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## Eugène Ionesco's stories on the puppet theater scene

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The Rijeka City Puppet Theater has performed several puppet shows during the course of its institutional activity since 1960, based on works from the oeuvre of French literature and art. In addition to presenting these plays, this paper gives particular attention to the play *All About Jacqueline's, a homage to Eugène Ionesco* (2004), performed as an interplay between actresses and puppets, based on *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age*, written by Eugène Ionesco for his thirty-three-month-old daughter Marie-France. The play features some intertextual links to Ionesco's dramatic oeuvre, as well as intermedial links to the paintings of the Belgian surrealist painter René Magritte, as well as to the music of the French composer Eric Satie. The peculiarity of performing *All About Jacqueline's, a homage to Eugène Ionesco*, makes the breakthrough of this Theater beyond the established experience of puppet theater as an art form intended primarily for children's audiences.

*Keywords:* Eugène Ionesco, René Magritte, Rijeka City Puppet Theater

### 1. French authors on the puppet theater scene in Rijeka

Performances based on the works of French authors have been present in the institutional activity of the Rijeka City Puppet Theater from its very beginning.

In the early years, these included plays based on music themes – compositions by Claude Debussy: *Petite Suite*, directed by Berislav Brajković, in the luminescent version of the black theater in 1966, and *Children's Corner*, performed using stick puppets in 1967, directed by the Slovakian director Jan Ozabal. The dramatization of Dumas' *Three Musketeers*, directed by Želimir Prijčić, in 1978, actualized the appearance of an actor in an interplay with a doll on the puppet scene, with the animation of several types of puppets. Plans to stage Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *Little Prince* existed already in the 1960s when Berislav Brajković intended to stage this play using a luminescent version of the black theater. However, the text was first staged twenty years later at the City Puppet Theater Rijeka – in 1985, directed and dramatized by Nikša Eterović (Verdonik 2010). In 2019, a text by Jera Ivanc entitled *Little Prince, A Song of Love*, based on the motives of Saint-

Exupéry's story, was directed by Yulia Roschina, dramatized by Staša Prah and co-produced with the Slovenian Puppet Theater in Ljubljana (Verdonik 2019).

The dramatization of Charles Perrault's famous fairy tale *The Booted Cat* was staged at the Rijeka City Puppet Theater for the first time in 1991, directed by Edi Majaron, and once again, with a new approach in 2018. The Theater made the decision to proceed with the re-enactment of *The Booted Cat* decided given that this fairy tale is even more relevant today than it was in 1991, as we continue to live in a time of intolerance for the different, social inequality, and dominance of the government over the common man, all of which are the topics that this fairy tale problematizes (Ibid.).

At the same time, some of these performances had the characteristics of adult puppet theater (once again, the performance of Debussy's *Petite Suite* and the performance of Dumas's *The Three Musketeers* as well as Jera Ivanc' text of the *Little Prince, A Song of Love*, performed as actors' play with elements of object animation). A similar approach was taken with the play *All About Jacqueline: Hommage à Eugène Ionesco*, performed in 2004 based on the text by Magdalena Lupi Alvir, based on the motives of Ionesco's *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age*.

## 2. About Ionesco's *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age*

In 1968, Eugène Ionesco published four stories for children under the age of three in his book of memories *Present Past, Past Present* (Brlečić 1994: 223). The stories were published as a sort of intermezzo between the individual chapters of this book, forming with them a unified whole, "perhaps even the best expression of what Ionesco seeks by writing down his memories" (Brlečić 1994: 231), that fit into Ionesco's literary oeuvre, whose theme is the resistance to growing up, banality, clichés, and the mechanism of everyday life (Ibid.).

Publicist and illustrator Marina Debattista wrote about Ionesco's *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age* in her text *Eugene Ionesco's Writings for Children*:

"Each of the tales for children less than three years old concludes chapter of a book that is replete with adult anxieties interspersed with memories of a luminous, intense childhood. (...) The main character of the four tales is little Josette. In each of the stories, Josette naturally accepts and participates in a situation which violets common sense. Her linguistic naiveté and childish unawareness of the properties of space and time invite and accommodate nonsense, as well as the marvellous. It is her father – evidently Ionesco's double – who guides her through the marvellous, and for this is rebuked – 'You are going to drive that little girl crazy, sir' – by the voice of reason, personified by the cleaning lady, Jacqueline. Josette's father is portrayed as ostensibly childish: gluttonous, enjoying puppet shows, fairs and movies, playing silly games and telling crazy stories. Like Alice's adventures, those of Josette and her father emerge from common everyday situations." (Debattista 2005: 16)

### 3. About the play *All about Jacqueline: Hommage à Eugène Ionesco of the Rijeka Puppet Theater*

In 2004, under the direction of Edi Majaron, the Rijeka City Puppet Theater staged Magdalena Lupi Alvir's text in nine scenes *All About Jacqueline: Hommage à Eugène Ionesco* based on the motifs from *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age*, written by Eugène Ionesco for his thirty-three-month-old daughter Marie-France. For the purposes of stage performance, the text of Ionesco's stories written in French were translated by Ljerka Galic. The puppets, set design, and costumes for the show were created by Agata Freyer.<sup>1</sup>

The director's conception of the play, which also forms the foundation of Lupi Alvir's text, is based on certain intertextual<sup>2</sup> links to Ionesco's dramatic oeuvre, as well as intermedial visual arts quotes<sup>3</sup> from the oeuvre of the Belgian painter René Magritte,<sup>4</sup> and music quotes from the oeuvre of the French composer Eric Satie.<sup>5</sup>

#### 3. 1. Intertextual links

The second scene of Lupi Alvir's text, entitled *The French Language Lesson*, can also be seen as a kind of allusion to the emergence of Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, inspired by the writer's learning of English through a manual (Mrkšić 1971: 269; Machiedo 2007: 112). At the same time, as Višnja Machiedo writes, in the play *The Bald Prima Donna*, which Lupi Alvir conveys in the aforementioned scene, Ionesco "plays with the shallowness of shabby conversation, automatic speaking, mocks the small-town repetition of common places, catchphrases, real or distorted sentences obscured by a lack of individual opinions and inner life" (2007: 112).

Same-named characters appear in Ionesco's plays: Bobby Watson is the first and last name of all the family members being discussed by the characters in *The Bald Prima Donna*, or Jacques and his same-named father, mother, grandparents, Jacqueline – his sister and Roberta I and II, Robert father and mother are characters

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<sup>1</sup> According to the Playlist attached to the play (Archives of the Rijeka City Puppet Theater).

<sup>2</sup> The term intertextuality is used here based on its definition found in the Croatian Encyclopedia of the Lexicographic Institute Miroslav Krleža < <https://www.enciklopedija.hr/natuknica.aspx?id=27671> > (5/11/2019).

<sup>3</sup> The terms intermedial visual arts and music references are used in accordance with the study carried out by Dubravka Oraić Tolić *Citatnost u književnosti, umjetnosti i kulturi* [Intertextuality in Literature, Arts, and Culture] (2019: 77-78).

<sup>4</sup> René Magritte (1898 – 1967), Belgian painter, began painting in the style of surrealism in 1925, recognizable by canvases with realistic detail motifs, described in detail but meaninglessly combined (Semenzato 1979: 593).

<sup>5</sup> Erik Satie (1866 – 1925), French composer "who played a significant role in the development of contemporary French music, bringing together young musicians of Paris who saw him as the destroyer of the old and worn out and the fighter for the new, different, and better" (Andreis 1989: 205).

in the drama *Jacques, or Obedience* (Ionesco 1981: 11, 73). Naming characters using the variants of the same name, taken from Ionesco's first of four stories for children under the age of three, is present in the sixth scene of Lupi Alvir's text, entitled *Dad's Stories Once Again*. In this scene, Dad tells the girl Josette a story whose character she calls Jacqueline. At the same time as Dad is narrating, characters appear on stage – Jacques and Jacquelines as flat plexiglass dolls (Lupi Alvir 2003: 8). Dad's story is interrupted by preschool teachers who, against her will, drag the girl Josette to ballet class. The ballet class is, once again, taught by preschool teachers Jacqueline I and II, and Josette is greeted there by Jacques and Jacquelines themselves from Dad's story, who dance with her (Lupi Alvir 2003: 10).

### 3. 2. *Intermediate visual arts and music references*

In her text, Magdalena Lupi Alvir explicitly refers to an intermediate visual arts quote in the opening stage direction in the second scene of *The French Language Lesson*, according to which "everything is visually and meaningfully done based on the principle of Magritte's paintings" (Lupi Alvir 2003: 2).

The following is a paragraph in which the nannies Jacqueline I and Jacqueline II teach the girl Josette French, that is, English:

Jacqueline I: (shows or draws an apple): This is not an apple. (Repeats it in French.)

Jacqueline II: (is boycotting Jacqueline I and trying to teach Josette English): A A A - apple. This is not an apple.

Josette: Huh?

Jacqueline I: This is not a pipe.

Jacqueline II: Pi, pi, pi, pipe. Pipe!

(Jacquelines quarrel. They draw objects or show them to Josette as props and teach her the "correct" meaning of the words.)

Josette: (Starts talking in a combination of English and French. In the end, though, she has to speak French.) This is not an apple - pipe. (...)

Jacqueline I: Josette! (Jacqueline dictates words and shows a range of objects, and Josette repeats them in French!) Once again! Pipe! Apple! Egg! Cloud! Hat! Comb! Tube! Pigeon!...

Josette: (answers in French).

Jacqueline I: And now, this is not a pipe! (This is not an apple! etc. – Josette answers in French" (Lupi Alvir 2003: 2-3).

The entire scene is filled with quarrels between the two Jacquelines who utter increasingly incoherent sentences as instructions for learning a foreign language. In the struggle to dominate, they are creating unusual characters out of the stage props, which can be visually referenced back to the paintings of the Surrealists (Lupi Alvir 2003: 4).

As an integral part of the stage design, Magritte's paintings of *The Treachery of Images* – *This is Not a Pipe* and *This is not an apple* are projected on stage during this scene to emphasize the absurdity of the dialogue. The connection between Ionesco's theater of the absurd present in this play and Magritte's paintings as

a theatrical stage sign is justified, since in the theater of the absurd, speech is devoid of gesture, words of their sense, and dialogue of the situation (Machiedo 2007: 111). In his paintings, René Magritte “points to the discrepancy between images and words (...), replaces the painted and the image, thus forming a kind of scenery, an artificial object that can be thrown over any real object” (Linhart 1981: 107).

The intermediate music references in the play are the stage music of the Slovenian composer Žiga Stanič, composed in the spirit of the music of the French composer Eric Satie, which, according to Edi Majaron, fits into the director's conception of the play.<sup>6</sup>

#### 4. Puppet theater for adults

The play *All About Jacqueline*, a homage to Eugène Ionesco by the Rijeka City Puppet Theater, was intended for both children and adults (Cuculić 2012: 231-233). The last, ninth scene of the play, entitled *Anthem to Liberty*, depicts a house crammed with objects that fill up the entire space. The characters of mom and dad become caryatids that carry the foundations of the house; the house collapses, and Jacqueline is projected onto the wall, who, along with Josette, sing the *Anthem to Liberty*. According to Magdalena Lupi Alvir, the play should end with many Jacqueline as children who are “out of control” within the story, singing a hymn of “equality, brotherhood, and freedom” alluding to the French Revolution. The young joins in and sings, finally free from the grip of the elderly (that is, the adults) who persistently teach them the “right” meaning of words and life. In short, the old worldview is decaying and the new one on the horizon, concludes Lupi Alvir (2003: 12).

The performance of Ionesco's *Stories for Children Under Three Years of Age* in the form of a puppet show based on an interplay of two actresses<sup>7</sup> and puppets animated by these actress proved justified, since the literary theory also describes Ionesco's characters, among other things, using the terms present in puppet theater terminology. For example, in the words of Vlado Mađarević, these characters are “mechanical puppets of a mechanized civilization (moving) mechanically on stage, symbolizing the puppet personifications of the spiritual states and socio-family circumstances of the modern urbanizing man marked by a petty citizen mentality” (Mađarević 1982: 384).

The use of Magritte's paintings as stage signs emphasized the absurdity of the textual plot and the performance, provoking thereby allusions to the present moment of excessive consumerism and, consequently, parental neglect of children and their needs. Adult audiences could perceive this play primarily as a grotesque depiction of everyday life and then as a call for change and new relationships with their children, within the family and beyond. In this way,

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<sup>6</sup> Verbal source: interview with the director Edi Majaron (10/11/2019).

<sup>7</sup> Members of the Rijeka Puppet Theater ensemble, puppet actresses Božena Delaš and Karin Fröhlich (Playlist, Archive of the Rijeka Puppet City Theater).

with the presentation of the lesser-known text by Eugène Ionesco, the Rijeka City Puppet Theater also contributed to the promotion of adult puppet theater on the Croatian puppet theater scene.

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## Prče Eugènea Ionescoa na lutkarskoj sceni

Gradsko kazalište lutaka Rijeka izvelo je tijekom svojeg institucionalnog djelovanja od 1960. godine do danas više lutkarskih predstava uprizorenih prema djelima iz opusa francuske književnosti i umjetnosti. Uz prikaz ovih predstava, posebna pozornost u radu je posvećena predstavi *Sve o Jacquelinama, hommage à Eugène Ionesco* (2004), izvedenoj suigrom glumica i lutaka, prema *Pričama za djecu mlađu od tri godine* koje je Eugène Ionesco bio napisao za svoju tridesettromjesečnu kćer Marie-France. U predstavi su prisutne pojedine intertekstualne poveznice s Ionescovim dramskim opusom, te intermedijalne poveznice sa slikarstvom belgijskog nadrealističkog slikara Renéa Magrittea kao i s glazbom francuskog skladatelja Erika Satiea. Osebujnost izvođenja predstave *Sve o Jacquelinama, hommage à Eugène Ionesco* čini i pritom postignut iskorak ovog Kazališta iz okvira uvriježenog doživljavanja lutkarskog kazališta kao umjetničke forme namijenjene prvenstveno dječjoj publici.

*Ključne riječi:* Eugène Ionesco, René Magritte, Gradsko kazalište lutaka Rijeka

