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András Visky and Matéi Visniec: Challenging boundaries of cultural specificity

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One of the defining features of contemporary European playwriting is that it is no longer deployed along national boundaries, and the provenance of authors and the languages in which they write do not necessarily overlap. Looking at the landscape of contemporary drama written in Romanian, it is particularly striking how few of the significant authors reside within the geographical borders of Romania: Matéi Visniec and Alexandra Badea live in Paris, Ștefan Peca is based in Berlin, Alexandra Pâzgu in Giessen. To make use of Romanian-American playwright Saviana Stănescu's terms, immigrant authors constantly live 'on the bridge of *in-betweenness*: negotiating between two cultures, [...] two cities [...], between the West and the East', in a world of 'hyphenate[d] identities' (in [Modreanu 2019](#)). This complexity is paralleled by the situation of Romanian theatre directors: many of the canonical figures have achieved their international careers in exile (such as Lucian Pintilie, Liviu Ciulei and Andrei Șerban), whilst the most innovative Romanian artists of today (the likes of Mihai Măniuțiu, Gianina Cărbunariu, Radu Afrim, and Radu Jude) are operating as truly transglobal artists (Modreanu 2020). It is crucial to stress, however, that irrespective whether these dramatists and theatre makers actually live in Romania at present, their work is rooted in and greatly fuelled by their experience of being brought up in Romania, and is regularly published and produced in their country of origin. Some of these playwrights continue to express themselves in the Romanian language, in addition to which many of them also write in the languages of their adopted countries (not unlike fellow Romanian-born author Eugéne Ionesco); Matéi Visniec, for instance, produces multiple versions of the same text whereby he essentially engages in an act of self-translation. The work of several authors, including Alexandra Badea and Saviana Stănescu, is translated into Romanian by other important literary figures (such as Eugen Jebeleanu and Alina Nelega), thus generating synergies between authorial voices and artistic preoccupations. Furthermore, the recently founded Teatrul Dramaturgilor Români (Theatre of

Romanian Playwrights) in Bucharest has already established itself as an influential creative hub in nurturing contemporary dramatists (such as Horea Gârbea, Lucia Verona, Alexander Hausvater, Sebastian Ungureanu), and in facilitating alliances between playwrights living throughout Europe.

The case of Hungarian drama, or that of dramatic works written in Hungarian, is complex for historical reasons. The category 'Hungarian literature abroad' emerged in the wake of the First World War when, after the Treaty of Trianon, significant Hungarian communities became part of neighbouring nations. The literatures written in Hungarian on these territories tend to define themselves as Hungarian with the relevant qualifier – such as Hungarian literature from Transylvania; however, their inclusion into the canon continues to constitute a sensitive matter. When it comes to high-profile authors, the sheer fact of writing in the Hungarian language prevails over geographical location, and consequently acts as a form of cultural debordering, though at times such authors may also find themselves attributed to the parallel canon in the language of their country of residence. For the purposes of this chapter, the language in which a particular playwright writes will form the basis of categorisation, nuanced by information on geographical and cultural affiliation. Looking at the landscape of contemporary Hungarian playwriting, several household names come to the fore, such as György Spiró, János Háty, János Térey, Péter Kárpáti, Zoltán Egressy, Kornél Hamvai, and Béla Pintér; yet when it comes to a predominant focus on drama in the respective authors' career and to genuinely innovative writing, it is Transylvanian dramatists that fare the best. This may well have to do with their exposure to more than one cultural tradition, and most importantly in this context, to the thriving Romanian theatre scene. The most original playwrights writing in Hungarian today, András Visky and Csaba Székely, speak and write excellent Romanian and collaborate extensively with key theatre institutions up and down the country. In this way, their work is not only influenced by concerns with visuality and movement-based practices that characterise much of Romanian theatre but is also produced in Romanian translation soon after the premiere, taking place as a rule at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj and/or the Miklós Tompa company at the Hungarian Theatre in Târgu-Mureş.

In attempting to offer a snapshot of the current Romanian and Hungarian theatre scenes, therefore, the blurring of boundaries is key, and this chapter focuses on two renowned playwrights who started their careers in the 1980s and came to prominence after the fall of the Iron Curtain. András Visky (b. 1957) and Matéi Visniec (b. 1956) are among the most prolific authors in the Hungarian and Romanian languages, in addition to drama also writing fiction, poetry, as well as journalism. They are both respected public intellectuals whose opinions on

current affairs influence large audiences, and who have been the recipients of prestigious awards and prizes. András Visky has been elected to the Széchenyi Academy of Letters and Arts in Hungary, and Matéi Visniec has a municipal theatre (in the Romanian city of Suceava) named after him that hosts an annual international festival that he co-curates. Visky and Visniec share a preoccupation with the human condition in its multiple manifestations, and invite public reflection on the role of history and its implication on the present. Actively engaged with keeping cultural memory alive, Visky and Visniec are adamant that to remember is an act of duty, and that it is imperative to configure theatre as a space that brings key concerns of our time to light.

Their fascination with staging history is paramount, and they approach this with a commitment that does not shy away from braiding the tragic with the ridiculous, and the absurd with the ironic. Visniec observes: 'Here, we live the absurd, [while you, over there, you write it]' (in Komporaly 2015: 391), whereas Visky notes that 'reality is nothing but absurd' as the theatre of the absurd does none other than 'amplify this absurd reality with mathematical precision, and make the world confront its own incongruity' (in Sipos and Visky 2009: 112). As I argue elsewhere, in adopting such an approach the playwrights embrace the postdramatic concern with 'troubling our expectations of how to interpret a text, and its rejoicing in the disruption of the hierarchical order: generic and political alike' (Komporaly 2017: 9). They both take delight in titling their plays in very unique and often striking ways that already kickstart an invitation for audience engagement. Visniec prefers relatively long titles that deploy a narrative of sorts and conjure up unforeseen juxtapositions (*How I Trained a Snail on Your Breasts*, *The Story of Panda Bears Told by a Saxophonist Who Has a Girlfriend in Frankfurt*), whereas Visky opts for very concise, often monosyllabic, titles that often carry internal contradictions and shock value (*I Killed My Mother*, *Porn*). Above all, the playwrights imagine dramatic situations that are able to capture the fragility of the individual in limit situations. They convey the essence of living under ideological oppression that can make people understand the emotional impact of the latter on a visceral level, without having had an immediate encounter with such oppression. Visky's and Visniec's plays are rooted in personal exposure to totalitarianism, yet are not 'historical plays' or 'plays about history' as such, but reflections on this limit-experience which explore the idea of captivity in multiple ways, examining the political, social and psychological implications of confinement. Thus, prisons, forced domiciles, hospitals, mental and childcare institutions feature prominently in their work – as a code for the severe limitations to personal freedom, and this is often accentuated to absurd proportions, thus foregrounding the challenges of achieving mental freedom under any kind of ideological as well as economic pressure.

Visky and Visniec are far from being exceptions in signalling the flaws of their world; however, they tend to engage with their subject matter as authors of dramatic texts (available for others to subsequently stage), utilising a lens that zooms in on the symbolic and on universally valid human concerns that often transcend the here and now. This differentiates their approach from that of younger practitioners who often have a background in directing and are preoccupied with scrutinising the recent past by way of verbatim theatre and/or expanded journalistic documentation, looking at issues of vital importance for Romanian society. As Romanian theatre critic Cristina Modreanu notes, such issues 'are strangely avoided by newspapers and mass-media in a general context of mass-media degradation and frequent obstructions of the freedom of expression' (2013: 385); theatre and performance thus occupies the prime position for dealing with high importance topics such as homelessness, racism, or ecological crises. Moreover, for a new wave of Romanian artists, theatre making is a collaborative art that takes place in multiple configurations and locations, often taking educational and therapeutic aims, and it is closely intertwined with the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. An emblematic figure for this strand is director-playwright Gianina Cărbunariu (b. 1977), by far the most influential voice in the generation approaching mid-career. Cărbunariu's early work *Stop the Tempo* (2003) achieved manifesto status for the 2000 generation in Romania, a generation educated after the communist era, and 'gave a voice to a universal need of youngsters to change the world' (Modreanu 2016). In a European context, Cărbunariu is better known as a playwright; *Kebab* was staged at the Schaubühne and the Royal Court in 2007, and *Artists Talk* was included in the 2019 Brexit Stage Left Festival at the Yard Theatre in London. Csaba Székely (b. 1981) came to prominence with a play originally written in English (*Do You Like Banana, Comrades?* 2009), but has since focused on writing in Hungarian as well as Romanian. He achieved cult status with the trilogy *Minelands* (2014), highlighting the dark side of the Transylvanian psyche and examining issues such as unemployment, alcoholism, nationalism, corruption, and high suicide rates among the Hungarian population in Transylvania. His recent work includes historical comedies and political satires that deconstruct the notion of heroism and invites fresh thinking on multiculturalism, particularly in the context of Transylvania's now centennial history as part of Romania. Affiliated to the Fabulamundi network, both Székely and Cărbunariu are adamant at international co-operation in the theatre and, in common with Visky and Visniec, not only address multicultural topics but also navigate between different languages and locations, thus challenging the boundaries of cultural specificity.

Confronting communist histories

Matéi Visniec emerged on the Romanian literary scene as a poet with the volume *La noapte va ninge* (*Tonight It Will Snow*, 1980), following which he started writing drama. The political undertones of his work, however, attracted attention and censorship almost straightaway. He continued to seek public outlets for his work, but by the time a professional theatre showed interest in one of his plays – Nottara Theatre in Bucharest announced plans to stage *Caii la fereastră* (*Horses at the Window*) in 1987 – he already had an invitation to France, and once there, asked for political asylum. This meant that Visniec got well and truly blacklisted until the fall of the communist regime in December 1989, but after the political changes in 1990 his work was rediscovered almost overnight, and theatres started staging his previously censored as well as newly written plays. Within a few years, Visniec has become the most frequently staged living Romanian playwright, having multiple texts in the repertoire of professional as well as amateur theatre companies at any one time, and volumes of his dramatic output being continuously reissued by some of the most important publishing houses such as Cartea Românească and Humanitas. His work has also become the subject of extensive critical scrutiny, generating numerous studies including an edited collection by international scholars published to mark the conferment of an honorary doctoral degree to the playwright at ‘Ovidius’ University in Constanța (cf. Cap-Bun and Nicolae, 2015). In parallel with this high-profile presence in Romania that has included over 20 years of productions at the prestigious Sibiu International Theatre Festival, Visniec’s theatre has continued to be firmly embedded into the French theatre system where it was initially nurtured. Over the years, Visniec has developed partnerships with a number of small and medium-size companies in France such as Pli Urgent in Lyon, and established himself as one of the most popular playwrights at the Avignon OFF Festival. In the course of almost 30 years, he had hundreds of productions at the festival, directed by Christian Auger, Mustapha Aouar, Gérard Gelas, Serge Barbuscia (among others), this work also benefitting from the PR support and extraordinary enthusiasm of publisher Émile Lansman. As a result of translations into over 30 languages, Visniec’s plays also appeared on the stages of some of the most prestigious theatres in Europe, including the Young Vic, Théâtre du Rond Point des Champs Elysées in Paris, Sary Theatre Krakow, Piccolo Theatre Milan, Royal Dramatic Theatre Stockholm, National Theatre Istanbul, and Maxim Gorki Theatre in Berlin.

András Visky also started his literary career with a volume of poetry – *Patraszállás* (*Debarcation*), 1984 – but turned to playwrighting much later in his career, at the turn of the

millennium, by which point he had already consolidated his career as a theatre critic and dramaturg. The first decade of the 2000s being a very different context from the communist dictatorship of the 1980s, his dramatic work was embraced instantly by public and critical opinion, and within just over a decade Visky had created a body of work that was staged in a variety of theatres by a range of directors, in addition to which he launched an original dramaturgical concept to underpin his approach to theatre-making and to performer–audience relationships. ‘Barrack Dramaturgy’ attempts to foreground deeply ingrained cultural memories, or memories that are not personal to us yet still attached to us, and reconfigure these as if they were our own. The concept departs from the premise that theatre is a place for introspection where one willingly accepts confinement to a shared intimate space, and where performer–audience communication takes place in an experiential fashion whereby all partake in the experience of one another. His ideas on Barrack Dramaturgy have been formulated alongside his playwriting practice, and offer a platform towards approaching the production process of most of his works (cf. Visky in Romanska 2015 and in Komporaly 2017). In addition to Gábor Tompa with whom Visky has been collaborating for decades, Visky credits US directors Christopher Markle and Robert Woodruff and European directors Silviu Purcărete and Yuri Kordonsky as the most influential on his career, and emphasises the defining importance of his experience as a dramaturg in developing his own distinctive voice as a playwright. In his multiple capacities as a theatre maker, Visky is concerned with exploring and expanding the boundaries of what the idea of theatre entails, and he is keen to experiment with new theatrical forms and experiences. Visky is the author of around a dozen original stage plays – including *Tanítványok (Disciples)* (2001), *Júlia (Juliet)* (2002), *A szökés (The Escape)* (2005), *Visszaszületés (Born for Never/Backborn)* (2004/2009), *Alkoholisták (Alcoholics)* (2009), *Megöltem az anyámat (I Killed My Mother)* (2010), *Pornó (Porn)* (2012), *Caravaggio Terminal* (2014) – and a handful of radical stage adaptations, most notably from the work of Nobel-prize winning Hungarian novelist Imre Kertész: *Hosszú péntek (Long Friday)* (2007). Visky’s work has been presented internationally at the Avignon, Sibiu, and Edinburgh festivals, alongside productions in France, Italy, Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, and the United States. Theatre Y in Chicago has emerged as a particularly ardent champion, and Visky has forged flourishing working relationships with actress Melissa Lorraine (formerly Hawkins) and director Karin Coonrod. Coonrod directed Lorraine in one of Visky’s most iconic plays, *I Killed My Mother*, at Theatre Y and at La Mama in New York (both in 2012), which generated rave reviews in the *The New York Times* for its ability to draw out ‘raw and human’ emotions in the audience (Brantley 2012).

Visky and Lorraine worked together most recently in May 2018 on *Stories of the Body*, a series of four short plays where the translation was created alongside the Hungarian original and the English-language premiere in Chicago preceded Hungarian stagings. This series had in fact its world premiere in London as one of the four plays, *The Unburied. The Saint of Darkness* (since retitled as *Teresa*) was staged by international company [Foreign Affairs] following their collaboration with the play's translator on the inaugural [Foreign Affairs] Translates! mentorship programme in 2017 (cf. Komporaly 2018). At the haven for experimental work that Lorraine runs in Chicago, she acted in or commissioned the majority of Visky's plays centred on strong female characters. This process started with *Juliet*, a memento for a truly exceptional woman and a deeply moving work that epitomises Visky's preoccupation with endurance, survival, and reconciliation in performance, also emblematic of his seamless intertwining of found stories with personal experience. It is thus fitting that Lorraine's image graces the cover of the first English-language anthology of Visky's work (*András Visky's Barrack Dramaturgy: Memories of the Body*, 2017), in a production directed by Coonrod, who in addition to directing Visky in the United States also created an Italian version of *Juliet* at Orvieto.

Figure 4.1 András Visky's *Juliet*, directed by Boian Ivanov at 'Sava Ognyanov' State Drama Theatre Ruse, Bulgaria (2016). Ivanov cast three actresses (Ralitsa Konstantinova, Yasena Gospodinova, Petya Venelinova) in the role of Juliet in order to explore the protagonist's complex state of the mind.

Photograph © Boian Ivanov.

Though available in dozens of languages, it is not the existence of foreign versions that situates Visky or Visniec in a European canon but their ability to intertwine urgent existential, political and aesthetic concerns, and the potential of their work for being incorporated into theatre traditions other than their local context. In Visky's case, for instance, Boian Ivanov's 2016 Bulgarian production of *Juliet* recalibrated the play to address the urgency of the ever-accentuating migration crisis (see [Figure 4.1](#)), while Jolanta Jarmolowicz and Cezi Studniak not only translated *Porn* into the Polish language but also conducted a transposition into Polish performance culture whereby the production by Teatr Nowy in Poznań was able to resonate with the legacy of Grotowski and Kantor at the same time as doing justice to Visky's play. Underpinned by a dramaturgy that Visky calls 'fragmented' and Visniec 'modular' – one that is not linear but made up of repetitive elements, in homage to Beckett – an important distinctive feature of both playwrights' style that frames the treatment of their subject matter. Despite writing in such different languages and having appeal in different countries, the experience of communism in Romania has been foundational to both playwrights' worldview and creative practice, and also constitutes the subject matter that they have explored the most frequently and

in constantly evolving ways. Visky started life as a victim of the communist regime, sent to a forced domicile at the age of two with his mother and six siblings, whilst his father was imprisoned elsewhere for supposedly anti-communist activities. He declared repeatedly that his 'true birthplace' was in the confinement of the Romanian Gulag (Huysler-Honig 2004: 5). Despite his family's release following the 'Khrushchev Thaw' of the Stalinist regime they soon found that they were only exchanging forced domicile for the larger-scale prison of communist Romania. Surveillance continued and supposed friends carried on informing on one another; Visky's play *Porn* vividly testifies to this sense of vulnerability and utter lack of privacy, whereby confidential conversations can only take place in the bathroom, to the protective soundtrack of the running tap, and couples' most intimate moments are subject to the intrusion of listening devices. Visky has written repeatedly about the act of facing his family's secret police files (after the regime change in 1990, it was possible to request such documents from the authorities), highlighting the heftiness of the material as well as the frustrations and bureaucratic complications of arranging this exchange of information.

Visniec also confronts the issue of coming to terms with an edited version of one's own life, so to speak, by way of secret police files. He even casts Eugène Ionesco as a character, and has him presented with his secret police file, as an homage upon returning to Romania after decades of absence. As an initially censored author himself, Visniec draws on the potential for and the right to free speech in various contexts. He creates a memorable alter ego of sorts in the character of blacklisted poet and journalist Sergiu Penegar (*And Now Who's Going to Do the Dishes?*), whereas in *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* he reworks the trope of the Shakespearean fool in order to create a space for political contestation under Stalinist conditions. The play is a virulent satire on ideological oppression, exposing the failed experiment of communism as 'the best of all possible worlds' where 'mad' people are free and 'normal' people are gradually losing their mind. Romanian critic Nicolae Manolescu noted that 'seldom has the human sub-condition been shown in such a crude, even mad light, illustrating not only a psychological degradation but also a political one' (Manolescu 1990: 1393). Like *Richard III Will Not Take Place*, *How to Explain the History of Communism* is a memento for the massacres committed in the name of communism, and the play is dedicated to the writer Daniil Kharms who died in socialist prisons. Visniec situates madness as a disease, and a mad social system side by side; in this way, the mental asylum chosen as setting instantly classifies ideology and becomes metonymic for the whole country, its prison-like conditions emblematic for the concentration camp universe of the Stalinist regime itself. This play was the first Visniec text to be staged in the US (by Florin Fătulescu at The Open Fist Theater Company in

Hollywood in April 2000), and also led on to the English translation of *Richard III Will Not Take Place, or Scenes from the Life of Meyerhold* (2001). The latter departs from the premise of a banned theatre production, and through the character of Meyerhold explores the fate of countless artists and intellectuals who have been fatally silenced by dictatorial regimes. Literally confronting the artist with the dictator, Visniec gets Meyerhold to expose Stalin as the representative of 'evil without ideology', and ironically invites the Generalissimo to state that the play Meyerhold is currently directing 'is more than a play, it is a trial. The trial of history.' Moreover, as Ilean Orlich argues, Visniec's play 'not only depicts trauma but also reproduces it on stage, engaging the audience to be witnesses, through theatrical performance, to the horrors of Stalin's Soviet Union' (Orlich 2017: 105).

Visniec's theatre intends to play an active role in refreshing collective memory regarding communism, which he calls an act of 'horror disguised as humanism' (Visniec 2012: 14). The volume *Procesul comunismului prin teatru (The Trial of Communism through Theatre)* is intended as an open invitation to relaunch reflection on the atrocities of communism, underpinned by the concern that, unless kept alive, memory will gloss over unpleasant episodes in history. According to Visniec, when democracy is in danger it is up to theatre to raise public consciousness and challenge the threat of collective brainwashing. As Daniela Magiaru points out, Visniec shares the view of Meyerhold, the protagonist of *Richard III Will Not Take Place*:

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.

(2012: 40)

Visniec aims to deal with the problem of communism by creating an emotional impact on the audience. He stresses the power of words and the importance of conveying messages through aesthetic emotions generated via plots and storylines. Thus, he addresses complex topics such as utopia, censorship, Stalinism, cultural resistance, and interethnic conflict by way of immediately engaging, perfectly crafted and clearly manageable dramatic situations. These situations are universally accessible on a purely visceral and emotional level, seeing that, ultimately, Visniec's goal is to convey what he terms 'the essence of communism', and not to carry out an act of public denunciation. Moreover, Visniec's critique extends against any

totalitarian form of governance, not just communism in post-war Romania, and in this sense has the potential to resonate with younger generations in their attempts to recover leftist progressive politics despite the troubled history of communism.

Similarly equipped with personal memories and found stories, Visky is in an ideal position to reflect on history, thus 'connecting the past with the present through the creativity of the theatre, constantly "quoting" from the past' (Rokem 2000: xiii). Visky defines the theatre of memory as an art form that operates via a 'shared, trans-individual body-based memory, in which movement precedes word, and image precedes speech' (Visky 2002: 23). He notes that while theatre dealing with history concentrates on articulating a particular message and aims to target the intellect, the theatre of memory is predicated on audience participation and aims for a shared experience of meanings (Visky, 2002, p. 23). Beate Heim Bennett elaborates on this stance in her review of the La MaMa production of *I Killed My Mother*: 'theatre is where memory and being are made manifest both in spoken language and physical stillness, but it is also where our acts of rebellion against systematic obliteration find communal attention' (2012: 97). Visky taps into personal and collective memory to evoke the past, and although inspired by local events his plays contain a global dimension that transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. As a result, Visky's plays are human stories par excellence, and shed light on ways of being a mother, child, daughter, or lover that are ubiquitously valid. For instance, *I Killed My Mother* can be read as a contemporary rewriting of Greek mythology where the orphaned protagonist encounters her biological sister and, unaware of blood links, falls in love with her. This dimension, needless to say, charts a direct link to European cultural memory, and inscribes Visky's work into a rich continental tradition of transnational adaptations.

In another strand of his work, Visky examines the lives of extraordinary characters from the past, and indeed present, including Caravaggio, Mother Teresa, and Italian Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi, and connects his plays to various cities such as Budapest, Cluj, Kolkata, and Rome, from the seventeenth to the twenty-first centuries. The plays themselves, however, are works of fiction, rooted in the technique of open dramaturgy. Visky recommends in his stage directions that theatres experiment with a montage of theatrical images, as Robert Woodruff's production of *Caravaggio Terminal* at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj in 2014 amply demonstrated; and they are also free to put on various combinations of the plays in *Stories of the Body*. As a result, spectators can watch different productions each time, presented in a choice of line-ups. In this way, the plays (*Teresa, Lina, Eva, Artemisia*) – and their approximately 50-minute-long stage versions – have the potential to gain meanings in each other's context: illuminating the stories of the body in the most varied refractions, as a variation

of a single theatrical space and set design (Visky, 2019). The possibility of manifold and cross-referential audience readings is an aspect that Visky shares with seminal Hungarian poet and playwright János Pilinszky. Prontvai (2014) argues that both write plays structured like musical scores that actors and audiences are invited to follow in order to transform content into embodied experience, and the work of both authors acquires ‘meaning and life-giving force’ in the light of such multiple readings.

Transnational and historical flows

As avid social commentators, Visky and Visniec have continued to keep their fingers on the pulse of times, acknowledging that the demise of communism in Eastern Europe has in no way instituted a fully democratic society. Coming to prominence precisely in the period of transition from a socialist to a market-oriented regime, both playwrights show awareness of the complexities inherent in economic as well as political and cultural change. One of Visniec’s most successful early plays looks at the Yugoslav war and situates an American psychiatrist alongside a victim of genocide and rape. As an intimate two-hander confronting two women metonymic for their communities, the play offers a welcome insight into international conflict resolution, and makes an attempt at celebrating humanity even at a time of utter desperation. Faynia Williams was the first person to direct Visniec in the UK, and her production of *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* for the Brighton Festival in 1999 took place just as NATO bombs were falling on Belgrade during the Kosovo War. The dinner-jacketed cellist joining the original double act in Visniec’s text was a character Williams invented, inspired by the famous photo of Nigel Osborne playing in the bombed out snow-covered concert hall in Sarajevo. In the production, she was on stage throughout ‘like a silent nemesis, watching, waiting, and keeping culturally alive in the midst of war, rape and the discovery of mass graves’ (Williams 2019). This production was the first-ever drama to be staged at the Old Market Art Centre in Hove (now known as The Old Market), and the play went on to be workshopped at the National Theatre Studio, this time under the direction of Alison Sinclair, and then to the Young Vic. This occasion gave Visniec his first London exposure, an event that has continued over the years with a variety of other well-received productions, including *What Shall We Do with the Cello?* directed by Vasile Nedelcu for Atelier Theatre Studio at the Vault Festival (2017).

More recently, Visniec has turned his attention to the global impact of migration, and the companion plays *Occidental Express* (2009) and *Migraaaants or There’s Too Many People on This Damn Boat* (2017) shed light on the extraordinary human cost of displacement and non-

belonging. Despite having been written almost a decade apart, the plays echo one another in their reflection of one of the most ardent concerns of our time, and examine assorted push-and-pull factors alongside the lure of the West. Both plays contrast the idealised image would-be migrants entertain of their target countries with the realities of the present, thus situating mythical and dystopian visions side by side. The plays respond to the dissolution of frontiers after the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe and in the first couple of decades of the twenty-first century, and highlight the drive to encounter formerly inaccessible cultures. They also prefigure Visniec's latest play that addresses the plight of children left in the care of grandparents whilst their parents are trying to make a better living abroad – *Extraterestrul care își dorea ca amintire o pijama* (*The Extraterrestrial that Wanted some Pyjamas as a Keepsake*) – staged in 2019 by the very theatre named after the playwright, the Matei Visniec Theatre in Suceava. Visniec maps out the impact on different generations of the post-1989 transformations, and touches upon the fact that it is mentalities that need adjusting in order to achieve a shared European identity. The topical importance of these plays is also indicated by being published in a new Romanian edition by Humanitas as *Trilogia balcanică* (*The Balkan Trilogy*, 2018), and by being staged (in Hungarian translation at the Sándor Tomcsa Theatre in Odorheiu Secuiesc and the Szigligeti Theatre in Oradea, respectively) by Zalán Zakariás as a duology of sorts. Visniec added a number of new scenes to *Occidental Express* for this occasion, including a wedding scene that places Transylvania on the symbolic map of this Balkan itinerary and experiments with further layers of meta-theatricality; in the words of the director staging this play-within-a-play, this Dracula-myth-inspired scene is likely to 'trigger international recognition' (Hulber 2019). Appropriating a Western construct of the East in this way is really empowering, in addition to the politically important strategy of layering ethnic and cultural traditions in a transnational arena. *Occidental Express* was also put on by Visniec's most ardent US champions, the Trap Door Theatre in Chicago in 2017, directed by István Szabó K, following on from the director's previous collaboration with the company that saw the premiere of *The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True* in 2011. Trap Door, led by artistic director Beata Pilch, have gained a reputation for championing Eastern European theatre since the company's inception, and staged and internationally toured several Visniec plays. This groundbreaking work significantly contributes to the integration of European and American traditions, facilitating bidirectional contact and arguing for the vitality and viability of European drama in a transnational context.

Some of the most memorable productions, of both Visniec and Visky's theatre in fact, have come about as a result of long-term partnerships with a handful of companies, festivals and

artistic directors. In addition to the Avignon OFF and Sibiu festivals, and repeat collaborations with Romanian director Anca Bradu and Hungarian István Szabó K (responsible for both local and international productions), Visniec has found long-lasting creative associations with KAZE Theatre in Japan, and with director and producer Márcio Meirelles of Salvador di Bahia, who identified aspects of Visniec's work that resonated with their concerns and framed their productions with direct references to the realities of their world. This interest is testimony to the firm impact of European playwriting far beyond the geographical boundaries of the Continent, as well as to parallels between seemingly different cultural contexts. As Visniec himself notes, Brazil is the country that reminds him the most of Romania, a connection that no doubt explains the extraordinary fact that *É Realizações* in São Paulo has to date published over 20 volumes of his work in Portuguese translation. As Dragan Klaić observes (2009, p. xviii), 'the parabolic features' of Visniec's theatre make his work 'more accessible for foreign readers and spectators, who were most likely little informed about the everyday life under the great Conducator [Nicolae Ceaușescu]', and indeed Visniec denounces the dangers of manipulation through ideology whatever it might be, and charts a history of cultural resistance against totalitarianism of any kind. Thus, Meirelles relocates *The Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War* (2014) to contemporary Brazil, and examines inter-racial relations in a post-colonial society through the play's initial juxtaposition of a Western and Eastern woman. The women are situated in mutual dependency, though it is ultimately the assessment-cum-judgement of the woman coming from a privileged background that is meant to impact on the future of the long-suffering other. A similar attempt for cultural reclamation is present in Meirelles's staging of *The Last Godot* (2014), whereby the Afro-Brazilian actor Leno Sacramento is cast as Godot, thus incorporating a canonical European character into the fabric of local ethnic categories and performance traditions in Brazil.

Visniec is fascinated by a subtle dialogue with landmark moments in theatre history, and his absurdist vein is rooted in his long-term preoccupation with the work of Cioran, Chekhov, Ionesco, and Beckett. These authors have not only influenced his style and worldview but also feature as references and actual characters in his plays (cf. *A Paris Attic Overlooking Death; The Chekhov Machine; Nina, or the Fragility of Stuffed Seagulls*). *The Last Godot*, for instance, has at its core the two figures that are notoriously absent in *Waiting for Godot* (Godot and Beckett himself), Visniec thus transforming into characters the non-fictional person of the author and what was in Beckett's play a mere name. As Lecossois argues that 'by calling into question the status of the character and that of the author, he shakes the very foundation of theatre as a genre' (2008: 94), not in the least because the characters in Visniec's play claim

that theatre has just been killed, so the play first appears a lament for the death of theatre. The trope of waiting is an underlying motif in Visniec's oeuvre, situated at the core of the popular *Pockets Full of Bread* (2004) and culminating perhaps in the waiting for Ionesco himself in *And Now Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* (2009), memorably staged in 2018 by Răzvan Mureșan at the National Theatre of Cluj.

European theatre is further present in Visniec's plays in conjunction with an interest in the workings of history. Visniec has a predilection for examining the ways in which history is framed, contested, and periodically rewritten; emblematic in this sense is his theatre poem *Joan and the Fire* (2008) that discusses Joan of Arc's controversial career. Over time, his responses to communism in Eastern Europe have given way to a discussion of major conflicts in the world, and to a reflection on the impact of globalisation on our society. Despite signalling the significant differences among the various contexts, Visniec points out the totalitarian strand inherent in both socialist regimes and conspicuous consumption, claiming that whilst brainwashing was centrally imposed under the former, it has become self-inflicted in conditions of the latter: 'Disinfecting language will open up the way towards true essence' (Visniec 2016: 104). As a practising journalist (for Radio France Internationale), Visniec has first-hand insight into the workings of mass media; the drive for sensationalism at the expense of accuracy has reconfigured the ways in which people are exposed to facts, which has an impact not only on understanding the past but also on shaping the present and on charting the future.

Why Hecuba? – as an adaptation of a Greek classic – is a departure of sorts for the playwright, however, as a play dealing with the haunting of history, it is firmly embedded into long-term preoccupations. Hecuba's loss and suffering is dramatised by Visniec as an ultimate test for maternal desire, in addition to which it is also an opportunity for the exploration of the tragedy of war and for a confrontation with the forces that rule the world as we know it. As Visniec notes, *Why Hecuba?* was born out of a desire to examine matters in a different light, seeing that nobody learns from past mistakes and history is repeating itself over and over again. Indeed, Anca Bradu's production for the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, Romania (2014) capitalised on this timeless topic to invoke the power of love as an antidote against the horrors inflicted by people on their fellow human beings. In conversation with playwrights Saviana Stănescu and Dorota Masłowska, Domnica Radulescu (2015) discussed Márcio Meireilles' production of this play in 2014, highlighting Visniec's geo-political and absurdist roots and emphasising a post-modern strand in much of his work.

Barrack dramaturgies

Visniec's most postmodern as well as postdramatic plays are modular texts, a selection of independent scenes that can be combined in various permutations in performance, thus allowing theatre companies full flexibility and agency towards achieving their artistic vision. Visniec takes pleasure in meta-theatrical experiments and rejoices in improvisation whilst displaying a predilection for parables and writing with striking precision. He ritualises repetition and accumulation, gradually divesting words and situations of their initial meanings and connotations to the extent that they lead to a defamiliarising 'sense of apprehension' (Visniec in Komporaly 2015: viii). *Decomposed Theater or The Human Trashcan* (1993), for instance, includes 25 disparate scenarios that illuminate psychological trauma by conjuring up an atmosphere of hopelessness and imprisonment. The play explores a gradual deployment of menace that blurs the boundaries between actual and imaginary situations, and is among Visniec's works that best transcends geographical and cultural boundaries. It is also the play that has opened up Visniec's theatrical universe towards marionette theatre, and marked the start of a collaboration with puppeteer Eric Deniaud and his company Drolatic Industry (2005). The dramaturgy of modular theatre is also present in Italian director Beppe Rosso's staging of *Attenzione alle vecchie signore corrose dalla solitudine* (*Beware of Old Ladies Gnawed by Solitude*) for A.C.T.I. Teatri Independenti Torino (2013), which aims not only for flexibility in terms of sequencing the dramatic text but also for audience integration by way of staging the play as a shared meal. The act of eating and drinking together is a well-considered dramaturgical device, and has the role of drawing attention to the dissonance between the conviviality of the shared meal and the complexity of the issues addressed. The production groups 15 short scenes around themes such as 'Borders', 'Agoraphobia', and 'Desert', and offers a poetic examination of our world through a surrealist lens. This world is perceived as simultaneously disturbing, contradictory, violent, and comical, and the aim of the production is to blend these seemingly fragmented instances into a shared ritual that charts a continuum of registers from the tragic to the ironic. Ultimately, in a manner reminiscent of Visky's 'Barrack Dramaturgy', the audience is invited to confront the above concerns in an intimate space, and engage with a range of stimuli and memories as if they had experienced them themselves. Visky's original dramaturgical concept was initially brought to public attention in a manifesto linked to the production of *Disciples* directed by Gábor Tompa at the Hungarian Theatre of Cluj in 2005. Barrack Dramaturgy 'was born out of the need to make imprisonment a common experience', and where the audience becomes 'prisoners of [their] free will' (Visky 2015: 467).

Performers and audience relinquish their freedom simultaneously, and thus are bound by a contract of sorts towards a shared experience: an enclosure into a claustrophobic space in which the performance and spectating areas are not separated. The performance commences with this joint act of being locked in, and finishes with a shared exit-cum-liberation, the latter being also symbolic of an act of doing justice. According to this approach, the aim of captivity is not simply to render actual reality but to evoke a universal experience and to suggest that ‘captivity is a state of being in which we are dislocated from our bodies’, and through which we are invited to explore the potential for participatory understanding (Visky 2015: 468). According to Visky, being shut in together with an aim to remember heightens the perception of the performance as an event in the present, and is predicated on unconditional involvement because its aim is to achieve a shared embodied experience. Actress Melissa Lorraine connects this shared experience with ‘a celebration of the very essence of theatre: the miraculous solidarity of strangers who can suddenly see one another inside of a moment’, and stresses that only ‘that which actually *occurs* during the time of “incarceration” is of any value. We offer ourselves over to this mysterious communal ritual in the hope of alteration. We volunteer to serve the time’ (Komporaly 2019). Via the concept of ‘Barrack Dramaturgy’, Visky also makes his preoccupation with the renewal of Hungarian theatre language explicit, and challenges the prevalence of dramatic text in performance in order to focus on the relationship between spectators and performers and the possibilities of audience engagement. Visky’s works are ‘texts inscribed into space’ that address the question of ‘captivity’ on the level of content and form (Visky 2002: 8). Visky’s theatre is not interested in offering an illusion of real life on stage, there is no psychological investigation of characters. Instead, he populates his plays with figures searching for their often lost identity, whose embodied retelling of stories leads to a regaining of their sense of self. In other words, Visky’s plays are not representational but instances of self-conscious and self-referential theatre that calls attention to its theatricality.

Ultimately, most Visky – and indeed Visniec – plays address a recurrent central question: whether there is such a thing as a form of freedom that simply cannot be taken away and/or that cannot be renounced; and this exploration of freedom is conducted side by side with an examination of identity, in a unique braiding among performance, theatricality, and the real. Over their extensive careers, the playwrights have developed dramaturgies that illuminate contemporary concerns through the use of poetry and metaphor, and paved the way in Hungarian and Romanian drama for a quest for new artistic forms. They spot dramatic situations in an amazing variety of mundane circumstances, and have a sharp eye for detail. Visniec has an uncanny ‘capacity to transform abstract ideas into characters’, and his frequent

intertextual references are rooted in his own rigorous practice as a most attentive reader (Ghițulescu 2008: 518). When addressing topical social and political concerns, Visniec is motivated by an overarching sense of ethical duty, and his crusade against the atrocities of communism as well as the excesses of globalisation ‘situates him as an influential public intellectual, whose legacy is bound to include a strong artistic as well as political merit’ (Komporaly 2015: xlii).

Despite authoring some of the most influential plays of the last three decades, Visniec declared that ‘without a good director I haven’t achieved anything’ (in Boicea 2010), a view echoed by Visky who sees the dramatic text as a blueprint for further artistic experimentation on stage. It is for this reason that his plays offer a genuine opportunity for the renewal of Hungarian theatre language, and since they are originally intended for the stage and not the page, Visky’s plays ‘carry out the typical journey of dramatic works in Hungarian theatre culture in reverse, because they only start their quests towards literary canonization after having gone through the “purgatory” of theatrical performance’ (György 2007). For Visky, play texts offer an opportunity for further exploration by other parties, and he grants them total creative freedom in terms of *mise-en-scène* and textual editing alike. Visky celebrates the exclusively live qualities of performance, and uses the term ‘ephemeral’ in relation to his work, thus referencing Peggy Phelan’s notion that performance, whose only life is in the present, ‘becomes itself through disappearance’ (1993: 146). In addition to being among the most vocal commentators on the moral and existential dilemmas of our time, both European and local, Visky and Visniec occupy an essential role in contemporary European playwriting for this generosity and openness towards staging practice. Visky’s and Visniec’s work invite minimalism in terms of staging, and their sole requirement is an intimate space shared by performers and spectators. Systematically broadening approaches that consider the dramatic text as a fully complete entity, Visky and Visniec practice a form of theatre making that transgresses linguistic, cultural, and stylistic boundaries, and celebrates the creative potential of *mise en scène* in realising engaging and audience-centred live performances.

András Visky – four key productions

Porno (Porn). Translated into Polish by Jolanta Jarmolowicz. Directed by Cezi Studniak. Set design by Michal Hrisulidis. Costume design by Magda Hasiak. Music design by Krzysztof ‘Wiki’ Nowikow. Scenic movement by Ewelina Adamska-Porczyk. Video projection by Maksymilian Ławrynowicz. Cast: Edyta Łukaszewska. Teatr Nowy, Poznan (Poland), 20 September 2016.

Jozefina Komporaly

Juliet. Translated into Bulgarian by Yulia Krumova. Directed by Boian Ivanov. Scenography: Elitsa Georgieva. Video design and 3D mapping: Todor Todorov. Sound design: S.U.S.F. Choreography: Tatyana Sokolova. Cast: Ralitsa Konstantinova, Yasena Gospodinova, Petya Venelinova. 'Sava Ognyanov' State Drama Theatre Ruse (Bulgaria), 18 April 2016.

Caravaggio Terminál (Caravaggio Terminal). Directed by Robert Woodruff. Dramaturg: András Visky. Set and costume design: Carmencita Brojboiu. Video: Bertalan Bányász. Sound design: Kata Bodoki-Halmen. Scenic movement: Ferenc Sinkó. Cast: Ervin Szűcs, Csilla Albert, Ferenc Sinkó, Csilla Varga, Balázs Bodolai, Éva Imre, Áron Dimény. Hungarian Theatre of Cluj (Romania), 24 June 2014.

Stories of the Body (Artemisia, Eve, Lina, Teresa). Translated into English by Jozefina Komporaly. Directed by Andrej Visky and Melissa Lorraine. Set Design: Péter Szabó. Costume Design: Rebecca Hinsdale. Lighting Design: Taylor Ovca. Props Design: Selma Muminovic. Cast: Kati Sherman (Artemisia), Matt Fleming, Nadia Pillay, Adrian Garcia, Eric K. Roberts, Katie Stimpson (Teresa), Melissa Lorraine (Eve), Laurie Roberts (Lena), Kris Tori, Cody Beyer, Nicholas Barelli, Laura Jones Macknin, Zarah Pillay. Theatre Y Chicago (USA), 25 May 2018.

Matéi Visniec – four key productions

Body of a Woman as a Battlefield in the Bosnian War. Translated into English by Alison Sinclair. Directed by Faynia Williams. Set and costume design by Faynia Williams. Cast: Amanda Mealing, Liz Kettle, Sarah Sansom (cellist). The Old Market Art Centre, Hove (now known as The Old Market), Brighton Festival Fringe (UK), May 1999.

Attenzione alle vecchie signore corrose dalla solitudine (Beware of Old Ladies Gnawed by Solitude). Translated into Italian by Beppe Rosso. Directed by Beppe Rosso. Set and production design: Richi Ferrero, Lucio Diana, Marco Ferrero. Consultants: Ornella Balestra, Monica Iannessi, Davide Bernardi, Debora Milone. Cast: Lorenzo Bartoli, Mario Pirrello, Francesca Porrini, Valentina Virando. A.C.T.I. Teatri Independenti Torino (Italy), 1 July 2013.

De ce Hecuba? (Why Hecuba?). Directed by Anca Bradu. Set, video and light design by Mihai Păcurar. Choreography by Adriana Bârză. Music and sound design by Vlaicu Golcea. Cast: Diana Văcaru Lazăr, Dana Taloş, Maria Tomoiagă, Dan Glasu, Iustinian Turcu, Arina Ioana Trif, Paul Bondane/Alexandru Malaicu, Liviu Vlad, Iulia Popa, Cendana Trifan, Vlad Robaş, Ioan Paraschiv, Gabriela Neagu, Anton Balint, Tudor Răileanu, Cristian Timbuş. National Theatre of Cluj (Romania), 4 October 2014.

Migránsoook – avagy túlsúlyban a bárkánk (Migraaaants or There's Too Many People on This Damn Boat). Translated into Hungarian by Ágota Bereczki. Directed by Zalán Zakariás. Sound design by Hunor-Lehel Boca. Lighting design by István Tóásó. Set and costume design by Csaba Csíki. Music by Csaba Csíki. Dramaturg: Ágota Bereczki. Cast: Csaba Antal D, Árpád Barabás, Kriszta Boda-Szász, Zenkő Bekő-Fóri, Róbert Dunkler, Norbert Esti, Kata László, Eszter Márkó, Andrea Fincziski, Attila Pál, Gellért Szűcs-Olcsváry, Árpád Tóth, Márta Varga, Nóbel Kudelász. Sándor Tomcsa Theatre in Odorheiu Secuiesc (Romania), March 2017.

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