

# Best of Chicago's fringe theater scene in 2011

The Trap Door Theatre presents the North American Premiere of **Matei Visniec's "The word progress on my mother's lips doesn't ring true,"** translated by Joyce Nettles and directed by Istvan Szabo K.

Cast: Antonio Brunetti, Wladyslaw Byrdy, Malcolm Callan, Simina Contras, Kevin Cox, John Kahara, Beata Pilch, Nicole Wiesner

*EXTENDED THROUGH JANUARY 21, 2012*



## **Chilling ‘Progress’ unfolds at Trap Door Theatre**

HEDY WEISS Theater Critic/hweiss@suntimes.com January 4, 2012 4:04PM

In late 1996, about a year after the Bosnian War ended (and with the horrors in Kosovo still to come), I traveled through the war-scarred “former Yugoslavia.” And among the many sights I saw on the scarred yet still beautiful landscape was one I have never forgotten.

It was a gray, wintry day, and driving through a town that had clearly suffered destruction I spotted the remains of a charred, roofless house with only fragments of its former walls standing. Seated at a small table in an open corner of the house were two men, wrapped in overcoats. They were playing chess.

Yes, war is a kind of madness. We all know that. And its aftermath can assume a surreal quality. Putting all that insanity on stage can be tricky. But in his fierce, impassioned, brutally honest fantasia, “The Word PROGRESS On My Mother’s Lips Doesn’t Ring True,” Matei Visniec, a Romanian-bred, Paris-based playwright, has given us the full feverish nightmare of it all. And Hungarian-Romanian director Istvan Szabo K. has staged the 90-minute work — now in its U.S. premiere by Trap Door Theatre, the Chicago company with a uniquely pan-European mindset — to dazzling effect, eliciting inspired work by his actors and designers. (The fine English translation is by Joyce Nettles.)

A comprehensive program note supplies enough background for those not fully versed in the history of the place. But listen to the song of the crazed soldier in historical costume who is found sitting on a child’s red wooden hobby horse at the play’s start, and you will get the heavily ironic gist of things: “We are a free country. We are a proud people. The blood spilled by our ancestors is our freedom and our pride.”

Not quite. The blood spilled over the course of a full and truly savage century brought very little freedom — from the Ottoman Empire, through two world wars, then on to the Soviet era (and its collapse), to the trauma of the Bosnia and Kosovo wars in the 1990s, and then to the arrival of ferocious capitalism, including human trafficking and more.

As the iconic characters in Visniec’s haunted scenario come to realize, the whole country is a grotesque graveyard, with once-clean wells now full of corpse-infected water. It is a place where bereaved families live in broken communities, and where their closest neighbors may have committed the most barbarous acts.

At the center of the story is a middle-aged couple (expertly played by Wladyslaw Byrdy and Beata Pilch), whose son has never returned from war. The grieving mother drives her husband to the brink by demanding he find their son’s remains for a proper burial. In a particularly chilling

scene, an entrepreneurial neighbor (the excellent Malcolm Callan) tries to sell skulls and bones that can be passed off as those remains.

Kevin Cox, Antonio Brunetti and John Kahara are the “soldiers.” Romanian-born Simina Contras is the beautiful female ethnic victim who is raped, beaten and forced into prostitution. And Nicole Wiesner is the Albanian pimp and the Mad Woman who, of course, speaks the truth.

Mike Mroch’s set (ideally lit by Richard Norwood) is pure genius — a tautly wired madhouse suggesting a prison, torture chamber and eerie, leafless forest. The haunting music is by Ovidiu Iloc, and the evocative costumes by Tonette Navarro and Bisa Dimitrova.

## **Chicago Stage Review**

Reviews and Features of Chicago Theater

Fri 30 Dec, 2011

### ***The Word Progress on My Mother’s Lips Doesn’t Ring True* - REVIEW**

Filed under: [REVIEWS OF SHOWS 'Now Playing'](#)

Tags: [4 STARS](#), [American Premier](#), [Don't Miss!](#), [EXTENDED!](#), [Istvan K. Szabo](#), [Matei Visniec](#), [The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True](#), [Trap Door Theatre](#)

*By Venus Zarris*

A painter in my apartment told me a joke that he heard from a Romanian coworker. It goes something like this.

“A lawyer and a fisherman are on a cruise together. The lawyer asks the fisherman, “Have you ever been to the Louvre in Paris?” The fisherman sadly replies, “No, I have not done much traveling.” The lawyer says, “That is too bad! Your life is half over.” The lawyer then asks the fisherman, “Have you ever visited the Acropolis in Athens. It is ancient yet magnificent, don’t you think?” The fisherman shrugs his shoulders and answers, “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t been there.” The lawyer says, “That is terrible! Your life is half over!” The lawyer says, “Well surely you have been to the Grand Canyon. Isn’t it one of the most wondrous things in nature?” The fisherman, completely embarrassed now, again says, “Sadly I have not been able to travel so I have not seen it.” “Well my friend, that is a crime as your life is half over.” The lawyer boasts.

Shortly thereafter the boat capsizes and the passengers are all in the water. The lawyer is struggling and cries out to the fisherman, “I can’t swim and I am drowning!” To which the fisherman calmly replies, “That is too bad. Your life is all over.”

This joke exemplifies the gallows humor that is prevalent in many Eastern European cultures. There is a dark mist that lingers over everything, even the jokes; a mist filled with the heartaches and hardships of struggles beyond the imagination of most Americans. Even faced with the death of a loved one, our struggles are comfortable and tidy compared to many that are denied what we consider basic human dignities.



In playwright Matei Visniec’s staggering *The Word Progress on My Mother’s Lips Doesn’t Ring True*, the aftermath of war is realized as a purgatory of desperation where grief cannot be exorcized with the rituals we take for granted. A couple returns after exile to find themselves stripped of everything but the shell of their former home and the broken pieces of the lives they once lived. They yearn for one thing above all others. Not a roof over their heads or food to eat but a tangible piece of their dead soldier son to bury.

Driven by visceral memories of love, ghosts long for a connection with the living and the living long for a connection with the dead. They are both close enough to touch yet unable to penetrate the veil that separates them.

“There must be at least 30 nationalities in the bowels of this earth, but at least we all get along now.” The ghost of Vibko tells his father who is frantically digging to find his son’s remains.



Visniec creates a hallucinatory reality and Director István Szabó K realizes it with a hauntingly astonishing vision. The brutalities are harsh, as sex traffickers mock their pitiful human merchandise in a place where morality has long since fled. The politics are absurd, but that is true wherever the location. The destitution is palpable yet strangely delicate.

Trap Door Theatre has made bringing avant-garde European theater to the American stage their mission. They deliver these plays with brilliant and oftentimes stylized imagination but under the remarkable direction of István Szabó K, they connect to an emotional truth that is as lovely as it is catastrophic. It is completely accessible. It is suffocating. It is theater at its most relevant and imperative.

Set Designer Mike Mroch creatively divides the small Trap Door stage into Visniec's scenes of surreal sadness and Richard Norwood's lighting design beautifully captures these scenes. Ovidiu Iloc's musical composition is extraordinary. Costume Designers Bisa Dimitrova and Tonette Navarro, Sound Designer Christopher Kriz, Make up Designer Zsófia Ötvös and Specialty Props Designer Meredith Miller impressively complete the bizarre Steampunk reality.





The extraordinary ensemble brings this tragic tale of death to life with strikingly stark contrasts of brutal degradation, ridiculous corruption and affecting frailty. Every actor adds a unique flavor to this dish of despair. Each performance stands as a powerful punctuation of Visniec's crucial vision but Kevin Cox and Beata Pilch marvelously deliver the nails in this bleak coffin. They do not hammer them in, but rather depict the loss between mother and son with fragile tenderness. Cox is an actor capable of bombastic presence and Pilch is an actor that often employs cartoonish characterizations with amazing effect but in ***Word Progress***, they become the very embodiment of gentle yet absolute melancholy.

As son Vibko, Cox magnificently portrays a compassion that can perhaps only be accessed by the dead. To him, all dead soldiers are now his brothers and his longing for the corporal love of his parents is as childlike as it is primal. As The Mother, Pilch is steadfast in her frantic need for some tangible form of closure. When it comes, the frenzied urgency is replaced with waves of grief and then precious bittersweet release. Pilch becomes absolution. Her transformation is breathtaking.

Trap Door Theatre consistently delivers some of the most superb and most challenging theater to be found anywhere and their production of ***The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True*** is Trap Door at its finest. It gloriously takes us to a place that is as exquisite as it is overwhelming. It connects us to a part of our humanity that is almost too painful yet completely vital and it elevates theater to its most critical purpose.



## ***4 STARS***

(*"The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True"* has been **EXTENDED** through January 21, 2011, at Trap Door Theatre, 1655 W. Cortland Ave. **773-384-0494**)

## **[Trap Door Theatre](#)**

***The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True***  
production images by Michal Janicki.

\* Visit Theatre In Chicago for more information on this show.

**[The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True - Trap Door Theatre - Play Detail - Theatre In Chicago](#)**

## **CHICAGO TRIBUNE**

**Chicago Tribune**

**[Theater](#)**

# A grim search in spellbinding 'Progress'; an engaging 'Opus'

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By Kerry Reid, Special to the Tribune

12:50 p.m. CST, December 14, 2011

## "The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True"



In the Dec. 4 edition of [The New York Times](#) Magazine, Kenan Trebinčević, a Bosnian Muslim who fled to the U.S. during the 1990s wars, recounts his recent visit to his homeland — and his encounter with the neighbor who stole furniture and clothing from Trebinčević's mother while the Serbian paramilitary swept his father and brother into concentration camps. "No one has forgotten," Trebinčević tells the now-elderly woman.

In Matei Visniec's stunning and searing "The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True," now in its North American premiere with Trap Door Theatre, the lines between survivors, victims and ghosts of a nameless Balkan war are impossible to draw with any kind of moral clarity. As directed by Visniec's fellow Romanian, Istvan Szabo K., it's a piece that unpeels and reveals itself bit by tantalizing bit, creating a series of poetic and nightmarish vignettes in which commonplace objects — broken plates, a white shirt — become stand-ins for those lost to war and genocide.

"There are 30 nationalities in the bowels of this earth," observes Vibko (Kevin Cox), a slain soldier whose spectral presence haunts his parents. "But at least we all get along now." The search for Vibko's corpse drives his father (Wladyslaw Byrdy) to become literally ensnared, like a Dadaist marionette, by a series of fishing lines, each connected to some object representing the detritus of war. His wife (Beata Pilch) lies motionless in a wheelbarrow of dirt, clutching her dead son's shirt. "In this country, a happy mother is a mother who knows where her child is buried," she observes.

Meanwhile, a voiceless young woman (Simina Contras) is sold into apparent sexual slavery, and a border guard (John Kahara) taunts a group of returning refugees and forces them to kiss the ground and sing the bloodthirsty new national anthem.

The performances — including Nicole Wiesner as a crazed woman furiously riding a rocking horse and Antonio Brunetti as the cheery ghost of a German soldier — are in perfect sync with Visniec's fractured but taut language (Joyce Nettles did the translation). Szabo's staging leads us through this labyrinthine world of horrors — which offers the faintest glimmers of hope — with haunting images that twist like a knife into our own memories. Ovidiu Iloc's stark score, Christopher Kriz's evocative sound design, Richard Norwood's hallucinatory lighting and Mike Mroch's inventive set sync up beautifully to bring us into this disorienting world.



Trap Door has long been the go-to venue in town for European avant-garde drama, but this production is the finest I've yet seen from these indispensable stalwarts of the storefront. It's a play that one feels along the nerve endings rather than comprehending in a chronological/logical way. After all, who ever can make literal sense of the betrayals and losses of endless warfare?

*Through Jan. 14 at Trap Door Theatre, 1655 W. Cortland Ave.; \$20-\$25 at 773-384-0494 or [trapdoortheatre.com](http://trapdoortheatre.com)*

## Best of Chicago's fringe theater scene in 2011

Nina Metz and Kerry Reid

1:18 p.m. CST, December 21, 2011

This time of year we're inundated with reminders to shop local, but there's never a bad time to check out smaller local theater companies who specialize in innovation, guts, and sometimes just sheer blissful goofiness. These artists mostly work for love, not money — and their damn-the-torpedoes commitment to craft over the bottom line makes our weekly voyages “On the Fringe” a homegrown adventure. Here are our top shows from 2011.

### Kerry Reid's picks:

**“The Word Progress On My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True” (Trap Door Theatre):** This Bucktown company's commitment to European avant-garde work makes them one of the fringiest of fringe companies — they're not exactly striving for mainstream accessibility. But Matei Visniec's sorrowful exploration of the aftermath of a Balkan civil war circumvented the cerebral for a punch to the gut. Through a series of heartbreaking and darkly poetic vignettes (captured through director Istvan Szabo K.'s unforgettable stage pictures), Visniec's script and the stellar cast channeled the voices of the dead — and walking dead — in a region where war has been a predominant fact of life for centuries. *Through Jan. 14. Up next for Trap Door: [Peter Handke's “They Are Dying Out,”](#) opening Feb. 16; [trapdoortheatre.com](http://trapdoortheatre.com).*

Matei Visniec playwright, poet and journalist, was born in Romania, and now lives in Paris. He began writing for the theatre in 1977. Early in his career Visniec's plays were banned by the Romanian censors. In 1987 he was invited to France by a literary foundation. While there, he asked for and received political asylum. After the fall of communism in Romania, in 1989, Visniec became one of the most performed playwrights in the country. Visniec gained international attention in 1992, with productions of *Horses at the Window* in France, and *Old Clown Wanted* at the "Bonner Biennale". Since then, Matei Visniec's work has been produced in more than 30 countries (France, Germany, United States, Denmark, Austria, Poland, Finland, Italy, Turkey, Brazil, Romania, Moldavia; etc.). Most recently, his play *The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True* was the winner of the "Best Play in the Off-section" at the Avignon Festival in 2009.

István Szabó K. Born in Romania, István Szabó K. has worked throughout Romania, Hungary and Germany. He graduated from the University of Targu Mures, Romania in 2000. He has served as the Theatre Director of the Hungarian State Theatre in Timisoara, and the Young Theatre in Piatra Neamt. At the Tomcsa Sandor Theatre in Odorheiu Secuiesc he held several positions, including Artistic Director, General Manager and the Theatre Director. Mr. Szabó has also worked as the resident director at the Arca Independent Theatre in Bucharest, and currently, is the Artistic Director of Szigligeti Hungarian State Theatre in Oradea. Most notable productions include *The Could Child* at the Radu Stanca National Theatre in Sibiu, *Edward* at the Romanian National Theatre in Timisoara, *The Temptation* at Euro Theater Central in Bonn and most recently *Mausoleum* at the Hungarian State Theatre in Oradea. Awards for his directorial work include: The Imagine International Festival for *The Wedding*, TopFest National Festival for *Le Enfant Terribles* and the Interethnic Theatre Festival "Press Prize" for *Teibale and her Demon*.

Set Designer Mike Mroch / Lighting Designer [Richard Norwood](#) / Costume Designer Bisa Dimitrova / Music Composer Ovidiu Iloc/ Sound Designer [Sam Lewis](#) / Stage Manager Allison Raynes/ Assistant Stage Manager Lisa Much/ Make up Designer Zsofia Otvos / Specialty Props Mer[Edith Miller](#) / Graphic Designer Michal Janicki/ Dramaturg Milan Pribisic

When: Opens: Thursday, December 1, 2011 at 8PM

Closes: Saturday, January 14, 2012 at 8PM

Runs: Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays at 8PM

There will be no performances on Saturday December 24 or Saturday, December 31

Admission: \$20, with two for one admission on Thursdays, \$25 on Saturdays

Where: TRAP DOOR THEATRE 1655 West Cortland Ave. Chicago, IL 60622

For Information/Reservations: 773-384-0494 To purchase online [www.trapdoortheatre.com](http://www.trapdoortheatre.com)

What: Guest Hungarian/Romanian director István K. Szabó captures the signature comic/tragic surrealism of Matei Visniec's *The Word Progress on My Mother's Lips Doesn't Ring True*. Winner of the "Best Play in the Off-section" at the Avignon Festival in 2009" this American Premiere delves into the pits of refugee psyche, a metaphysical space where one continuously runs from a place with nothing left, to a place with nothing to offer. This collaboration is made possible with the generous support of the Cultural Services of the French Consulate in Chicago and a grant from the Trust for Mutual Understanding in New York.



TRAP DOOR THEATRE  
PRESENTS



THE WORD *PROGRESS* ON MY MOTHER'S  
LIPS DOESN'T RING TRUE

WRITTEN BY MATEI VISNIEC  
TRANSLATED BY JOYCE NETTLES  
DIRECTED BY ISTVÁN SZABÓ K.













































