

BENEATH THE NEON LIGHT: THE ANATOMY OF A LOST AND FOUND ORCHARD

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BIO

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the manifestations of the *new sincerity* on the contemporary Romanian stage, with a particular focus on *Am avut o Livadă*, a theatrical production directed by Eugen Jebeleanu. The play blends Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* with a modern text by Yann Verburgh, recontextualizing Chekhov's themes within the socio-political reality of post-communist Romania. Characters from Chekhov's original are intertwined with contemporary figures, creating a polyphonic narrative that reveals generational trauma, fluid identities, and emotional dislocation. Drawing on theoretical frameworks from Erika Fischer-Lichte, special attention is given to the interplay between presence and absence, as well as the transformation of actor-audience dynamics, embodiment and corporeality on stage, and the symbolic spatial design.

KEYWORDS

postmodernism, new sincerity, metamodernism, intermediality, transition, fragmentation, liminal space

“Theatre with a message, with commitment, with responsibility, but not with... grimness.”¹ This is how Eugen Jebeleanu described his theatrical style in an interview with Ioan Big in 2022. Thus, we are talking about responsible, purposeful theatre. In this article, I aim to explore manifestations of *new sincerity* on the Romanian stage, focusing my analysis on the performance *We Had an Orchard*². This performance is a blend of a classic Chekhovian drama³ and a contemporary text signed by Yann Verburgh⁴, that sheds an entirely new light on the original material. The play probes the collective memory of the restitution processes of the 1990s – of lost and reclaimed spaces, but also of borders – be they geographic, mental, or imaginary – that generate tensions between the real and the symbolic, between identity and alterity. In this inquiry, I will reflect on the notion of authenticity as a fluid construct, which I will attempt to outline through a set of criteria meant to guide the reader’s reflection toward this new sincerity and what it truly means to recognize a play as authentic.

Viewing *We Had an Orchard* through a variety of theoretical lenses, I will argue that it serves as a paradigmatic example of authentic theatre. In *Being and Time*⁵, Heidegger defines authenticity as a target we strive toward, but never fully achieve. Continuing this line of thought, I assert that authentic theatre manifests through a transgression of conventions and a total disregard for any form of artistic “label” – if we can call it as such. These acts of rebellion are constantly metamorphosed, profoundly influenced by the climate of their time, continually reshaping the idea of authenticity. How, then, can authenticity be achieved on today’s Romanian stage? We can no longer speak of directing in the traditional, hierarchical sense – the director as a divine architect – but instead we focus on collective creation, on the meeting of multiple creators (directors, playwrights, actors, set designers, etc.), each carrying their own obsessions. From this exchange, from this dialogue of sensitivities, emerges the authenticity we seek to capture. This new sincerity – marked by emotional honesty and

1 Ioan Big, “CLIN D’OEIL | EUGEN JEBELEANU: «Fac teatru și film cu mesaj, cu responsabilitate, dar nu cu încrâncenare»,” in *Zile și nopți*, published on June 8, 2022, <https://zilesinopti.ro/2022/06/08/interviu-cu-eugen-jebeleanu-fac-teatru-si-film-cu-mesaj-cu-re-sponsabilitate-dar-nu-cu-incrancenare/>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

2 A performance directed by Eugen Jebeleanu, which premiered on October 20, 2023, at the Odeon Theatre in Bucharest.

3 *The Cherry Orchard* (1903), the last play written by Anton Chekhov.

4 Translated from French by Diana Nechit.

5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, English translation by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson from the seventh German edition (Blackwell Publishers, 1967), 223.

Fig. 1



Fig. 2



a radical openness to one's own vulnerability – is brought to the forefront. Directors, particularly those creating in publicly funded theatres, must speak “about people in low-income jobs or from the LGBT minority because they all contributed to these subsidies.”⁶ Contemporary theatre thus articulates a responsibility to reflect the current socio-cultural reality, integrating political and ideological narratives, embracing intermediality, and cultivating a deep awareness of societal needs. This shift aligns with broader cultural and theoretical developments. Critic Jim Collins introduced the concept of “new sincerity”⁷ into film criticism in his 1993 essay, *Genericity in the 90s: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity*, where he contrasts ironic eclecticism with an earnest embrace of stylistic conventions. Similarly, David Foster Wallace – who challenged postmodernism's reliance on irony – argued that irony deconstructs without offering alternatives, making the turn toward sincerity a necessary evolution. Scholars have coined terms such as “post-postmodernism” to capture this

cultural moment, including currents like altermodernism, digimodernism, and metamodernism. Among them, metamodernism stands out for placing new sincerity at its core – an approach that serves as the theoretical framework for this discussion.

The analysis will be structured into three interdependent sections which function like layers of a painting, where each intervention builds on the previous. The first step is an analysis of the ideas introduced by playwright Yann Verburgh, along with the reconfigurations of Chekhovian characters and new dramatic entities, focusing on their relational structures. This first part will act almost like a scenic recipe, in which the dramaturgical ingredients are tied together by subtle tensions. The second section will explore the dimension of corporeality – the relationship between gesture, movement, and body – drawing on Erika Fischer-Lichte's theory of performance, posthumanist philosophy, metamodernism⁸, and queer studies. Here, the actor is viewed as a rhizomatic presence, constantly oscillating between

6 Eugen Jebeleanu in Ionuț Mareș, „Eugen Jebeleanu: «Trebuie să scuturăm spectatorul prin povești la care nu a avut acces până acum»,” in *Films in Frame*, published on September 14, 2021, <https://www.filmsinframe.com/ro/interviu/interviu-regizor-eugen-jebeleanu/>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

7 See Jim Collins, “Genericity in the Nineties: Eclectic Irony and the New Sincerity,” in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, edited by Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Preacher Collins (Routledge, 1993).

8 In *Notes on Metamodernism*, Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker define metamodernism as a cultural sensibility characterized by a dynamic oscillation between modern enthusiasm and postmodern irony. Rather than offering a fixed theory, they emphasize a fluid, essayistic approach that reflects the nonlinear and open nature of contemporary experience.

Fig. 3



Fig. 4



becoming and dissolution. Next comes spatiality – set design, sound, and cultural echoes that sneak in, sometimes subtly, other times frontally. Here, the fragility of the idea of space becomes visible. Space is no longer just a setting, but a conundrum; it is permeable, always between demarcation and dissolution, continuing the meditation on borders. The performance oscillates between two narrative cores and the universes of the characters that animate them. On one side, we find eight figures from *The Cherry Orchard* – Liubov Andreevna, Ania (Ioana Bugarin), Varia (Eduard Trifa), Lopakhin (Ruxandra Maniu), Gaev (Alexandru Papadopol), Trofimov (Nicoleta Lefter), Charlotta (Simona Popescu), and Firs (Diana Gheorghian); on the other, six characters from Verburch's contemporary text – Daniela (played by Elvira Deatcu, who also embodies Liubov Andreevna, becoming the densest point of confluence between the two worlds), her son Matei (Niko Becker, who becomes, through symbolic allusions, a possible double of Grisha, Liubov's drowned child), Cati (Alina Berzunțeanu, see Fig. 8), Daniela's sister, who emigrated to the West eighteen years ago in search of a new life, Paul and Radu, her husband and son (Gabriel Pintilei and Vlad Birzanu), and finally the sisters'

uncle, Bruno (Ionel Mihăilescu), who is better revealed in a late autobiographical monologue. Among these characters, a red thread materializes, gradually revealing each one's personal trauma. Between Daniela and Matei (see Fig. 3), a Freudian dynamic develops, marked by ambiguous maternal-filial tensions and unresolved emotional frustrations. The relationship between Matei and Cati – his biological mother who abandoned him when she left the country – adds another layer of pain and alienation, infused with a persistent sense of rejection. Tension also mounts between the two stepbrothers, Matei and Radu, a relationship marred by deep jealousy, where each covets exactly what the other seems to have: love, validation, a sense of belonging. This performance perhaps offers the most ingenious ways in which the director and playwright explore the notions of presence and absence, invoking not just corporeality but the actors' very identities. According to the playwright, this piece is part of a trilogy with two other productions directed by Eugen Jebeleanu – *Itineraries* (2019 premiere) and *The Seagull* (2022 premiere): "These three shows are like three paintings revolving around the subject of theatre."⁹ Thus, Niko Becker not only plays with his scene partners like a puppeteer (recalling

⁹ Taken from the program brochure of the performance.



his portrayal of Treplev) in acts III and IV, marked in chalk on a blackboard placed on one of the bar walls, but he also spars with the audience. He establishes what Erika Fischer-Lichte calls a “a special relationship with the spectators, a particular bond sensed physically as a kind of energy flowing back and forth between actor and spectators.”¹⁰ Matei / Becker addresses the audience during his most vulnerable moments – he descends from the stage and tells us about his mother and friends who use the bar to stage their own *Cherry Orchard* – anchoring us in the space we are in and inviting us to closely observe what follows. In a way, we witness a genuine theatre directing seminar – an intentional choice. Jebeleanu creates theatre for a *connoisseur* audience, attentive to detail, capable of recognizing the subtleties of scenic language. Just like Treplev, who wears that seagull’s head, Matei undergoes his own becoming in a hybrid form – man-animal. Charlotta (see Fig. 1), one of the Chekhovian characters able to migrate between the two worlds, engages with Matei directly in the bar, asking him for a bag of peanuts to feed her dog. After he gives them to her, she starts throwing them chaotically around the room, irritating him. After several attempts to stop her, Matei

ends up transforming into a dog himself, enacting a kind of Lacanian mirroring, this version of him taking shape like a hallucination or a dream, as a doubled reflection of the bodily image. If the spectator closed their eyes, it would be impossible to distinguish between actor and animal – that is how authentic the metamorphosis was. The level of embodiment that Niko Becker achieves is extraordinary, making it almost impossible to differentiate between the actor’s semiotic body and his phenomenal one: “Presence is produced by particular processes of embodiment, which are able to bring forth anew the phenomenal body of the actor as an energetic body and, at the same time, his semiotic body as a representation of a dramatic figure. However, it is conceivable that processes of embodiment performed by the actor or performer re-create his phenomenal body as an energetic body and thus produce presence in the strong sense of the concept, without representing any figure or anything else.”¹¹ This moment of transformation not only showcases the actor’s remarkable physicality but also gestures toward the deeper thematic current of identity as mutable and contingent – a thread that continues to unravel in what follows.

10 Erika Fischer-Lichte, “Appearing as Embodied Mind – Defining a Weak, a Strong, and a Radical Concept of Presence,” in *Archaeologies of Presence: Art, Performance and the Persistence of Being*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye, and Michael Shanks (Routledge, 2012), 104.

11 *Ibid.*, 112.

Fig. 7



Fig. 8



From this moment on, another essential dimension unfolds: the awareness that we are witnessing a disoriented character, willing to become whatever the other demands. This theme of fluid identity profoundly reflects the lived experiences of Romania's 1990s sacrifice generation – marked by anxiety, uncertainty, and a deep crisis of direction. When this man-animal body returns to his human form, Matei and Charlotta share a kiss, followed by an erotic scene. This moment recalls Donna Haraway's definition of our condition as companion species: "We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand. We are, constitutively, companion species. We make each other up, in the flesh. Significantly other to each other, in specific difference, we signify in the flesh a nasty developmental infection called love. This love is a historical aberration and a natural cultural legacy."¹² This intimate moment between Matei and Charlotta becomes an expression of mutual recognition in alterity. In a gesture of fusing differences, distinct bodies, significantly *other*, enter a relationship of co-creation, embodying exactly what Haraway calls a "natural-cultural legacy" – a

form of love that is not natural, but tense, ambivalent, sometimes even destructive. Sexuality, in this context, does not appear as a solution but as a symptom: of confusion, of the need for meaning, of the desire to be defined through the *other*. Of course, from the perspective of the man-animal body, we can also view Matei through a Deleuzian lens – as a body without organs¹³. Matei uses his traditionally organized body – the "organism", a holistic construction that stores, internalizes, and reproduces trauma, norms, and socially imposed behaviours – as a territory of intensities – a surface that pulses and revolts against imposed discipline, which, as Deleuze notes, "regiments and constrains the subject."¹⁴ As in Artaud's vision, this corporeality finds its "true place" not through transcendence, but through an upside-down dance – visceral, unpredictable, liberating¹⁵. Thus, Matei *deconstructs himself* on stage, exploring the limits of what a body can become beyond memory, trauma, and language, only to rebuild himself later. More constructively, "postmodernism comes to the animal as a reminder of the limits of human understanding, and also of the value of working

12 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *When Species Meet* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 16.

13 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Continuum Publishing Group, 2004).

14 *Ibid.*, 116.

15 Antonin Artaud, "To Have Done with the Judgment of God," in *Surrealism Plays*, 1947. <https://www.surrealism-plays.com/Artaud.html>, accessed: April 22, 2025.

Fig. 9



Fig. 10



at those limits"¹⁶ – the emerging figure of this exploration, which Steven Baker calls “the postmodern animal”¹⁷, is a cultural product of a post-Cartesian, ecological, neo-totemist worldview that rejects dualistic thinking and oppositional taxonomies in favour of models emphasizing complexity and dynamism.

Another significant difference between this production and a traditional one lies in the casting: certain male roles – Lopakhin, Firs, and Trofimov – are played by women, while Varia, a female character, is played by a man. These directorial choices do not necessarily follow a narrative logic but are conceived rather as a form of poetic expression. Ruxandra Maniu manages to render Lopakhin’s characteristic crudeness with remarkable precision, but through a Western lens – we see in Lopakhin a kind of Stanley Kowalski¹⁸, a resentful man who can be charming when it suits him, embodying a toxic masculinity reimaged for a more nuanced reality. In the case of Firs, it is pleasing that beyond the grumpy butler stereotype, he is also allowed to express a playful side, albeit only in Matei’s presence. Although there is no physical resemblance between

Diana Gheorghian and Chekhov’s imagined Firs, the actress captures the archetype of the loyal servant and his inner complexity. Trofimov, the eternal student, gains in Nicoleta Lefter’s interpretation a dreamy, almost utopian aura that revives his characteristic idealism but adapted to a painful present where ideals are crushed by harsh everyday life. His relationship with Ania expresses a love freed from traditional constraints and prohibitions, offering a new vision of romance. This production is not a coming-out play addressed to a heterosexual audience hoping for understanding or acceptance. As the director notes, the presence of love in queer couples appears naturally on stage – just as it exists in real life, without the need for justification. While there have been other attempts to portray lesbianism in Romanian theatre, many unfortunately confirm Monique Wittig’s hypothesis that such representations are essentially products of the “straight mind.”¹⁹ This approach to diversity fails to transcend the limits imposed by hegemonic heterosexual norms, and in this sense, performative approaches often maintain the same dominant structures of power and representation. Varia

16 Una Chaudhuri, “Animal Rites: Performing Beyond the Human,” in *Critical Theory and Performance*, edited by Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach (The University of Michigan Press, 2015), 507.

17 Steve Baker, *The Postmodern Animal* (Reaktion, 2000), 16.

18 Character from *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. He is Stella’s husband.

19 Monique Wittig, “The Straight Mind,” in *Feminist Issues*, vol. 1, 1980.

(see Fig. 5) embodies all symbols of masculinity, but with a twist – she wears heels and exudes an uninhibited corporeality, devoid of remorse, becoming a true focal point that amplifies the performance’s expressive originality.

The set design by Velica Panduru is infused with cultural references, blending a recognizable atmosphere evocative of the Lynchian universe with a subtle reminiscence of the painting *Nighthawks*²⁰ (see Fig. 10), through the architectural detail of the bar, with its precise and contrasting angles. The artwork displayed on the walls amplifies this ambiguity, placing us under the vigilant gaze of the Madonna. The scenographic choices create a space in which the cultural and social context is authentically reflected, featuring representative elements of that era – slot machines, wooden bead curtains, an old TV broadcasting news from a semi-recent reality, and the neon sign *La Vişini café bar*. Within this atmosphere, the way the characters interact with the space becomes a performative act in itself. The music, curated by Remi Billardon, plays a central role in structuring affectivity, marking emotionally intense moments, and supporting the narrative’s intimate or liberating progression. This soundtrack, which seems to moderate the fluctuations of the performance’s

intensity, allows the characters to build their portraits, settling into the story where they feel most at ease, after a continuous search.

A striking example of this is Cati, who – following a tense interaction with Matei, just after he has learned that she is, in fact, his mother – breaks down. Through a contortion, both physical and psychological, she stretches out on the floor and goes into spasms, accompanied by Billardon’s musical choice, *Wild Is the Wind* by Nina Simone.

These moments of emotional release unfold with an almost ritual intensity, perfectly in sync with the atmosphere created. Another example of an emotional outburst or acting-out through music is offered by Matei, who expresses himself through percussion (see Fig. 6 and 7). The echoes of the past and future are present in the way he strikes the wood against the metal of the drums, and his rhythm seems to resonate from the depths of the self, striving to release a sorrow that has been quietly accumulating.

This act of reconciliation with oneself is a deeply felt tension – almost suffocating – but profoundly meaningful, perfectly complementing the complexity of the characters and the narrative. *We Had an Orchard* goes beyond a simple adaptation of Chekhov’s play, offering an interpretation that explores, with intensity and depth,

20 Edward Hopper’s painting, *Nighthawks*, 1942.

the contemporary dilemmas of exile. Just as Yann Verburgh has superimposed Chekhov's orchard onto the Romania of those who left, the performance rekindles an acute emotional and cultural tension, where the roots of the past meet the reality of those who have departed. Here, the strength of the production lies not only in the recognition of the text but in how it becomes a vehicle for exploring both collective and personal memory.

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Appendices

Photographs taken by Sabina Costinel for the Odeon Theatre Bucharest. <https://teatrul-odeon.ro/spectacol/am-avut-olivada/> (accessed: April 22, 2025).