals what the day hides. However, in Sebastian's work there are moments of pure intensity: moments of real passion, in which the present is populated with chimeras, with the ephemeral promises of another destiny.

In our version, the character Ichim becomes an intimate heartbeat, an inner pulsation of the entire show. He generates and stirs vibrations in others, even if often without success, yet urging them to live more intensely. There is something in Ichim's silence, in his dense, charged silence, which gathers within itself one of the most important tensions of this theatrical universe.

The beginning of the show captures him as if he were being born from an original substance, emerging from the pile of earth that covers the entire stage. He listens to the deep voice of matter, its archaic vibration, and his appearance has the force of a necessary birth. Throughout the show, he becomes the impulse of awakening, an energy that tries to shake the spirit of the other characters, to open their eyes to their own being.

His plan fails. The world he tries to move remains stuck in its inertia. Therefore, he will return to the silent place from whence he came, back into the earth, in a fatal repetition of the beginning. Throughout this journey, he gives voice to the unseen thought, the intimate desire to live each moment authentically, the inner calling that others cannot hear or understand. He is, in fact, the unborn child of the couple Marin Miroiu and Mona, a fragment of a possible but unfulfilled life. He may belong to the two young people who meet by chance, or to the elderly couple, born in a broken form, a shell of what could have been. Ichim is a liminal spirit, a vibration of a love that never came to fruition, but which continues to search, to call, to disturb.

But what is the difference between Sebastian and Chekhov? Alexa Visarion states: "Unlike Chekhov, who also projects spiritual hierarchies and existential decadence, Sebastian's characters express themselves through the symbolism of ideas, not human nature itself. Without being among the winners or losers, Mona, Miroiu, and Udrea are entities that harmonize in the symphony of the mind, loneliness and madness, a certain hysteria of personal experience, an eccentric taste for the unique; their destiny gives them fictional particularity."³

³ Alexa Visarion, *Răs, lacrimi, tăceri...*, op. cit., p. 177.

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