

The Image of History in Matei Vişniec's Dramaturgy

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Motto

At the age of 17, I believed in progress, even in the utopia of science (it seemed logical to me that humanity was going to get it better due to scientific and technological discoveries). Later, when I became a teacher and I was engaging in an infernal commute between Bucharest and Dorobantu-Pătăreşti village, all my illusions were shattered and I understood that the communist system was impossible to reform from within. Now, after 31 years of living in the West, it seems to me that the capitalist system cannot be reformed from within either, and that the unique consumer pattern adopted by the whole planet leads us to collective suicide. In addition, we have also discovered that people never learn from the mistakes of the past, and that history repeats itself with its most macabre episodes. A new mediaeval fragmentation of human societies is possible, a return of religious obscurantism is possible, a regression of democracy is evident on the planet, and a new age of dictators (or dictatorships) seems plausible to me. History is not an exact science; it is the approximate (often politically instrumentalized) reading of human adventure.

(Matei Vişniec)

Abstract: This paper aims at analyzing the dramaturgical tools in Matei Vişniec's dramaturgy, which shed light upon the relation between art and history, between art under the cover of fiction and what takes place outside the walls of the theatre. These two are never completely split, they intertwine and they empower one another. A key point in Matei Vişniec's work is the way in which history is presented like a mechanism dwelling phenomena always ready to repeat themselves, as for instance totalitarianism. The content of the paper is based on theoretical approaches, also on the opinions of the

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dramaturge in relation with his own creation and on practical assumption following a personal point of view of the actor integrated within two productions based on plays written by Matei Vişniec: *The Spectator Sentenced to Death*² and *Richard III Will Not Take Place or Scenes of the Life of Meyerhold*³

Keywords: history, totalitarianism, theatre, Matei Vişniec, freedom, absurd, grotesque, terror.

There are three key questions that the present paper is based upon: which are the mechanisms of history? Is there any possibility for an oppressive historical fact (dictatorship, for instance) to repeat itself in new, unrecognizable forms? Which is the relation between history and theatre, as it is presented in contemporary dramaturgy? Starting from these interrogations, I approached a few texts by Matei Vişniec, in order to outline the fact that we are caught in the trap of a historical machinery that will adapt its rules to no matter what changes and that, in very subversive ways, history can revive atrocities which seemed buried and (maybe) forgotten long time ago. From this perspective, brought in the field of art in general and in theatre especially, it is natural to ask ourselves: in what way is history supposed to influence and shape the form of certain theatrical manifestations and, in reverse, how is art meant to challenge the course of history and even change it? To these questions, Matei Vişniec answered:

Neither literature nor theatre ever overthrew a dictatorship or brought about the fall of a monstrous regime. Still, literature and theatre can become spaces of cultural resistance, zones of relative freedom, forms of direct or veiled social critique. Art and especially theatre have an influence upon history as they are able to change people, to make them think and reflect, to get worried and indignant, sometimes to the extent of revolting themselves.⁴

² Răzvan Mureşan director, *Spectatorul condamnat la moarte* by Matei Vişniec, Teatrul Naţional „Lucian Blaga”, Cluj-Napoca, premiered on 21 December 2013

³ Răzvan Mureşan director, *Richard al III-lea se interzice!* by Matei Vişniec, Teatrul Naţional „Lucian Blaga”, Cluj-Napoca, premiered on 18 September 2015

⁴ All the quotations from Matei Vişniec (the motto of the paper included) in relation with the topics of the paper are excerpts from the interview that he gave me especially for the elaboration of the present paper.

If we remain in the area of this connection between history (in its extreme forms manifested through totalitarian regimes) and art, is it obvious to point out a connection that Matei Vișniec makes in his play *Richard III Will Not Take place Or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* between Vsevolod Meyerhold, Stalin and the Shakespearean character Richard III. It is well known how Shakespeare deals with the issue of power: King Richard III, as Shakespeare portrayed him, is the mirror of the systems that are imposing themselves through crime, manipulation and oppression, just like in the case of Stalin. The system is legitimating itself through an ideology that brings a key figure, or a very carefully designed stereotype. As far as Stalin is concerned, this tool of manipulation and validation of his atrocities is the image of the "new man". Getting back to Matei Vișniec's dramaturgy, we are confronted with the image of history as an origin of this sort of atrocities in the scene of the birth of the new man in *Richard III Will Not Take place Or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold*. As Laura Pavel pointed out:

One of the most grotesque scenes in the post-communist theatre that approaches political themes is, without a doubt, the birth of the "new man", of the "marionette-child" in Matei Vișniec's tragic farce *Richard al III-lea nu se mai face sau Scene din viața lui Meyerhold* [*Richard III is Forbidden or scenes from Meyerhold's life*]. Having turned into a grown-up rather suddenly, through what appears to be a genetically inherited ideological perversion, the child turns, within the span of a few moments, into a monstrous censor of the Stalinist regime. Once he has fitted the Shakespearean Richard III crown upon his head, the "newly-born comrade" brings a simultaneously nightmarish and hilarious indictment against his own father, the illustrious Russian director Meyerhold.⁵

As Mihai Lungeanu emphasized, the above mentioned scene is an expression of the absurd, as the child, once born, becomes "the quintessence of terror".⁶ Also, the grotesque walks hand in hand with the absurd⁷ in the

⁵ Laura Pavel, *Teatru și identitate. Interpretări pe scena interioară / Theatre and identity. Interpretations on the inner stage* (Cluj-Napoca: Casa cărții de știință, 2012), 147-148.

⁶ Mihai Lungeanu, *Personajul virtual sau Calea către al V-lea punct cardinal la Matei Vișniec* (Cluj-Napoca: Eikon, 2014), 120

⁷ Mihai Lungeanu, *Personajul virtual*, 120.

scene where the head of “King Richard” is served on a plate by Stalin himself. In fact this is a paradigm of the history as it is presented by Matei Vişniec in the plays in which he refers to the atrocities of totalitarianism. An important concept in the play *Richard III Will Not Take place* is the evil. We were used to the image of the Shakesperean Richard as an expression of the historical evil itself. On the contrary, the character Meyerhold created by Matei Vişniec turns Richard into another kind of character, which can be easily perceived as a positive one, as he is, in contrast with Stalin, the evil deprived of any ideological dimension.



Fig. 1: Scene from *Richard al III-lea se interzice / Richard III Will Not Take place*.
From left to right Cristian Grosu and Matei Rotaru.

RICHARD III: I am when I can get away from a life of crime, Comrade Maestro Artiste. In the meantime, I'm still killing... I have killed the two princes, my nephews, I have killed my wife, Queen Anne, I have killed my loyal friend Lord Buckingham... All those who could lay claim to the crown and who could have stood in the way of my goal are dead. Except Lord Richmond, who has fled to France to seek out help. But I will crush him on the field of battle... Tell me, Maestro Artiste, why do you want to make me into a sympathetic character?

MEYERHOLD: Because you represent evil without the trappings of ideology. You are a dark force, but you represent honest evil. You kill to get power, but you do not kill in the name of some grand utopia. You have no scruples, no hesitation to do wrong, but you do not ask your accomplices or your victims to praise your crime. With you there is a certain grandeur in the horror, because you are not a demagogue. You fascinate and you terrify at the same time, but you do not set yourself up as God. You fake friendship and love, but one cannot deny that you do it with class. You throw a little brutality in with deceit, but your speech is subtle and surprising. You represent something humanity has lost: evil, raw, sincere, and pure. Today, evil is cloaked in a thousand promises of a better world. Today, it's not enough for evil to crush the crowd, it wants to be adored by them at the same time. The evil of today is not content to live in the palace and dominate the world, it wants to live inside the head of the people and control them from inside. The evil of today is the worst plague of our time. The evil of today is so tenacious and insidious it can leave its mark on a fetus in the womb.⁸

The fact that main character of the play is the Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold has a very special relevance for the problematic of history in relation with the art of theatre. Meyerhold, beyond being an inventor in the field of his art⁹, he is the hero-artist, the one who died for what he mostly believed in, being executed by the Stalinist regime. Meyerhold had a very specific and authentic vision on how his art should be. For him, psychological states are determined by specific physiological

⁸ Matei Vișniec, *Richard III Will Not Take Place Or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold*, trans. Jeremy Lawrence, in *Matei Vișniec - How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients and Other Plays*, ed. Jozefina Komporalý (Chicago: Seagull Books, 2015), 233-234.

⁹ Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874 - 1940) marked the history of theater by imposing biomechanics as a training technique for performers. Meyerhold's choice of this technique was a reaction to the naturalist theater. What brings Meyerhold new is the intervention by which he changes the paradigm of production and reception of the theater performance and which consists in placing the emphasis on the physicality and plasticity of the performer (on the possibilities of the body, respectively on the form of what is represented) by contrast with traditional methods that focused on the supremacy of the text of the play, or on present psychological realism. He thus opposes his professor Constantin Stanislavki, and he finally departed from him at the end of a process of rejection of naturalism, which began approximately in 1903.

processes. By physically correcting his condition, the actor reaches the point where he experiences that type of excitation that is communicated to the spectator and thus induces his willingness to feel and be part of the show. This state is, for Meyerhold, the core of theatrical art.¹⁰

The meeting between him (as character created by Matei Vişniec) and Richard III (on one hand, as the expression of the history portrayed by Shakespeare, on the other hand as a character created by another character) on the ground of the totalitarianism proliferated by Stalin speaks a lot about the possibility of the history to return with different masks, but with similar devastating effects.



Fig. 2: Scene from *Richard al III-lea se interzice / Richard III Will Not Take Place*.
From left to right Miron Maxim and Cristian Grosu.

Thinking about the possibility of history returning, of politics staging new tragedies, I asked Matei Vişniec what he thinks about this, about this possible return of the ideological evil. He answered, highlighting the extreme danger of nowadays directions in social behavior and politics: a deformed, absurd *déjà vu*, endangering the freedom of thought and the democratic values gained with so many historical sacrifices.

¹⁰ Edward Brown, *Meyerhold – A Revolution in the Theatre* (Surrey: Methuen Drama, 1998), 67.

Absolutely, and yet how! In Turkey, the secular state, inspired by the Western model, was gradually liquidated by the so-called moderate Islamist party. In Egypt, at the time I am writing these lines, a law is being examined to ban atheism (in other words, no one will have the right to declare himself an atheist, you will have to choose a religion otherwise you would otherwise risk being declared as suffering from mental illness). Imperial nostalgia is visible in Russia, China, and even in Iran. There are many areas of the world in which the grotesque and absurd situations described by me in some plays persist. Even Europe risks to be fragmented against the background of the migrants' crisis. Some western democracies are gurgled by the power of money, like the American one. Donald Trump reminds us of *King Ubu*, he is a planetary clown who has been entrusted with the guard of the nuclear button. Italian democracy becomes a *populocracy*, in other words, a society in which populism triumphs through caricature – like characters. Berlusconi was an example, but Beppe Grillo is even more *commedia dell'arte* at the political level. A great philosopher said that history repeats itself in the following way: what was a drama comes in the form of comedy (and sometimes vice versa). I think we are witnessing today the tragedy of the disintegration of the traditional democratic model. In Western Europe, the ease with which radical Islam progresses is narcotic. Nothing is more opposite to radical Islam than Western freedom and democracy. And the "useful idiots" of radical Islam, that is to say, the left-wing intellectuals who believe that Muslim immigration is the expression of the new proletariat, are heavily involved in the total extinction of the Western way of life.

If in *Richard III Will Not Take place* history is the playground for the ideological evil which give birth to monstrous exponents of the totalitarianism, like the image of the new-man, in *The Spectator Sentenced to Death*, Matei Vișniec creates a parody against the "justice" exerted in the Stalinist totalitarian regime. Terms like guilt, innocence, evidence mingle their meaning in an absurd context where everybody can be accused, found guilty and killed. The spectator bears his guilt a priori, he is integrated in a court where roles exchange, reality and fiction being separated by a very thin and fragile border.

The distanciation and the anti-catharsis that Vişniec now proposes to the reader or spectator are no longer intended to awaken some sense attitude, or a revolutionary consciousness afflicted by surfeit; instead, like in the *The Spectator Sentenced to Death*, *The Prompter of Fear*, *Gufi's Country*, or *Decomposed Theatre*, they are meant to parody the utopian logic and mystifying verbosity that made possible the totalitarian concentration camp universe.¹¹

At this point it is important for me to speak from the point of view of an actor who was part of two performances based on plays by Matei Vişniec, which, as it was specified, have at their core themes like history and art, or the image of history in relation with paradigms of totalitarianism.



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Fig. 3. Scene from *The Spectator Sentenced to Death*.

From left to right Patricia Brad, Miron Maxim Cristian Grosu and Ionuț Caras

The two shows directed by Răzvan Mureșan at the National Theatre in Cluj-Napoca, *The Spectator Sentenced to Death* and *Richard III Will Not Take Place Or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* prove to be extremely meaningful for the vision that Matei Vişniec himself has about historical traumas which do

¹¹ Laura Pavel, *Teatru și identitate [Theatre and identity]*, 150.

not cease to be represented and questioned in contemporary dramaturgy. In both cases, the audience plays a very important role: the spectators are extremely close to the performers, they are practically placed at the reach of the actors's hands.

Beyond the sensation of deep intimacy given by the claustrophobic arrangement of the space (there seems to be no split between the acting space and the spectators' area), there is a clear feeling of having the same life, of taking part in the same history and not at all in a symbolic way, not in an abstract mode of relating to the reality referred to. The actors are clearly able to see and feel every gaze of the spectators, every gesture, every single reaction they have at what it is staged and performed. Similarly, the spectators can see each drop of sweat of the actors, every twinkle of their eyes.

This proximity generates the feeling that we are caught together in the same trap of history, in the claustrophobia of the ones that can find no escape from a history which menaces to repeat itself, even if dressed in new clothes and wearing a different make-up. Stalin's grin, the new-man's atrocity, Richard's fear, Meyerhold's nightmare, the fake tools of a fake juridical system, the set up history imposed in the name of a machinery that got to work by itself are directly in the eyes of the audience who is no longer detached, but part of the same experience shared by the actors.

It is also a great feeling, mixed with a deep emotion to have the author himself in the audience. This is why I asked Matei Vișniec how he perceived the two shows directed by the Răzvan Mureșan and I think that the answer that has been gives validates both visions:

I do not really have enough words to answer this question. I enjoyed enormously the two shows, they touched me and made me happy. They were two theatrical jewels, but what it is mostly important is the fact that the director (and the whole team together with him) plunged deeply into the core of my theater. In the small studio of the National Theater in Cluj Napoca I fully felt that it was worth dedicating my life to the theater.

Of course there are many other titles that should be taken into account when we speak about history, politics and totalitarianism in Matei Vișniec's dramaturgy. There are issues that are fully relevant for the Romanian society, for our post-revolutionary trauma. It is impossible, in this sense, not to revisit the play *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*, in which the author refers at a large extent to ideology.

If, with *Richard III Will Not Take Place* we face the visage of the ideological evil, in this case we are welcomed in the laboratory of the ideologist. We discover that this industry of promises functions and it is set in motion by an eternal promise that the heaven will descend on Earth. The images of the dictators are just a succession of faces that flow on the same water, masks of the same reality. No matter which kind of party or nation launches the ideological attack, it is all about the same mechanism that will finally bring about crime, repression and a complete lack of freedom. Anyway, we cannot escape the question that comes back again and again: how is it possible that the history repeats itself in this way? Maybe the answer is given by Hanna Arendt when she speaks about terror. In Matei Visniec's plays we are confronted with traumas of regimes that were built upon terror. Nowadays, more subversive systems may appear, as they are not openly using terror.

A fundamental difference between modern dictatorships and all other tyrannies of the past is that terror is no longer used as a means to exterminate and frighten opponents, but as an instrument to rule masses of people who are perfectly obedient. Terror as we know it today strikes without any preliminary provocation, its victims are innocent even from the point of view of the persecutor. (...) On the one hand, the Bolshevik system, unlike the Nazi, never admitted theoretically that it could practice terror against innocent people, and though in view of certain practices this may look like hypocrisy, it makes quite a difference. Russian practice, on the other hand, is even more "advanced" than the German in one respect: arbitrariness of terror is not even limited by racial differentiation, while the old class categories have long since been discarded, so that anybody in Russia may suddenly become a victim of the police terror. We are not concerned here with the ultimate consequence of rule by terror—namely, that nobody, not even the executors, can ever be free of fear; in our context we are dealing merely with the arbitrariness by which victims are chosen, and for this it is decisive that they are objectively innocent, that they are chosen regardless of what they may or may not have done.¹²

¹² Hanna Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1976), 6.

Matei Vișniec's dramaturgy has, thus, the function to awaken us, to help us keep in mind how even ourselves can help the totalitarian machinery go on working or even get better, if we forget and let ignorance creep in.

The image of history, through Vișniec's lenses, has a lot to do with the function of art. Even if art will not trigger a Revolution by itself it has the mission to prevent our reason from falling asleep, to be confronted to what has been done wrong and paid with too high prices.

What is mostly notable in Matei Vișniec's dramaturgy is that the author never points an accusing finger at anyone, he never morally focused, but creates characters made equally of pain, laughter, sorrow, absurdity or painful reality. Just like life. In the end, the one who can provide us with an open conclusion is the writer himself:

Whatever it is, there were millions of people who honestly believed in communism, but who ended up being manipulated and eventually massacred. How is it possible that a utopia (which seemed so generous) to dominate a whole century, start with incredible impetus, inflame the entire 20th century and end up with a hundred million dead and a the huge historical gap? Today we are talking about a new utopia, which would be globalization. Unfortunately, globalization is a utopia that has no ideology or philosophical basis. Let us not forget that the Communist utopia began with a reflection that lasted almost a hundred years, and it was only afterwards that it took place. And it came out! Communism was a utopia initially thought by thousands of people. Hundreds and hundreds of texts have been written about what should have been the great communist, social-democratic, socialist utopia ... But globalization began without any kind of thought, without any basis of reflection, and we are heading for something that is not clearly prefigured on the horizon. We navigate to the unknown in a context of terrible violence, terrible uncertainty, in a world full of monsters that can come to light every step. Who imagined, when communism collapsed, that the future great danger of mankind would be integrism? No one. Integrism was a joke, and yet, terrorism, integrism is beginning to show its grin.

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