A CHALLENGE TO AMERICAN PRAGMATISM: STAGING O'NEILL'S *HUGHIE* BY ALEXA VISARION

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Abstract: *"Hughie or the Tale of a Memory" is the working title of the first play that the experienced artist Alexa Visarion has directed for the independent theater (a production released in 2017). The purpose of my paper, which is an investigation of several drama reviews that discuss the play's first night, is to prove that – despite difficulties with cultural reception and public taste (given a text by O'Neill that is 80 years old, as well as the director's first time with an informal theater production) - this performance was a succesful attempt at communicating and debating the conflicted values of American pragmatism and equally a crowning of the Romanian director's effort to stage O'Neill's plays in our country. Relying on insights from the Amercan doctrine of Pragmatism, I will try to show how O'Neill's text challenges philosophical premises that are inbred in the American status-quo, thereby making his plays "anti-materialistic" by promoting a fatalistic approach to existence.*
Key words: reception; pragmatism; fatalism; performance; Romanian-America cultural connections;

Introduction

To approach a text by Eugene O'Neill in the 21st century means to be aware that you are dealing with a writer who, despite having been part of American culture and having enjoyed the benefits of celebrity, nonetheless made it his life-long mission to criticize the political system of his country, to militate for the "misbegotten" ones, people for whom the American Dream will always be illusory yet who insist on living their lives in this illusion, because what makes a dreamer's life special is exactly the beauty of their unreacheable dream. Following O'Neill, the majority of classic American playwrights have dwelt upon this hybris and have produced significant, worldy-renowned drama: Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, David Mamet, Sam Shepard etc. In their plays, material succes is usually what is sought after but frequently the dreamers harbor a different illusion – one connected to an impossible love affair, a dream-job or a paradisical place where they could finally be happy. Sometimes, a misbegotten's biggest challenge is being able to give up drinking, step out of the door into the light

of the street and just lead a normal existence. Eventually, however, these misfortunate creatures are inevitably shattered by the very impossiblity of their aspirations and the final resignation to their inescapable doom is soul-rending.

O'Neill's *Hughie* is an encapsulation of this moral struggle that all significant plays by the same author exhibit. "Erie" Smith is a typical O'Neillian character, a former player that has run out of luck and is being threatened by a gang to which he owes money. Superstitiously, he connects his prolonged spell of ill fortune to the death of a close acquaintance, the night clerk Hughie. The play's conflict is centered on Erie's desperate attempt to find a replacement for his former side-kick in the present night-clerk of the hotel that he is usually staying at, a guy named Charlie Hughes.

The fact that director Visarion Alexa has selected this play for staging at Unteatru is relevant for several reasons: it is a one-act play, which recommends it for an independent, low-budget theater production, it was an occasion to celebrate Alexa's 70th anniversary by staging O'Neill's last play, which at the same time represented the director's final statement about producing O'Neill's plays in Romania. For the author of the present paper, the background regarding Alexa Visarion's involvement with Eugene O'Neill's Romanian reception is more than familiar, having constituted the original impulse for embarking on my doctoral project[47]. However, despite the director's continuing efforts, his cultural project of reviving O'Neillean drama on the Romanian stage was invalidated by unsupportive cultural agents[48].

These being said, I will focus on the interaction between the production and its audience, through the prism of critical interpretation (a survey of several drama reviews). Having seen the performance and based on a previous analysis of the play's contents (its dramatic anatomy, so to speak, which in this case involves an incursion into O'Neillean anti-pragmatism), I

[47] My thesis was defended in 2012 and published in book form in 2018, after the release of the presently-debated production. Thus, the volume has gained a certain, unhoped-for circularity: the onset of my research was given by Alexa Visarion's organization of an "Eugene O'Neill" Symposium in 2003 (at the National Theater in Bucharest and in celebration of 50 years since the playwright's death), while the concluding contribution was brought by the same director's final staging of *Hughie* in 2017.

[48] I am referring to Alexa's project of the *Romanian-American Artist's Theater*, bearing O'Neill's name. The theater was intended to stage at first O'Neill's plays (a revival of *Anna Christie* and *A Touch of the Poet* was already underway in 2004, when I joined the team as an occasional translator, working with the actors in order to adapt O'Neill's lines into contemporary vernacular) and onwards there were planned other productions of classical American drama. Unfortunately, these initial efforts were suppressed by the National Theater direction, mostly due to internal political dissensions, and the project did not bear fruit.

will try to assess the succes of the attempted transposition of the play's conceptual universe onto the Romanian stage.

Romanian Resilience versus American Pragmatism

In an instant of self-irony perhaps, Alexa Visarion decided to celebrate his 50 years of direction by symbolically staging O'Neill's *Hugie* at Unteatru (an independent theater house), a production which was about "the meeting of generations from the world of theater, in a project that defies pragmatism." (*Contemporanul*: 20) On the surface, a very honorable intention of looking at things from outside the high cultural forum of state theater, a reputed director and respected professor of theater direction at UNATC (Alexa is a former head of the doctoral school) reaching out to the independent world of small theater and giving less known performers a chance at glory by association with his name. Looking deeper into the matter, I would argue that Alexa's choice was an informed cultural one, since the state theater houses have a very selective policy and a rigid choice of repertory, working only with enrolled directors (or with collaborators that are found to be "convenient" – an adjective that would hardly suit Alexa's personality). Moreover, Unteatru had staged and is staging several other American plays[49], whose orientation is close to O'Neill's one-act dramas (that is, expressionistic or existentialist). I consider it, however, to have been an ironic choice since *Hughie* is - as one of the reviewers put it - "an essay about failure" and also Alexa's attempts to found an independent theater enterprise dedicated to O'Neill were doomed from the onstart… therefore, what we are looking at is a case of two-fold failure paradoxically crowning a famous director's career, who – ironically I believe – has chosen O'Neill's play to celebrate his life-long achievements, which equals an expression of disappointment with the world's futility and vanity. In a way, Alexa's final directing statement is a replica of O'Neill's deathbed quipping: "Born in a hotel room and, goddamn it, died in a hotel room! " – with the spectral image of the impersonal transitory space looming large all over the script in *Hughie*[50].

Reviewing the concepts of American pragmatism[51], I would like to focus on "thought as an instrument or tool for prediction, problem solving

[49] *The Sunset Limited* by Cormack McCarthy and *Ages of the Moon* by Sam Shepard

[50] Erie Smith's prolonged conversation with the clerk is in fact a postponement of entering the chamber of death which is the solitary hotel room upstairs where he will commit suicide, which makes the hotel lobby death's antechamber where – paradoxically – the characters may still entertain the illusion of life and dreams of success.

[51] **Pragmatism** is a philosophical tradition that began in the United States around 1870. Its origins are often attributed to the philosophers William James, John Dewey, and Charles Sanders Peirce. Peirce later described it in his pragmatic maxim: "Consider the practical effects of the objects of your conception. Then, your conception of those effects is the whole of your conception of the object." (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pragmatism)

and action" (cf. Wikipedia) and to say that O'Neill's human wrecks are deprived of *the very pragmatic virtue of common sense*, being unable to perceive their own plight or deluding themselves that they could get out of it, as Erie Smith does. According to the doctrine, "most philosophical topics — such as the nature of knowledge, language, concepts, meaning, belief, and science — are all best viewed in terms of their practical uses and successes", following which the philosophy of pragmatism "emphasizes the practical application of ideas by acting on them to actually test them in human experiences" (idem). This very act of *testing the pragmatic notions by experience* is – ironically – the test at which most O'Neillean characters fail, proving themselves unable to subsist outside the veil of illusion they have shrouded themselves in. Thus, the poster of the production very clearly reveals the plight of the main character: his entanglement in self-delusion.

Figure no. 1

Since pragmatism focuses on a "changing universe rather than an unchanging one, as the Idealists, Realists and Thomists had claimed" (cf. Wikipedia), we conclude that the philosophy of O'Neillean characters is rather idealistic and on this base we may infer an affinity with the Romanian "fatalistic" attitude as exhibited in the foundational ballad *Mioritza.* Moreover, idealism does not necessarily presuppose pessimism[52] – as the

[52] As some critics noted, the attitude of the Romanian shepherd, when forewarned of the murder plot, is not defeatist but takes into account the possibility of death, giving his instructions under a hypothetical "and *if* I were to die…"

millennial experience of survival by our people proves – on the contrary, it seems that idealism is just another facet of resilience.

The Play's Anatomy

Hopefully, a few excerpts from the play will bring us closer to demonstrating the tenets of American pragmatism being challenged by O'Neill's character construct. I will start with the stage directions, which in O'Neill's drama are as important as the lines themselves (especially the parenthetical references):

> SCENE: The desk and a section of the lobby of a small hotel on a West Side Street in midtown New York. It is between 3 and 4 A.M. of a day in the summer of 1928.
> It is one of those hotels, built in the decade 1900-10 on the side streets of the Great White Way sector, which began as respectable second class but soon were forced to deteriorate in order to survive. *Following the First World War and Prohibition, it had given up all pretense of respectability, and now is anything a paying guest wants it to be, a third class dump, catering to the catch-as-catch-can trade. But still it does not prosper. It has not shared in the Great Hollow Boom of the twenties. The Everlasting Opulence of the New Economic Law has overlooked it.* It manages to keep running by cutting the overhead for service, repairs, and cleanliness to a minimum." (O'Neill, 1988: 831)

From the onset, the audience is confronted with an image of failure that the hotel embodies, just as the end-of-the-line station that Blanche DuBois has to descend at in *A Streetcar Named Desire.* The fact that in parallel with this enterprise, others have prospered and been part of the Great Economic Boom of the twenties (derisively given a sarcastic appellation, that equates economic with hollow, thereby suggesting the spiritual emptiness usually associated with material success) – which is said to have "overlooked" the premises – makes this hotel the likely placement of the action involving more representatives of the "misbegotten" lot of humanity so dear to O'Neill. The time of the action is in keeping with the characters' mood and appearance, which I will analyze below.

In order of appearance, the characters are

> The Night Clerk, who exhibits the following characteristics:
>
> - Sits on the stool, facing front, his back to the switchboard.
> - There is nothing to do. He is not thinking. He is not sleepy.
>
> He simply droops and stares acquiescently at nothing, waiting for the end of his shift.

- He has been a clerk in New York Hotels so long he can tell time by sounds in the street.
- In appearance, he is overall "without character" and "his blank brown eyes contain no discernible expression. One would say they had even forgotten how it feels to be bored".
- He wears an ill-fitting, old and over-polished, blue serge suit.
- Upon the other man's entrance, "his gummy lips part automatically in a welcoming The –Patron-Is-Always-Right grimace, intended as a smile."
- His big uneven teeth are in bad condition. (831).

and "ERIE" SMITH, introduced to the audience as "a teller of tales":

- He walks to the desk with a breezy familiar air.
- He wears a light grey suit cut in the extreme, tight –waisted, Broadway mode, the coat open to reveal an old and faded but expensive silk shirt in a shade of blue that sets teeth on edge, and a gay red and blue foulard tie (…)[53]
- He carries a Panama hat and mops his face with a silk handkerchief; his expensive silk shirt of a daring blue is old and faded and his tie is stained by perspiration.
- He is consciously a Broadway sport and a Wise Guy – the type of small fry gambler and horse player, living hand-to-moth on the fringe of the rackets.
- He and his kind imagine they are in the Real Know, cynical oracles of the One True Grapevine.
- There is something phony about his characterization of himself, some sentimental softness behind it which doesn't belong in the hard-boiled picture. (832).

Rather unwillingly, the two characters engage in conversation and go to a first name basis, with Erie offering Hughes plentiful insight into his whereabouts and the occasional wise advice, such as "Take my tip, Pal. Don't never know nothin'. Be a sap and stay healthy." (833). On his part, Hughes pretends to listen to Erie's "gabbing", trying to forget about his aching feet and repeatedly wishing his chatty new acquaintance would go to bed (in the stage directions, Erie is referred to as 492 – the room's number – by Hughes). Their dialogue (or rather Erie's monologue accompanied by Hughes' abstracted thoughts and circumstantial muttering), acutely

[53] Judging by the color code, the author might have intended to portray Erie as a grotesque version of Uncle Sam.

punctuated by revealing stage directions, soon takes absurdist overtones and is darkly humorous, occasionally with sinister overtones:

Figure no. 2

ERIE (*He pauses – boastfully*) Some queens I've brought here in my time, Brother – frails from the Follies, or the Scandals, or the Frolics, that'd knock your eye out! And I can still make 'em. You watch. I ain't slippin'. (*He looks at the Night Clerk expecting reassurance but the Clerks' mind has slipped away to the clanging bounce of garbage cans in the outer night. He is thinking: A job I'd like. I'd bang those cans louder than they do! I'd wake up the whole damned city!" Erie mutters disgustedly to himself*) Jesus, what a dummy! *(He makes a move in the direction of the elevator, off right front – gloomily)* Might as well hit the hay, I guess.

NIGHT CLERK – (comes to – with the nearest approach to feeling he has shown in many a long night – approvingly) Good night, Mr. Smith. I hope you have a good rest. *(But Erie stops, glancing around the deserted lobby with forlorn distaste, jiggling the room key in his hand.)* (837).

Little by little, and against the Night Clerk's will, Erie reveals to the latter how come he and Hughie bonded so well:

> Christ, it's lonely. I wish Hughie was here. By God, if he was, I'd tell him a tale that'd make his eyes pop! The bigger the story the harder he'd fall. He was that king of sap. He thought gambling was romantic. I guess he saw me like a sort of dream guy he'd like to be if he could take a chance. I guess he lived a sort of double life listening to me gabbin' about hittin' the high spots. Come to figger it, I'll bet he even cheated on his wife that way, using me and my dolls. *(He chuckles.)* No wonder he linked me, huh? (845).

The above speech sample is an encapsulation of how O'Neill's text challenges the pragmatic doctrine, philosophically speaking. While for William James the truth was that which could be directly experienced or something with immediate consequences in reality[54], for Erie the lie has exactly the same function – as long as he can find someone to believe (in) him. However, James draws our attention that it is experience which ultimately corrects our perception of truth:

> Expedient in almost any fashion, and expedient in the long run and on the whole, of course; for what meets expediently all the experience in sight won't necessarily meet all farther experiences equally satisfactorily. Experience, as we know, has ways of BOILING OVER, and making us correct our present formulas. (James)

Erie won't allow himself a truthful perception; moreover, he feels an urgent need to suck in others and make them accomplices in his self-aggrandizing quest. Therefore, EXPERIENCE, for Erie Smith (the "wise guy") is damaging because he ultimately has to acknowledge that he is a failure, running away from engagements and leading a dissipated existence. Nevertheless, up to the very end, he desperately exchanges truth for lies and seeks an audience for his illusion-making act. Cheating and tall tales have by this point become an addiction, as he gambles reality for an illusory state of happiness: the belief that he has "all the luck", with the sympathetic night clerk as a witness. Hughie or Hughes (the "sucker") is the necessary sidekick who validates this pipe-dream for Erie. Occasionally, though, Erie confesses to his deceitfulness yet he seems to delight in it:

> I sure took him around with me in tales and showed him one hell of a time. *(He chuckles – then seriously)* And, d'you know, it done me good too, in a way. Sure. I'd get to seein' myself like he seen me. (…) Oh, I was wise I was kiddin' myself. I ain't a sap. But what the hell, Hughie loved it, and it didn't cost nobody nothin', and if every guy along Broadway who kids himself was to drop dead there wouldn't be nobody left. Ain't it the truth, Charlie? (O'Neill, 1988: 846).

The above quote exemplifies once more, how O'Neill twists the pragmatic notions until they acquire a certain ambiguity or even duality, like the two faces of a coin. Thus, despite being nonsensical, the apparent monologue suddenly turns into a dialogue which is meaningful for the

[54] 'The true, to put it very briefly, is only the expedient in the way of our thinking, just as the right is only the expedient in the way of our behaving. (W. James)

audience: "NIGHT CLERK *(His glassy eyes stare through Erie's face. He stammers deferentially)* Truth? I'm afraid I didn't get – What's the truth?

ERIE (hopelessly) Nothing, Pal." [55]

After proudly recounting how he paid homage to Hughie at his funeral (by allegedly ruining himself in the process), Erie resumes the idea once more for the sake of emphasis: "Hughie liked to kid himself he was my pal. *(He adds sadly.)* And so he was, at that – even if he was a sucker. *(He pauses, his false poker face as nakedly forlorn as an organ grinder's monkey's…)"* (847) Towards the end of their dialogue, it seems that there can be no mental connection between the two characters, each one of them drifting away on their own. While Erie is still thinking of Hughie and musing about the meaningless of existence, Charlie seems to be talking to himself in a way that is meant in fact to address the audience:

> ERIE (*breaks the silence – bitterly resigned*) But Hughie's better off, at that, being dead. *He's got all the luck*. He needn't do no worrying now. He's out of the racket. I mean, the whole goddamned racket. I mean life.
> NIGHT CLERK (*kicked out of his dream – with detached, pleasant acquiescence*) Yes, it is a goddamned racket when you stop to think, isn't it, 492? But we might as well make the best of it, because – Well, you can't burn it all down, can you? There's too much steel and stone. There'd always be something left to start it again. (848)

Figure no. 3

[55] To follow their argument would be to obtain the following judgement: truth being nothing, the corollary is that nothing is true, so lies are everything! William James would decidedly have been baffled by this reversal of logic...

Charlie's retort is an exasperated existential moan, yet – as we have grown accustomed by now – his lines can be reverted to bring a surge of optimism, which is the note on which the play ends. When all hope seems to be lost, Charlie is suddenly converted to Erie's lying game, accepting it as the only possible escape from a stifling "reasonable" (but in fact absurd) reality. When he thinks of how the "great" Arthur Rothstein plays poker, Charlie is entranced and Erie suddenly becomes important to him because he is familiar with that renowned player. And since Charlies has accepted to play the sucker part, Erie immediately joins him in adopting the wise guy role:

> Say, Charlie, why didn't you put me wise before, you was interested in gambling? Hell, I got you all wrong, Pall. I been tellin' myself, this guy ain't like old Hughie. He ain't got no sportin' blood. He's just a dope. *(generously)*Now I see you're a right guy. Shake. *(He shoves out his hand which the Clerk clasps with a limp pleasure. Erie goes on with gathering warmth and self-assurance.)* That's the stuff. You and me'll get along. I'll give you all the breaks, like I give Hughie.[56] (550)

Figure no. 4

In the play, when the curtain falls, the two characters are caught up in a game of "craps" (that is, dice) – with Erie's "soul" being "purged of grief, his confidence restored." (851). The only changes that the director made to the script are the misterious apparition, just before the end, of a woman's figure, swirling across the scene[57], following which Erie gets entangled in the plastic

[56] I consider that the use of the first form of the verb "I give" suggests that for Erie, the replacement has been done, like a recharging of the batteries. Now he can be lucky again, even if he feels death getting closer.

[57] possibly a symbolic death figure, like the lady in black that the sailor Hank visualizes before he swoons in *Bound East for Cardiff*

sheet at the back of the stage and the black-out follows. Erie's final words resound peremptorily in the audience's ears: "He's gone. Like we all gotta go. Him yesterday, me or you tomorrow, and who cares, and what's the difference? It's all in the racket, huh?" (851)

Critical Opinion

> Alexa Visarion wants to demonstrate that even in the modest context of independent theater it is possible to illustrate a text through a minutely conducted visualization…Each moment is minutely conceived by the director who possesses the science of theatrical illustration through details. Its vision abounds in certain impressive theatrical effects, while others are forcibly brought forth…The director has thought through every scene, but the effects placed in a restrained perimeter are too abundant, since in the independent theater the intimate dramatic convention is what carries the desired emotion towards the spectator. The director's lack of experience with this type of acting space is manifest. (Lucaciu, 2017 my transl.)

> …the staging exceeds the linear solid monologue structure exactly through the lack of swerves in meaning and invents a rich scenic motion, which puzzles, changing the focus much too often and breaking the flow of conscience that would have had the chance to happily complete the experience of watching the play. An overload of fuss, many strident bits, futile dangerous acrobatics and vainly-wasted energy. (…) "Hughie" aims at 'tackling' the mystery and succeeds at this task in a very obvious fashion. Meanwhile, it pretends to keep it attractive. In this it fails. The obscure feeling of watching a performance that you don't understand not because you are unable to but because it is built in such a way that it is unclear in itself about what it purports to be… (Epingeac, 2017 my transl.).

The two above excerpts illustrate the pros's and con's that the reception of the play has met with in terms of critical response. As such, the two reviews I have been quoting are an encapsulation of the notable highs and lows of the performance. The minute rendition of each character's stylistic patern is indeed a hallmark of director Alexa Visarion who, in the naturalistic manner, ascribes certain gestures or habits to each character in turn but mainly focusing on Erie. Indeed, the stage motion of the main character is abundently marked, whereas – just like in the script – Charlie is almost always stationary, his motions being usually restricted to the upper part of his body, which is visible from his desk. Like in the play, Charlie's movements are "limp" and his all-weather smile occasionaly lapses into a blank grin. However, the actor's occasional shrewd eye motion is not indicative of his

always being a worn-out "sap", the director perhaps aiming for the audience to become aware that Charlie also plays the unacknowledged judge of Erie's meanderings. As for the part of Erie, Alexa found in Bovnoczki that "total actor" many directors dream of working with. Of an equally robust yet slender constitution, Bovnoczki doesn't really correspond to the description of a stout, puffy-eyed heavy drinker and glambler. Morover, his ability to tap-dance, balance himslef, do pirouettes or sommersaults can only be equated with the character's verbal pyrotechnics. Yet, what he pulls out remarkably well (and Andrei Seuşean – Charlie – is also good at this) are the piercing moments of existential despair or those of delusional exhilaration. Perhaps Alexa wanted to insert into O'Neill's play the Shakespearen feeing that "all the world's a stage/ and all the men and women merely players…", since he is a well-known Shakespearean and Chekchovian director, who wrote a lot of essays on the dramatic universe of the two great aforementioned playwrights. Indeed, in one of his recent essays from *Contemporanul*[58], entitled "Differently, about Hamlet", Alexa Visarion discusses the ethos of Shakespeare's great tragedy in terms that would definitely match O'Neill's *Hughie*:

> A mismatch between reality and the ideal that he had forged in life, Hamlet appears as a synthesis of humanism in Shakespeare's time. They had seen the lie that was surrounding them, which made them revolt themselves, yet they were powerless in righting the wrong. They were, like Hamlet, a bunch of dreamers. (Alexa, 2017: 306, my transl.)

Similarly, we could add, Erie and Charlie both have had their separate revelations of the indeafeatabity of evil but chose to lie to themselves in order to endure a meningless existence - this schism between dream and reality in their souls making them the bearers of a "hamlet-ian sandness", in the brief moments of awareness that they exhibit. Therefore, the conclusion Alexa draws to the essay on *Hamlet* is more than fitting for the ending of O'Neill's play[59]: "It is a good thing that life is not eternal. It is good that all is passing. It is good that death exists. It is a good thing that there is an end. This is the only way in which one can play their role on the scene of life." (306, my trasl.)

Given that the play was at its first night when the critics evaluated it, we can only hope that the director will take his time to work with the actors and smooth the occassional over-acting bits thus finding a way to get across to the audience his Shakespearean message more explicitly.

[58] Gathered in the collection *Împotriva uitării* (*Against Oblivion*).
[59] This seems an almost exact transcription of Hugie's final lines.

Final Considerations

The target of Alexa's Visarion inspired direction was – according to Richard Bovnoczki's citation – that of valorizing the text: "The text must be perceived as a cycle of life. Something revealed and also hidden. Something alternating between being laid bare and getting covered." (Contemporanul: 23) This is a comminicative feature that every good piece of literature must exhibit, an embedded ability to lure the reader by continually enticing them to find out more or to fill the gaps left across the text. Therefore, Alexa Visarion took care to build an aura of mystery before settling all the details of the performance and this ineffable but essential part of his artistic direction is very well explained by the lead actor in the play: "The proposed advancement was achieved through a dense fog in which the forms, colors and obstacles were barely perceived, indefinite, merely sketched, a few suggestive touches, so as not to allow the untimely aggregation of a form." (Contemporanul:23)

Since the actors are meant to fill up the space of performance with their living presence, the dramatic conception of the acting structure is a vital pre-requisite for starting the rehearsals. So, the two actors (Andrei Seuşan and Richard Bovnoczki) took their time to get immersed in their roles and to integrate their understanding of the text with the director's vision: "This obsessively minute advancement was aimed at circumscribing a necessary state that ensured the mysterious dimension of the performance." (Bovnoczki in *Contemporanul*: 24)

Figure no. 5

The lead actor confesses what a delightful experience it had been for him to work with a director who is totally dedicated to the actors: "The

dialogue with the actor pursues the vitality of the performance, turning the act into being. (…) The actor's being contains and sends forth to the audience what the director desires and thinks." (Bovnoczki in Contemporanul: 24) And, since according to Bovnoczki's testimony very few directors privilege the actors in this manner, he felt extraordinarily enriched both in a professional and human way by the experience.

Before concluding, I would like to mention a couple of other elements that the lead actor insisted upon in the interview: Alexa's obsession with tracking all the essential details of a scence or character and how, before working on the stage movement, the psychic structure was being heightened. Bovnoczki was amazed to see the whole dramatic construct fall into place when the director wanted it to:

> Everything went on so smoothly, precisely and rapidly that it was masterly. He [the director] almost didn't need to backtrack at all. He knew intimately and rendered precisely the essence of acting and of the performance[60]. (…) After the first night, I became aware of how much more I still had to uncover, to work at, to bore into myself so as to fill up all that he had built. (Contemporanul: 24)

The staging of *Hughie* at Unteatru was a crucial event for the Romanian theater since it constituted a meeting point between the old and the new school of acting and directing. It was made possible by the generosity with which Alexa Visarion conceived his project. His total dedication to building the performance represented a great opportunity for the team of young professionals involved in this enterprise. According to Bovnoczki, it was an artistic act accomplished in the name of Love: "The nobility and elevation of his relationship with us testified to the feeling that was at the foundation of our entire meeting. Love! This love of his put our friendship into perspective!" (*Contemporanul*: 25)

To sum up, certain technical flaws notwithstanding, it is my stated belief that the public both enjoyed and benefitted from attending this production, which constitutes an important addition to the repertory of Unteatru. Luckily, the public was more or less prepared for this meeting with O'Neill and his characters, the one act plays *Hughie* and *Before Breakfast* being the only two which can presently be said to pay homage to the American playwright's memory on the Romanian stage.

[60] A great director always motivates the actors in his play to do their best, energizes them and shows them how to valorize their potential.

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