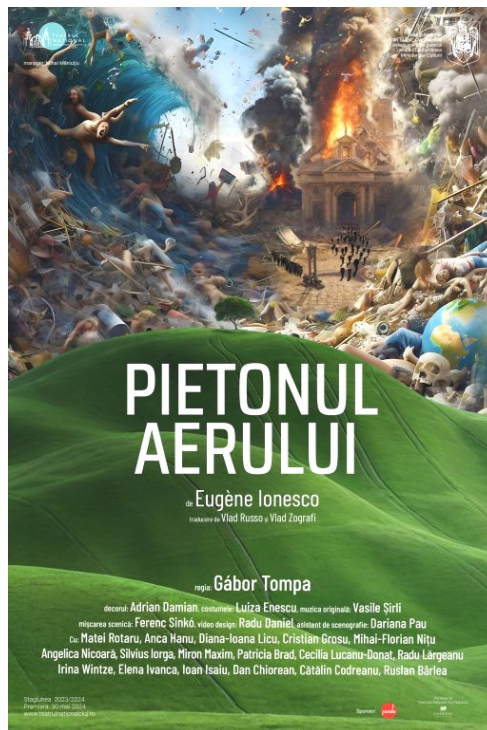


The Inflated, Absurd World of a Liberating Dream

PERFORMANCE REVIEW:

**Eugène Ionesco, *Pietonul aerului* (*The Air Walker*), by Gábor Tompa,
"Lucian Blaga" National Theatre, Cluj-Napoca, premiere: May 30, 2024**



Eugène Ionesco confessed that he perceived the world as being emptied of meaning, and reality, most of the time, as unreal. The feeling of unreality was expressed through his characters, who wander, tormented by anxieties,



failures, regrets, and the emptiness of their lives, or are depicted as lost beings in the meaninglessness of existence. His plays are a blend of fantasy, poetry, and nightmare on the one hand, and social and cultural critique on the other. They contain the turmoil of someone who realizes that life is hellish, and yet loves it with all its hellishness. A being that wants to be free, in a world that resembles a prison from which it cannot escape. Ionesco and his characters appear to be stunned by the absurdity of the universe, by the individual's inability to know and understand. They experience the revelation of Death, of Evil, and of an inadmissible existential condition. The identities of his characters are not clearly defined; they melt into others, change ages and roles, and evolve in an uncertain space and time, reproducing the vagueness of memories from a dream. In a dream, another kind of reality appears, in which the characters try to integrate by accepting conventions; the images become incoherent, overlapping, shifting from one plane to another. In the theatre of the absurd, the dreamlike follows its own laws, like in a game of mirrors, where characters have the freedom to act, in a constant state of mobility and transformation, where the irrational takes control.



A perfect connoisseur of Eugène Ionesco's works, whose texts he has staged memorably in *The Bald Soprano*, *Jacques or Submission*, *The Chairs*, *The New Tenant*, and *Rhinoceros*, director Gábor Tompa creates a true poetic dream in *The Air Walker*, a production of the "Lucian Blaga" National Theatre in Cluj. Written in 1962, during the Cold War, the play serves as a warning, recognized at the time and still relevant today. Drawing from Ionesco's stage directions, but in harmony with the geometry of the directorial concept, the geometry of space, brilliantly imagined by set designer Adrian Damian, coexists with the spirit of the text. "Immediately to the left, a country house in the English style [...] The house, as well as the landscape described below, must offer a dreamlike atmosphere. At the same time, this dreaminess must be created mainly through the means specific to a 'primitive' painter, a craftsman mimicking amateurism, and less through the means of the surrealist artist. [...] Everything is bathed in light, with no shadowed corners, no veils, etc. The rest of the stage represents a meadow with tall, very green, and fresh grass, on a hill that overlooks the valley; [...] The sky is very blue and very clear. A few trees on stage, etc.," notes Eugène Ionesco in his stage



directions, which are deeply sophisticated in their illustration by Adrian Damian, alongside the eloquent, vividly colored costumes by Luiza Enescu. The inflatable mattress with trees and columns, which appear and disappear effortlessly, serves the Ionescian universe through images reminiscent of naive paintings, while also suggesting the lack of consistency in the ideologies promoted by various groups, through the sudden deflation at the end. An inflated, absurd world, a universe of forms devoid of substance.



In the dialogues of *The Bald Soprano*, as well as in Gábor Tompa's 1992 staging, the characters become entangled in language, in its banality. In *The Air Walker*, Ionesco recontextualizes themes from *The Bald Soprano* through the group of characters who speak without saying anything, in a time without time, in another tragedy of language. The initial dialogue, convivial and akin to a textbook for learning a foreign language, cultivates the same expression of preciousity, the contradiction of appearance vs. essence, form without substance. As a tribute to the 1992 performance, in which the protagonists – puppets – emerged from a music box, in *The Air Walker*, the

opening sounds imitate the music box with the chords of the United Kingdom's anthem, and the characters are presented in a marionette-like manner, in a harmony of sound and movement. The remarkable songs, which span the entire performance, were composed by Vasile Șirli, accompanied by plastic, suggestive movements conceived by Ferenc Sinkó. In *The Air Walker*, director Gábor Tompa also shapes the character profiles in symbiosis with Ionesco's universe, where the anti-heroes appear as: "Puppets. Beings without faces. Rather: empty frames to which the actors can lend their own faces, their own persona. [...] In the endless and senseless words they speak, they can say whatever they want, they can express whatever they want, comedy, drama, humor, themselves." Thus, Cristian Grosu (The Journalist), Mihai-Florian Nițu (The First Englishman), Angelica Nicoară (The First Englishwoman), Silviu Iorga (The Little Boy, their son), Miron Maxim (The Second Englishman), Patricia Brad (The Second Englishwoman), Cecilia Lucanu-Donat (The Little Girl, their daughter), Radu Lărgeanu (John Bull), Irina Wintze (The First Old Englishwoman), Elena Ivanca (The Second Old Englishwoman), Ioan Isaiu (The Uncle-Doctor), Dan Chiorean (The Funeral Employee), Ruslan Bârlea (The Judge, The Executioner, The First Assessor), with expressiveness and craftsmanship, give shape to the characters, shading them with traits, sometimes with humor, defining the universe of absurd banality.

The main character is attributed biographical elements similar to those of Eugène Ionesco. Bérenger, subtly and inventively shaped by Matei Rotaru, is a famous playwright, with a wife and a daughter, a family to whom he feels very connected, differing from the other bearers of the same name, Bérenger, from *The Killer Without Salary*, *Rhinoceros*, or *The King is Dying*. He is less naive, more lucid, and at the same time more playful, at one point even approaching the age of his daughter Marthe, a mature little girl in her approach to things, full of affection for her father and mother, convincingly portrayed, with scenic intelligence, by Diana-Ioana Licu. The figure of the wife and that of the daughter, from the playwright's real life, are projected onto the images of the female characters Joséphine and Marthe. The text contains moments of marital harmony, serving as mirrors of the author's own couple.



The central image of the play is, however, flight, the act of moving through the air, an image that originates in a dream, a dream that is also connected to the mythological motif of Icarus, entering the sphere of archetypes and the logic governing the collective unconscious, as discussed by Jung. The foundation of the play lies in the idea that, in the past, humans were capable of flying, whereas modern man has lost this ability, which Bérenger tries to regain. Bérenger's flight is a liberating dream. What Bérenger sees from above (terror, wars, massacres, catastrophes) is the critical aspect of the social context, associated with the dreamlike substratum. Gábor Tompa, through his faithful interpretation of Ionesco's text, brings to the stage the essential data of the human condition, where the real and the unreal, the conscious and the unconscious, the concrete world and the dream intertwine. Joséphine, Bérenger's virtuous wife, portrayed with a wide range of stage abilities by Anca Hanu, aside from embodying the playwright's wife on stage, integrates within her emotions a part of the author's anxieties – fear of death, disappearance into nothingness, despair at the loss of loved ones. Joséphine is haunted by the image of her dead father, but the character of

Uncle-Doctor says he would still be alive. The sequences in which Joséphine appears are sometimes tragicomic, while others alternate with those typical of a dream, such as scenes in which her nightmares appear. The climax is reached at the moment when Joséphine is subjected to an “absurd trial,” Kafkaesque in nature, presided over by a giant judicial panel, with nightmarish-fantastic traits, an inspired video projection created by Radu Daniel, who is responsible for the video design of the production.



We also encounter the theme of the “biblical garden.” At certain moments, sometimes comedic, sometimes lyrical or tragic, the absurd alternates with religious symbolism; the silver bridge, the tree of the sky (*Axis Mundi*), which appears and disappears, or the Edenic gardens that will be restored according to Martha’s hopes at the end: “Maybe everything will be sorted out... maybe the flames will be extinguished... maybe the ice will break and melt... maybe the abysses will be filled... maybe... the gardens... the gardens...” The column, the tree, or the bush, the silver ladder are symbols

meant to signal the supernatural of divine nature. The pedestrian from the Anti-World (Cătălin Codreanu), conceived with transparent meaning by Gábor Tompa, evokes the image of a Christ from an overturned world, coming from a space that is the essence of eternal Evil.

Tamara CONSTANTINESCU

*Facultatea de Teatru, Universitatea Națională de Arte „George Enescu” Iași,
tamara02_02@yahoo.com*