

PART II

DRAMA

1. IONESCIAN AND BECKETTIAN MASKS AND STAGE PROPS

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Abstract: *In modern theatre shows, the masks were used to create typologies, to dis-individualize characters, to emphasize the ceremonial character of staging. The mask reveals the ritual roots of the genre, infusing the dramatic experience with more detachment, releasing it from the style and dynamics of realistic drama. The antiheroes / anti-heroines in the Absurd Drama appear as grotesque automata, drained of any human substance, like masks and puppets easy to handle. The playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd do not necessarily use the mask as disguise. The human figure becomes materialized in true masks. Stage props can have a plurality of meanings. Ionesco's stage props can be understood as an attribute of the character, a distinguishing feature, that characterizes the antihero / anti-heroine, acquiring symbolic value. Beckett brings on the stage objects that overpower the spirit as the body separates from it. But the object can be bearer of humorous messages, tending to balance the feeling of despair or finitude. The absurd drama plays, the Ionescian or Beckettian ones cannot be reduced to the interpretations offered to traditional plays that have a conflict which can be summarized in narrative form. The essential feature of the plays indebted to the Theatre of the Absurd is precisely that they motivate us to find multiple reading versions.*

Key words: *theater of the absurd, Ionesco, Beckett, Bible, birthday, meaning*

Dance and mask are related to myth and ritual. "Mask pervades the entire historical time and all meridians. Its presence is an indication of the search for truth about the world and the gods. The term derives from the Italian *maschera* (4th century) and has an obvious connection with *travesti*, met in the Carnival celebrations. [...] The mask is designed to lend the "actor" the hero's life, prompting those who see it to meditate at a «reality» of beyond (the world of the gods, of earthly beings, hidden self, etc.) or a return to the beginning of the universe, but constantly keeping the factual position."¹⁰⁶ The mask can be seen in theatrical shows of all time, from Greek tragedy to the modern drama, where the masks are used either with the aim of creating typologies, of dis-individualising characters, or to emphasize the ceremonial character of the staging. Thus, drama returns to ritual, converting its values into aesthetic values. The mask infuses the dramatic experience with more detachment, releasing it from the style and dynamics of realistic drama.

Antiheroes / anti-heroines in the Absurd Drama appear as grotesque automata, drained of any human substance, like masks and puppets easy to handle. "The principle of un-masking, of manifesting a critical attitude towards

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¹⁰⁶ Sorin Crișan, *The Game of Fools*, Dacia Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, pp.74-75

reality, by using the mask of the clown designates a fundamental process of the grotesque and absurd creation.”¹⁰⁷ “*The Bald Soprano*” at the Hungarian Theatre in Cluj (1992) in Tompa Gábor's production, for example, illustrates these ideas through the absurd vision conveyed by his directorial vision. The “*Rhinoceros*” show signed by the same Tompa Gábor at “Radu Stanca” Theatre, Sibiu (2006) is the representation of uniformity and a replication of Evil, in which the characters metamorphosed in rhinoceros, have a stage behaviour that leads to ritual, wearing identical masks and costumes. “Ionescian paraphernalia are all in place: the ritual movement that hides, in reality, the mechanism, the deformed masks (as in Beckett are the clown hats) and overcoats/raincoats to the ground which distort. In *Rhinoceros* everything is gray, dull, identical, pyrographed.”¹⁰⁸ Not incidentally, in the play “*Rhinoceros*” staged by Claudiu Goga at “Vasile Alecsandri “ National Theatre (2011) ” rhino heads carried on the shoulders of the characters at the end of the show do not have eyes, nor mouth, they only have horns, symbol of latent intolerance, instinctual violence that smoulders and awaits. Paradoxically, people metamorphosed into rhinoceros, by the frequency of their appearance shrouded in a mist which dissolves precise outlines, cease to be hated, they do not frighten anymore. On the contrary, they arouse wonder and curiosity. We believe that it is by doing so that they are actually threatening. That is, through the possibility of our acceptance, of the consent that leads to membership.”¹⁰⁹

Mask appears in the text itself. In *Jack, or The Submission*, Roberta's mask which has three noses, as Ionesco himself highlighted, refers to myths, to Mesopotamian agricultural deities and, at the same time to those of sexuality and fecundity. The dramatic, theatrical mask reveals the ritual roots of the genre, however its function is not only mythical, but one revealing of theatricality. If, in the beginning, drama brought on stage especially mythical subjects and actors' faces were covered with masks, as time went on, the masks were abandoned and descending into ritual became an exception. In the absurd drama, in Ionesco's particularly, the characters are trying to break free through ritual from the exile they are subjected to, to dominate a hostile reality, as a sign of the rift between man and the world. The ceremonial of death, of the passage of time in *Exit the King*, the ritual dance in *Jack, or The Submission*, the dance which accompanies the metamorphosis of the rhinos, or the dance of the metamorphosing witches in *Macbett* are just a few examples. In *Hunger and Thirst* there appear three types of rituals: a religious one, a military one and a prison one, in which the character is trying to save himself/herself from a tragic reality, from the rigidity of exile.

¹⁰⁷ Mircea Cristea, *The Human Condition in the Theatre of the Absurd*, Didactic and Pedagogic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 61

¹⁰⁸ Iulia Popovici, “They Say Some Rhinos Were Walking Free Around the City” published in ‘The Day’, March 6th, 2006, in “Eugene Ionesco in Stage in Romania”, work designed and conducted by Florica Ichim, Cheiron Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 90.

¹⁰⁹ Anca-Maria Rusu, “About Unicorns and Bicorns”, “The Theatre Today”, no. 5-6, 2011

The playwrights of the Absurd do not use the mask as a disguise. Beckett neutralizes the mimics of the actor, turning his face into a real mask, abandoning the psychological expression that conveys information about the character's feelings. In *Comedy*, he specifies in the early stage directions, that the characters are just impassive faces with atonal voices.

The human figure becomes materialized in true object masks. This is how appear Nagg's and Nell's heads "with a very white face" in *Endgame or Krapp in Krapp's Last Tape* who presents the bluish nose on a white face of a typical clown mask. This loss of meaning of the facial expression is recovered, for example, in *Waiting for Godot* through increased mobility of the body, gestures and movements, with which it is externalized, in fact, the character's inner state, and in *The Last Tape* the pantomime of repetitive gestures emphasizes the absence of genuine human feelings. This fixed expression of the actor during acting, in Beckett's shows, this paucity of facial means is sometimes inconsistent with the design of gesture language, the mobility of body movements, suggesting an escape from normality, a break from the patterns.

Mask, as Vito Pandolfi stated, is the principle of the game in life and illustrates the very essence of the grotesque. The contemporary world, a world turned upside down, filled with absurd relationships between individuals, wars and terrorist attacks, the nonsense and the lack of a well-defined purpose of existence, a world in which the divine is perceived as absent, can be illustrated on stage only by means of the grotesque, the tragic farce. In this respect, Ionesco, in *Notes and Counter Notes*, stated: "If the value of drama consisted of self-evident effects, they should be straightforward and more, they should be highlighted, be emphasized to the maximum. Pushing drama beyond this intermediate zone that is neither drama nor literature, is to return it to its own framework, its natural limits. You should not hide the strings, but made them more visible, deliberately obvious, go in the depth of the grotesque, in caricature, beyond the pale irony of witty comedies. Not comedy, but farce, extreme burlesque caricature. Humour, yes, but with the help of burlesque. A rough comic, devoid of refinement, excessive. No dramatic comedies. But a return to the unbearable. Everything to be pushed to the paroxysm, where the sources of tragic dwell. Let there be a drama of violence: violently comic, violently dramatic. Psychology should be avoided or rather be given a metaphysical dimension. Drama lies in extreme exaggeration of the feelings, an exaggeration that dislocates flat everyday reality. Also a dislocation, a disarticulation of language."¹¹⁰

Grotesque was defined as either "a game with the absurd", either as a synonym of the absurd. Grotesque was frequently the form the absurd took in depicting the human condition, highlighting inconsistencies, the hardships of reality; from the point of view of form, the grotesque opposes classical regularity, composite structures, Baroque and mannerist irregularity. The tragic

¹¹⁰ Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, translation and foreword by Ion Pop, Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992,p.5

and the comic are intertwined in a "smile mixed with horror" as Ionesco said. Modern grotesque replaces the notion of absolute with that of absurd, of an operational mechanism beyond any human control, becoming a true philosophy developed into the absurd, having an impact on the entire dramatic structure from worldview, to antiheroes, situations and conflicts. It requires the image of an alienated universe, full of surprising metamorphoses, deprived of the criterion of rational understanding in which everything is possible, changing, often nightmarish.

The aesthetic category of grotesque expresses in a "skillful" way a lonely world, full of dangers. It involves the representation of unlikelihood, of fantastic exaggerations, of paradox. In absurd drama, by means of the grotesque, daily reality is particularly exposed where the antihero becomes the clown of an irrational, meaningless world.

There is no longer any clear distinction between man and animal, between man and plant, there appear distortions, exaggerations of in the appearance of the objects, beings, phenomena. The worlds portrayed are disproportionate, in which space and time are subject to other laws, bringing to the stage a "grotesque reality".

Ionesco and Beckett's texts rely on aesthetics in which a large part of the traditional drama structures disappears. Among them there may be mentioned specific elements such as: the cyclical, repetitive situations and dialogues, the communication gap, the cancellation of the "hero's" presence, placing the centre of gravity of the play outside it, thanks to the character who became absent, to the approach of the theatrical expression, the absurdity of the behavior in and between pairs of characters, the entwining of the comic and the tragic.

Beckett is a true master of theatrical signs. He reformed the dialogue down to its substance, giving up the word, when it may not help (see *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*). The characters sometimes turn to non-verbal forms of communication using robotic, puppet gestures, pantomime or gags from the circus arena.

Eugene Ionesco's plays are sometimes allegories of human life maladjusted to the social environment, satirical attacks against the unwillingness and inability of the individual to act as well as the Character, the lonely being in *A Hell of a Mess*. The author, starting from the desire to emphasize the limits of speech as a means of communication, highlights the power of other theatrical signs to complete and enhance the meanings. Therefore, not only Ionesco, but in general, the absurd drama, what cannot be revealed by using the word is encoded in signs and symbols. The props that invade, overcrowding the stage, almost crushing the characters in *The New Tenant*, *The Chairs*, *Amédée*, or *How to Get Rid of It*, *Victims of Duty* may also have a plurality of meanings. The Ionescian stage props can be understood as an emblem of the character. Without being possible to be separated from him/her, becoming a hallmark, they characterize the antihero/anti-heroine, gaining symbolic value. The corpse in *Amédée*, or *How to Get Rid of It* contains the image of a sin, an error occurred in

the couple years ago which cannot be overcome. Also, the corpse, which is living matter brought into the decaying phase, symbolizes in Ionesco's text, the death of love that was once "alive" and which has died, entering the stage of "decomposition".

The set of furniture that buries *The New Tenant* builds the portrait of the depersonalized individual, lost in the labyrinth of matter that engulfs him. "The assault of the space on the Ionescian hero is accomplished by the proliferation of object-oriented world. Things build up in a mechanical disorder, out of control. Matter creates matter; chairs, tureens, cups, eggs, mushrooms, furniture, dead bodies, cars, rhinoceros heads, stifle the individual, overwhelming him. The heaping of objects, their frantic movement create a world subject to laws which converts the contingent elements into hallucinatory rules of a universe in which man is expelled. The mechanism and image of the proliferation are ultimately a sign, a symbol of death."¹¹¹

Beckett brings on the stage objects that overpower the spirit as the body separates from it. In *Happy Days*, Winnie tries to define herself, depending on the bag full of memories contained in the objects of daily use that she handles, while her body is captive under the mound of earth. But the object can be bearer of humorous messages, tending to balance the feeling of despair or finitude.

So are the carrots, leftovers of a biscuit, turnips, worn-out shoes, bananas ready for the slipping gag, the top hats as marks of the tragicomic of human existence. Those who try to discover in Beckett's plays "the key to understanding" them, trying to prove in well-defined terms what message these disclose, they can see that many times, the show goes beyond the initial intentions of the author, and appear much richer, more complex and more open to a lot of other possible interpretations. For example, as Beckett himself showed in his writings, form, structure and emotion in art cannot be separated from the content, of its conceptual substance; simply because a work of art, as a whole, represents its meaning, because what it is said in it is inextricably linked to the way in which this is said and cannot be said in any other way.

Ionesco in his journal pages, in interviews, in the conversations he had, tried to provide avenues for decoding his plays. In contrast, Beckett refused to comment on his writings. *Godot*, for example, the biggest conundrum in the history of the theatre, the essence of expectation, may be an allegory of fate or a metaphor for the faith. Each critic or producer of shows is trying to unravel the meaning of Beckettian texts, depending on the path he follows.

Symbols contain, in their substance, the mystery of a possible relationship of the individual with the divinity, astonishment and concern at the human condition, despair and inability to give meaning to existence. Other symbolic meanings in the absurd drama, point to the annihilation of human ideals, to the man crushed by stress and daily worries; or to the man reduced to "nothing" in the face of the complexity of the universe. In *Happy Days*, Winnie soliloquizes and Willie is the one who incites her to speak. But Winnie talks only for the

¹¹¹Anca-Maria Rusu, *The Concentric Circles of the Absurd*, Artes Publishing House, Iași, 2009, pp.126-127

sake of talking while her gestures express a completely different state. Overwhelmed by the angst of the passage of time towards death, Winnie succeeds in conveying through word messages other messages than through the body language, illustrated by handling objects of daily use. Staging a show with this Beckettian text allows its producers to find multiple meanings, both in the words and gestures of the character.

In the 1985-1986 theatrical season at "Bulandra Theatre, under the "wand" of Mihail Măniuțiu with Irina Petrescu in the role of Winnie, the director decodes this one as being a clown figure, "a modern lunatic" oscillating between burlesque pathos and discreet comic, a desperate, hopeless character, shadowed by an external eye which reflects her and watches her at the same time.¹¹² In the first staging of this play in Romania, implemented in 1960, having I. Igiroșianu as director, Ana Barcan introduced a warm, generous, good Winnie using the tone of a "caring mother", without free sentimentality related to the dying condition of the man. To wait means to suffer the action of time, which means a constant change."¹¹³ The difficulty of staging the plays of Beckett comes especially from the fact that they are even more devoid of conflict than of other authors of the Absurd. "Instead of a linear development, it presents the author's insight on the human condition, through a basic polyphonic method; they are asking the public to face organized structures of images and statements that are interwoven and must be understood in their entirety rather different themes in a symphony, gaining meaning through the simultaneity of their interaction."¹¹⁴

The fact remains that the plays of the Absurd Drama, the plays of Beckett and Ionesco cannot be reduced to the interpretations of the traditional plays that have a conflict that can be summarized in narrative form. The illusion that it might be revealed "some key" to help uncover the secret that might bring out the conventional-type conflict, well concealed in such a text, remains only an illusion. The essential feature of the plays indebted to the Absurd Drama is precisely that they motivate us to find multiple reading versions, of several ways and possibilities of deciphering the meanings. Through its power of generalization, the Theatre of the Absurd encourages allegory and parable, providing show producers with different ways of interpretation.

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¹¹² See Mihail Măniuțiu, Winnie - A Celebration of Vitality" in "Twentieth Century", no. 298-299-300/1985, pp. 201-202-203

¹¹³ See Ana Barcan, A Pioneering Beckettian Act in "Twentieth Century", no. 298-299-300/1985, pp. 199-200

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