

Staging History:

Memory and Representation in the Theatre of Matéi Visniec and András Visky¹

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This article examines instances of engaging with history in Romanian post-Communist theatre. The article signals, on the one hand, a trend for accuracy in terms of representation – at the level of dramatic plot and characters, and on the other, a consolidating endeavour to draw attention to the ethical and social responsibility associated with historical phenomena. From the point of view of this article, revisiting history through the medium of theatre is an engagement with appraising and understanding particular events, in conjunction with a process of delving into the examination of power relations at a given time, and highlighting matters of responsibility and victimhood. In other words, the article posits theatre as a potent forum for keeping cultural memory alive, and a platform capable of formulating plausible hypotheses on the relationship between historical acts and their immediate and long-term consequences.

In addition to historical parables and adaptations of foreign classics, which have been long-term staples in Romanian theatre, both before and after the regime change in 1989, it is the memory of the communist era that has become a haunting presence of late. Following almost a decade of predominantly formal explorations, for many authors the late nineties and the noughties offered a new context, sufficiently distant in time, to reinterpret and, in some cases, come to terms with one of the most controversial periods in recent history. Especially for the generation of playwrights born in the fifties, such an endeavour has become a necessity in their quest for completing their artistic and personal journeys. The resurgence of plays about the horrors of communist dictatorships have become instrumental in facilitating an understanding of the unspeakable, and conversely, it is precisely a more or less immediate experience of totalitarianism that feeds a continued interest in their dramatization. The considerable amount of work that is being generated on this topic – ranging from plays by authors as diverse as Nic Ularu to Vlad Zografi – actively revisits the relationship between history and representation, situating the role of witnessing and documentation centre-stage, as ‘when it comes to horror, reality surpasses the imagination’ (Matéi Visniec).

In this article, dramatic representation will be read as a social mode of historicization, and a key contributor to ‘collective memory’ (to use Maurice Halbwachs’ term). The article investigates the post-war history of Romania through a discussion of two seminal authors (who are, respectively, the most frequently staged contemporary playwrights writing in Romanian and

Hungarian), although the plays and playwrights under scrutiny also belong to contemporary French and Hungarian theatre. I make a deliberate point of referring to theatre work by the different ethnicities co-existing in Romania, due to their shared history and the urgency of exploring this matter in a fresh light in the post-communist era. Matéi Visniec (1956-) is a Romanian-born playwright, poet and novelist who has been living in France for over 25 years.² His fiction and poetry continues to be written in Romanian, but he writes his dramas in French which tend to be premiered and first published in France. András Visky (born 1957) is a poet, playwright and dramaturg living in Transylvania (Romania), who writes in Hungarian and is widely staged both in Romania and Hungary. Visky, however, makes a political point of not belonging to the literary establishment in Hungary, and dedicates considerable effort to the rapprochement between Hungarian and Romanian cultural circles. The work of both playwrights is translated into the language of the other; Visky having worked as dramaturg on Visniec productions at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj and theatres pioneering Visniec plays in Romania, such as the National Theatre in Cluj, also embracing Visky's dramas.

Drawing on plays written over the last fifteen years or so – *Júlia/Juliet* (2002) by András Visky, and *L'histoire du communisme racontée aux malades mentaux/How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* (1998) and *De la sensation d'élasticité lorsqu'on marche sur les cadavres/And Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* by Matéi Visniec (2009) – the article explores the potential of dramatic representation in dealing with particularly traumatic historical events, such as deportation, imprisonment and systematic brainwashing under totalitarianism. The above plays engage specifically with communist Romania, yet as ex-Yugoslavian-born theatre scholar and cultural commentator Dragan Klaić observed, 'parabolic features' make this work 'accessible for foreign readers and spectators'.³ Thus, the article charts the fault lines between cultural specificity and universality in dealing with cultural memory, and touches upon the ritualistic value of attempts at recapturing the past and the cathartic effect of the process, for writer, performer and audience alike.

The playwrights write from the perspective that in communist Romania the absurd was an everyday reality, rather than an aesthetic trend as practiced by Western authors. Matéi Visniec gets his alter ego of sorts to clarify this to the virtual character of Eugene Ionesco in *And Now Who's Going to Do the Dishes?':* 'Here, we live the absurd, while, over there, you write it.' In this sense, Visniec argues for the importance of playwrights being closely tuned in to actual political and social events, and joins a long line of politically engaged authors. As far as communism is concerned, for Visniec the job done so far is inadequate; and he is weary of people simply glossing over facts without having entirely comprehended the scale of the atrocities committed

in the name communism. For Visniec, to remember is an act of duty, even if, with the passage of time, one has a tendency to forgive. To this end, Visniec's theatre intends to play an active role in keeping collective memory alive regarding communism, which he calls an act of 'horror disguised as humanism'⁴. The representation and acting out of trauma offer a communal context for remembering, and as Romanian-born US-based theatre director Moshe Yassur notes, 'with his work, Visniec has assumed the role of speaker for the dead', and he deploys theatre 'as a space to bring the horrors of communism to light'.⁵

The plays discussed in this article share an exploration of the horrors of the 1950s, the final phase and immediate aftermath of Stalin's dictatorship. The spectre of the Secret Police lurks behind all three plays, symbolically as well as via actual archival remains: the physical document of the police files maintained on dissident figures. Visky recalls the 6000 pages worth of material in which he and his (ex political prisoner) father recognize their informers,⁶ while Eugène Ionesco, turned into a Visniec character, is presented with his hefty file as an homage upon returning to Romania after decades of absence. Ironically, Ionesco is invited to use the file as inspiration towards further creative work, in other words, to use history as a document that could spawn further re-enactment in theatre. In actual fact, in Communist Romania Ionesco's work had been banned from 1971 onwards, being kept away from public access and prevented from entering the canon.

The dramatic situation in all three plays centres on a forced removal from society (deportation in *Juliet*, imprisonment in *And Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* and internment to mental institutions in *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients*), on political grounds, but while Visky's references operate on the level of an unnamed family, Visniec is explicit about high profile individuals, their dissent and punishment. Visniec's predominantly male protagonists are counterbalanced by Visky's focus on strong women; in *Juliet* he dramatizes the story of a woman who found herself deported for the perceived political subversion of her husband, a highly regarded theologian and minister of the Hungarian Protestant Church in the predominantly Orthodox Romania (he was sentenced to 22 years for the crime of plotting 'against socialist public order'). Visky stresses Juliet's sacrifice, underpinned by her love for her husband, and makes it clear that Juliet stands by her man through thick and thin. Moreover, he stresses Juliet's foreignness: Juliet was born in Budapest and only moved to Transylvania (by then Romania) when she married a member of the Hungarian minority in Romania who chose to return to his homeland despite a potentially more comfortable life in Hungary. Destined as other – a beautiful, educated woman who does not speak the local language – Juliet finds herself a victim of the system through no fault of her own, and although Visky emphatically condemns

political persecution on religious and ethnic grounds, he focuses on the way in which this impacts on innocent people. By not offering too many palpable details on his protagonist and those invoked by her (no-one is named apart from Juliet; she refers to her ‘children’, her ‘husband’, the ‘lawyer’, etc. – all without personal names or connection to a clear timeline), Visky dramatizes suffering as universal and places his protagonist into a mythical time frame. Thus, although Visky departs from facts, the play transcends objective history and inhabits the realm of mythic history (terms used here as launched by Erika Fischer-Lichte)⁷.

Visniec, deliberately specific on names and dates, sets *How to Explain the History of Communism to Mental Patients* in Moscow in 1953, during the final weeks of Stalin’s life and in the immediate aftermath of his death. The play is a sharp satire of Stalinism, yet Visniec stresses that this is also a realist play in which he intends to denounce communism through emotions rather than discourse. He tackles political power, the fascination with utopias and the dangers of personality cults by centring on a writer sent by the authorities to help re-educate the mentally ill with regard to the events of the Great October Revolution. The play opens with the director of the Central Hospital for the Mentally Ill in Moscow mapping out a context for an omniscient political regime: ‘We know everything’. The play identifies multiple forms of surveillance through which everyone keeps track of everyone else, and, in an atmosphere of uncertainty and insecurity, no-one can pin down who are the genuine inmates and dissidents. Neither is it explicit on whose side is the writer. He is an in-between character claimed by both parties: sent as an agent of communist propaganda to perpetuate the Stalinist mythology, yet his subversive storytelling aligns him with the dissidents.

As pioneering Visniec scholar, Daniela Magiaru, contends, the ambiguity of the play’s language contributes to the confusion between narrative planes and defies clear boundaries between madness and normality’.⁸ Indeed, at first sight, the writer’s parables appear to illuminate the expected events from the required historical period (such as the regime change to communism, the process of collectivization); yet these stories are not delivered in a conventional way but filtered through a seemingly infantile language. Thus, these stories only reveal their anti-establishment stance gradually, in parallel with which they have the potential to effectively undermine the system from within. According to Visniec ‘The communist system before 1989 was not monolithic. It included many who were undermining it from within [...]. In its last phase the regime was as fragile as it was aggressive. [...] It was important to utilize irony to fracture the mental and ideological constipation of the regime [...] and metaphor proved more powerful than censorship’.⁹ In this way, highly deliberate ambiguities, such as the writer’s, constitute important attempts at a rewriting of history that depict the horrors of communism, and practice a form of

cultural resistance that is reminiscent of real-life dissident writers and also echoes Visniec's own anti-establishment stance.

The character of Penegaru in *Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* is similarly emblematic for Visniec's recurrent preoccupation with cultural resistance, the role and the social responsibility of creative minds and the significant risks undertaken by them under totalitarian conditions. Penegaru is uncompromising in his quest for freedom, and even when he accepts, under duress, to write a poem about the (Communist) Party, the outcome is clearly provocative in its obscenity:

Party, I'd love to have you in my mouth
 like a sip of vodka
 I like to feel you in the waiting room of my words
 So I kneel in front of you
 and kiss your navel
 and I kiss your hands
 and I kiss your knees
 and I kiss your ankles
 I even kiss the sole of your feet
 despite them being smelly
 because you walk too much and don't always find the time to wash your socks and dust your boots
 when you walk over me
 and over millions of dead bodies
 Oh, how nice it must be
 To bounce over dead bodies
 Yes, dear Party, I am your carpet of words
 and to show you how much I love you and want you,
 dear Party,
 I also kiss your arse.¹⁰

Associated with anti-establishment poetry of this mould, the character of Penegaru emerges as the epitome of the dissident writer, and his stance resonates with moments of actual resistance, such as Ana Blandiana's now iconic protest poem published in 1984 *Total [Everything]* and Visniec's own poem, *Corabia [The Vessel]*. Visniec's ship was metaphoric for communism, and the poem chronicled, via a process of extremely slow sinking, initial euphoria followed by bitter disappointment. It is not surprising, therefore, that a public reading of this poem led, in the summer of 1983, to the closing down by the authorities of the legendary literary club 'Cenaclul

de Luni'. In addition to referencing dissident acts, the writer-protagonist of *And Now Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* also establishes important connections with Visniec's post-communist meditations on the topic of history. Visniec draws attention himself to the recurrence and free interchange of similar characters and voices in his poetry and drama, and most significant in this context is the political poem *La masă cu Marx* [*At Table with Marx*], published in Romanian in 2011, and in English, in a very inspired translation by Ileana Alexandra Orlich, in 2012.

This poem is a history lesson on communism, conceptualized as a dramatic monologue. *At Table with Marx* stages the history of communism as a period drama in three acts: an elaborate meal – suggestive of the euphoric promise of the early days, the washing of the dishes – indicative of the subsequent phase of overpowering helplessness, and, finally, the trauma of participation – and the coming to terms with the enormity of the events in their aftermath. US-based Visniec-scholar Ileana Orlich convincingly argues that the poem 'illustrates the dignity of survival and of moral choices inside an endless cycle of political repression and totalitarian control that made a prison house of the whole society'.¹¹ *At Table with Marx* – sections of which are intertextually braided into *And Who's Going to Do the Dishes?* under the guise of another openly subversive poem by the writer-protagonist Penegar – interrogates the complicity with history that all those who embraced communism in whatever shape or form embarked on. The initial feast where 'history had sat with us at the table' soon made way to images of disfigurement: 'Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin [who] had in fact a single eye mounted on a tank turret, an eye as big as a lighthouse beacon that rotated 360 degrees at every move of the bourgeoisie'. Summing up the essence of communist ideology and practice, this nightmarish image transforms into an even more haunting crescendo, culminating in the burial of 'a hundred million dead in just one mass grave', a grave needed to be dug with 'only a sickle and a hammer' and with maximum urgency due to the alarming pace at which history is being revisited. The recurrent processes of rewriting history is, in fact, a regular trope of Visniec's (cf. *Jeanne et le Feu* [*Ioana și focul*] as a particularly eloquent case in point), and the author draws attention to the gaps between facts and interpretation, and the fluid space carved out in and by history books for personal political ambitions and fantasies of grandeur.

As Visniec states in *At Table with Marx*, it was 'wrong [for us] to sit at the table with Marx, Engels and Lenin', and Orlich rightly notes that the 'washing of the dishes appears to be the domestic equivalent to expiation and atonement, for having accepted the soup, the stewed cabbage, and the carved meat passed by Marx, Engels and Lenin, and for having sat "right in front of Stalin"'.¹² In other words, washing the dishes is an exercise in healing and in coming to terms with the past, and a potentially inclusive forum for participating in collective memory. It

may or may not be liberating from the haunting past at an individual level, but it is instrumental in preventing ignorance and oblivion. Visniec has repeatedly warned that post-Communist Romania has become a place for deliberate forgetting. This is why, through his prolific output in multiple genres (journalism, fiction and poetry in addition to drama), he considers it his mission to refocus our attention to the fact that what started off as a convivial meal with Marx and company, and ended as one of the major atrocities mankind has witnessed so far, should not be allowed to be erased from memory.

Visniec's alter ego, the writer-protagonist Penegarú is forced to share not only his cell but also his bed with other inmates. In *Juliet*, Visky describes a roofless mud hut as the forced domicile allocated to the deported family (mother and her seven children), and notes the lack of any furniture in the space. Visky's Juliet appears unaccompanied by her Romeo, and although the play is generally staged with just one performer, it is categorized by the author as a 'dialogue' as it brings to life a range of stories, places and situations. Visky favours fragmentation and non-linearity, and structures his play on Juliet's disparate flashbacks to her childhood, the family's arrest, the trial of the husband at a military court and aspects of the detention. In this way, *Juliet* institutes an alternative temporality with mythical accents, in which the past is superimposed upon the present.

Juliet references a multitude of *lieux de mémoire*, rummaging through an assortment of events and experiences that comprise her experience. Nora argues for the pertinence of these memory aids in explicating [French] history, and claims that a *lieu* is 'any significant entity [...] that by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.¹³ In his stage directions, Visky recommends a non-realistic set defined by light and sound effects, and Gábor Tompa's original production in 2002, featuring Enikő Szilágyi in a co-production by Thália Theatre Budapest and the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj, dispenses even with some of the props mentioned in the script. The stage is populated by a single chair, with a jacket draped over it. Andrea György claims that this jacket marks a presence [of the absent husband] that can never be 'removed' or dissociated from Juliet, and it is intended for the audience entering the intimate studio space to instantly absorb this present-ness.¹⁴ The trial scene, where the husband removes his wedding ring and returns it to his wife, Juliet, thus offering her freedom from further persecution, is the ultimate bond of love; as Juliet – instead of opting for independence from the commitment of marriage – assumes it two-fold and becomes twice betrothed: 'I am not an I and he is not a he.'¹⁵

The family located at the core of the play is Visky's own, him being the youngest child aged just over two at the time of deportation. Visky and his family remained in forced

accommodation in the concentration village of Lătești by the River Danube in the south of Romania between 1958 and 1964, until the regime decided to end political detentions. As Visky recalls, for him, ‘in the beginning there was persecution’, yet he is adamant to see persecution as a ‘blessing’, in the sense that it sustained a ‘thirst for freedom’ in him which he transmits to his protagonist in the play.¹⁶ Juliet as a mother can neither comprehend nor accept the suffering of her innocent children, and, although she is unable to change their material deprivation, she explores spiritual freedom via her protests oriented towards God (in whom she continues to believe, yet constantly wrestles with).

Juliet’s quest for freedom echoes the dissident writers in Visniec’s plays, since in communist Romania religious practice was on par with accessing and producing forbidden literature. The play is ‘structured upon the parallels between confinement and religious experience’,¹⁷ as the physical poverty of the detention space is aligned to the spiritual poverty of a godless era, atheism being a centrally imposed requirement in communist countries, and many of those deported to be ‘re-educated’ were members or families of the clergy. Director Gábor Tompa notes that it is ‘the religious language built into the play [that] transforms *Juliet* meaningfully into a broader parable, beyond which we can experience the authenticity of András Visky’s own story of imprisonment’.¹⁸ Indeed, Visky’s witnessing of the horrors of Stalinist deportation lends a tone of authenticity to his theatre towards which contemporary re-enactors of historical events in performance can only aspire. He draws on personal memory to capture snippets of history, and institutes dramatic representation as a legitimate medium in keeping collective memory alive. In this sense, there is no attempt at telling a new story; rather, Visky aims to establish connections with a universal mythological reservoir and to invite spectators to a mode of experiencing through immediacy and participation. Visky’s plays are ‘found stories’, both through their intertextual references (such as Shakespeare or the Bible) and their resonances with real life events, and are preoccupied with the loss of freedom as a form of injustice drawing on various permutations of captivity, detention and confinement.

In sum, Visky’s relatively recent approach to personal history testifies for the importance of allowing for temporal distance when dealing with memory in dramatic representation. His theatre of witness offers a highly charged and personal account of things unspeakable, and constitutes a priceless document of the era while it also transforms objective history into a mythic history. Visniec draws on publicly available data in order to dramatize the abuses of Stalinism and communism more generally in Romania, and establishes parallels with subsequent instances of political dissidence in order to suggest a line of resistance to, arguably, the most repressive totalitarian regime in Eastern Europe. Ultimately, Visniec’s ambition is to convey ‘the

essence of communism' rather than to carry out an act of public denunciation, not in the least because he contends that the latter has already been achieved by Soviet dissident writers such as Solzhenitsyn or Zinoviev. For both Visniec and Visky though, dealing with the subject matter constitutes a necessity and an act of utmost ethical duty, at a time when political disappointment persists, be it under the guise of more liberal regimes, as it is through the processes of embodiment that performance, history and memory can communicate and jointly defy oblivion.

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<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f2YV9Bn93Y> – András Visky interviewed for Artlab Chicago – accessed 22 Sept. 2011.

¹ An earlier version of this article was presented at the 'Things Unspeakable: Theatre after 1945' international and interdisciplinary conference on theatre and human rights, University of York, UK, 7-9 October 2011, and as an invited lecture at Arizona State University in the USA in March 2015.

² The playwright uses the original spelling of his name in Romanian publications, and the version Matéi Visniec in an international arena.

³ Klaić, p. xviii. The 'Great Conducator' refers to Nicolae Ceaușescu, leader of the Romanian Communist Party and president of Romania between 1965-1989.

⁴ Visniec, 2012, p. 14.

⁵ Yassar, p. 370.

⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f2YV9Bn93Y> Visky interview for Artlab Chicago – accessed 22 Sept. 2011.

⁷ Terms introduced by Fischer-Lichte at the 1999 'Kulturen des performativen' colloquium at Freie University Berlin.

⁸ Magiaru, p. 154.

⁹ Visniec quoted in Lungeanu, p. 45. My translation.

¹⁰ Visniec, in Korporaly (ed.) 2015.

¹¹ Orlich, pp. 9-13.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nora, p. vvii.

¹⁴ György, p. 135.

¹⁵ Visky, 2007, p. 42.

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4f2YV9Bn93Y> Visky interview for Artlab Chicago – accessed 22 Sept. 2011.

¹⁷ Cesereanu, in Visky, 2007, p. 98.

¹⁸ Blurb on back cover, Visky, 2007.
