

## Eugen Ionescu - the theatre of human psychology and social identity

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**Résumé:** Eugène Ionesco est l'auteur d'une écriture authentique, qui occupe une place importante dans l'histoire de la littérature roumaine, parce qu'elle peint des personnages liés à leur époque, mais qui, en fait, sont l'expression d'une humanité insuffisante, limitée. C'est pourquoi on peut affirmer qu'une oeuvre littéraire de certe valeur esthétique se situe au carrefour du temps et de l'éternité.

**Mots-clés :** imaginaire, métaphysique, théâtre de l'absurde

Generation 1927. A "noisy" voice makes itself heard during that period. It is Eugen Ionescu's. Young promising writer, Eugen Ionescu "uses and abuses", to the benefit of the generation to whom he belongs, the metaphysical fundamentals, discursive techniques, and typical behaviours of the sophistic school.

Sophistic metaphysics, "personal subjectivity raised to the rank of unique reality and certainty – provided Ionescu with an utmost inner freedom" [1]. As a result, he may contradict his own assertions, according to circumstances and whims.

But for Ionescu the metaphysical issue remains unsolved, and his universe is full of "small beings" playing and making faces. "Ionescu's theatre gives the genuine impression of puppet world, operating, i.e. uttering paralogisms, in a nightmarish sophistic duet of the deaf as long as they have been wound up. Reduced to the condition of mechanisms uttering aberrant judgements, his characters most often generate, in an ambiguous aesthetic effect, harbouring the metaphysical anguish". [2]

The experiences in Ionescu's theatre compose in fact a "game" of destiny and nature, where man becomes just a pawn, although he believes he acts out of his own free will. So, it is a game deciding upon man's freedom.

Regarding Ionescu's theatre, Virgil Tănase, a Romanian writer exiled to Paris, speaks admiringly: "I feel him very close. I believe we are kindred spirits, where the existential anguish is ornate with coils, where comedy tackles cosmic logic"... [3] The topics of this modern, absurd, psychological, undefined theatre are close to daily life, narration is based on successive unconnected tableaux. However, Eugen Ionescu and Samuel Beckett are by far the most prominent authors who managed best to draw the audience's attention on this drama of human condition.

Such a theatre hides "screams", supplications and anathemas, all absorbed into a modern theatre, which is no longer *a discourse on an action*, nor *a language of ideas* or *a field of issues*, it no longer analytically demonstrates the human condition, nor deals with human anguish and uncertainty, but **shows them**.

Exposing the disproportion between transcendent and human, in theatre the metaphysical comic, which Ionescu sensed very early, calling it "the metaphysical ridicule of my human state" – resides, according to Hartmann, [4] in the vicinity of tragedy. That is why paralogisms, puns, paradoxes, fallacious dilemmas pervading Ionescu's theatre generate – in addition to the intellectual, typically mannerist euphoria – the persistent feeling of anxiety, the uselessness of the end of the world. As Ionescu's work leaves the sensation that the anguished puppet really exists.

Ionescu's contribution to the programmatic ideas of his generation is marked by his inner freedom, subjectivism and intense individualism.

In an interview taken by Claude Bonnefoy, Eugen Ionescu accepts the recipe proposed by the French journalist: "In most of your plays, the mechanism is crucial. Moreover, it takes various forms from a play to another, forms which tally in within the same play: language mechanism, behaviour automatism, object proliferation, plot acceleration and derailment. But there is more.

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The manner in which you use these mechanisms constitutes a break from traditional theatre mechanisms. From a classic point of view, in theatre there are two types of mechanisms: a tragic mechanism, corresponding to the fatality leading the protagonist to death, a comic mechanism, consisting in the repetition of phrases or situations, or the entanglement of the plot that has to be disentangled in one move — and here comes a parallelism with dramatic suspense leading to plot acceleration. But generally speaking, these mechanisms are external to the characters; they constitute one or several gears that they cannot escape. On one hand there is fate, on the other the obstacle which makes the clown fall... the mechanism departs from the comic, the burlesque, being seemingly born from the very behaviour of the characters, and then it increases continuously until, through its excess or derailment, it suddenly becomes tragic". [5]

Ionescu may become a theatrical model for certain playwrights. But this is not what he wanted. His characters profess the falseness of a world, its decadence, and especially the fact that man, in the sublime sense of the word, does not and will not have his own place in this chaotic micro universe. The subject matter, seen in the traditional sense of the word, is non-existent; that is why it is quite difficult to narrate or represent a play.

The characters in the early plays did not wish to communicate. They were empty of all psychology. They were mere mechanisms. Being machineries, if they cannot communicate, they do not communicate with themselves either. They seem not to even think. They belong to the world of the impersonal, the world of collectivism. The characters of the beginning, apparently uneducated, are people uttering slogans, which spares them from thinking. However, Ionescu cautions us: "If I really believed in absolute incommunicability, I wouldn't be writing. By definition, an author is someone who believes in expression. I believe in the possibility to communicate, except the case when it is refused from various reasons: ill will, lack of attention, political passion, and temporary incomprehension. It may still occur out of lack of initiation ... ", [6]

In his theatre, the world becomes insane; it explodes, carried by our passions. There is a passionate mechanism which exceeds goals. For instance, people go on strike, revolts, revolutions, in order to obtain very clear results; in their enthusiasm, they may go beyond the goal, reach the instauration of tyranny, dogmatic stupidity, organised collective assassination, etc. it seems that at some point they lose control, and become insane. What was supposed to be good becomes evil. The revolution becomes regression; liberation becomes alienation; the administration turns into hateful abusive power; justice turns into unleashed sadism, etc.

On the other hand, each work has its own time. And if it does not express its own time and its anguish and troubles, then it is not true and thus it becomes less interesting. It is tedious, as it lacks substance or historical reality, viz. true-to-lifeness. The entire literature history is the history of its expression. At the same time, the characters depicted in the work should not be too closely linked to their era. The themes of the theatre of Ionescu are the ones proposed by Beckett or Adamov, expressing the absurd condition: man will die; man is limited; man does not accept his destiny, and still has a destiny; the meaning of this destiny, the meaning of man's incapability of providing meaning to his destiny, etc. These themes may also be found in eras called times of crisis, although all eras are more or less times of crisis. Thus such themes are to be found in the entire theatre history. When talking about the absurd, Ionescu turns toward the Greek theatre. "For the Greeks, for example, where there is fate, conflict between man and his fate, there is the intuition of the absurd, the evidence of the absurd." Regarding the meaning of the absurd as expression, Eugen Ionescu provides a surprisingly simple and profound explanation: "I prefer to call it "odd" or "feeling of oddness". [7]

The theatre of the absurd is the theatre of absolute enigma. The absurd is carelessness, contradiction, the expression of the disagreement with the world, the deep disagreement with oneself, the disagreement between the world and itself; the absurd is also mere lack of logic,

carelessness. Maybe man creates the absurdity of history, as it is no longer clear which laws history obeys.

The artist, the writer, beyond his dreams and passions, has to see the truth, be objective. Neither didactic, nor moralising, antisentimental and anticonventional, Ionescu's theatre is a theatre-game, a real game, therefore free and strange, pure and sincere, challenging, a captivating, vertiginous chain. In fact, comedy and tragedy are constantly intertwining; the bright comedy path becomes the road to darkness, to death.

Ionescu's oniric space serves a protective function for the character, i.e. the frustrated individual, in permanent conflict with himself and the hostile environment he lives in; by means of this type of space, the author creates a world of total refuge, where alienation reaches its climax in a conflict-ridden world, characterised by hostility and lack of communication, specific to the crisis of the modern world.

#### Notes

[1] Petreu, Marta, *Ionescu în țara tatălui*, Cluj-Napoca, Editura „Biblioteca Apostrof”, 2001.

[2] Eugène Ionesco., *Note și contranote*, București, Editura Humanitas, 1992.

[3] Virgil Tănase, *România mea*, E.D.P., București, 1996, p.104

[4] Nicolai Hartmann , *Metafizică și ontologie*, 1998

[5] Eugène Ionesco, *Intre viață și vis*, Convorbiri cu Claude Bonnefoy, Editura Humanitas, București, 1999, p.105

[6] *Ibidem*

[7] Eugène Ionesco, *Intre viață și vis*, p.119.

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