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Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?

By Edward Albee

The New York Times

February 25, 1962

A theatre person of my acquaintance--a man whose judgement must be respected, though more for the infallibility of his intuition than for his reasoning--remarked just the other week, "The Theatre of the Absurd has had it; it's on its way out; it's through."

Now this, on the surface of it, seems to be a pretty funny attitude to be taking toward a theatre movement which has, only in the past couple of years, been impressing itself on the American public consciousness. Or is it? Must we judge that a theatre of such plays as Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape," Jean Genet's "The Balcony" (both long, long runners off-Broadway) and Eugene Ionesco's "Rhinoceros"--which, albeit in a hoked-up production, had a substantial season on Broadway--has been judged by the theatre public and found wanting?

And shall we have to assume that The Theatre of the Absurd Repertory Company, currently playing at New York's off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theatre--presenting works by Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Arrabal, Jack Richardson, Kenneth Koch and myself--being the first such collective representation of the movement in the United States, is also a kind of farewell to the movement? For that matter, just what is The Theatre of the Absurd?

Well, let me come at it obliquely. When I was told, about a year ago, that I was considered a member in good standing of The Theatre of the Absurd I was deeply offended. I was deeply offended because I had never heard the term before and I immediately assumed that it applied to the theatre uptown--Broadway.

What (I was reasoning to myself) could be more absurd than a theatre in which the esthetic criterion is something like this: A "good" play is one which makes money; a "bad" play (in the sense of "Naughty! Naughty!" I guess) is one which does not; a theatre in which performers have plays rewritten to correspond to the public relations image of themselves; a theatre in which playwrights are encouraged (what a funny word!) to think of themselves as little cogs in a great big wheel; a theatre in which imitation has given way to imitation of imitation; a theatre in which London "hits" are, willy-nilly, in a kind of reverse of chauvinism, greeted in a manner not unlike a colony's obeisance to the Crown; a theatre in which real estate owners and theatre party managements predetermine the success of unknown quantities; a theatre in which everybody scratches and bites for billing as though it meant access to the last bomb shelter on earth; a theatre in which, in a given season, there was not a single performance of a play by Beckett, Brecht, Chekhov, Genet, Ibsen, O'Casey, Pirandello, Shaw, Strindberg--or Shakespeare? What, indeed, I thought, could be more absurd than that? (My conclusions. . . obviously.)

For it emerged that The Theatre of the Absurd, aside from being the title of an excellent book by Martin Esslin on what is loosely called the avant-garde theatre, was a somewhat less than fortunate catch-all phrase to describe the philosophical attitudes and theatre methods of a number of Europe's finest and most adventurous playwrights and their followers.

I was less offended, but still a little dubious. Simply: I don't like labels; they can be facile and can lead to non-think on the part of the public. And unless it is understood that the playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd represent a group only in the sense that they seem to be doing something of the same thing in

vaguely similar ways at approximately the same time--unless this is understood, then the labeling itself will be more absurd than the label.

Playwrights, by nature, are grouchy, withdrawn, envious, greedy, suspicious and, in general, quite nice people--and the majority of them wouldn't be caught dead in a colloquy remotely resembling the following:

IONESCO (At a Left Bank cafe table, spying Beckett and Genet strolling past in animated conversation)
Hey! Sam! Jean!

GENET Hey, it's Eugene! Sam, it's Eugene!

BECKETT Well, I'll be damned. Hi there, Eugene boy.

IONESCO Sit down, kids.

GENET Sure thing.

IONESCO (Rubbing his hands together)

[MISSING TEXT]tion, really and truly The Theatre of the Absurd.

And I would submit further that the health of a nation, a society, can be determined by the art it demands. We have insisted of television and our movies that they not have anything to do with anything, that they be our never-never land; and if we demand this same function of our live theatre, what will be left of the visual-auditory arts--save the dance (in which nobody talks) and music (to which nobody listens)?

It has been my fortune, the past two or three years, to travel around a good deal, in pursuit of my career--Berlin, London, Buenos Aires, for example; and I have discovered a couple of interesting things. I have discovered that audiences in these and other major cities demand of their commercial theatre--and get--a season of plays in which the froth and junk are the exception and not the rule. To take a case: in Berlin, in 1959, Adamov, Genet, Beckett and Brecht (naturally) were playing the big houses; this past fall, Beckett again, Genet again, Pinter twice, etc. To take another case: in Buenos Aires there are over a hundred experimental theatres.

These plays cannot be put on in Berlin over the head of a protesting or an indifferent audience; these experimental theatres cannot exist in Buenos Aires without subscription. In the end--and it must always come down to this, no matter what other failings a theater may have--in the end a public will get what it deserves, and no better.

I have also discovered, in my wanderings, that young people throng to what is new and fresh in the theatre. Happily, this holds true in the United States as well. At the various colleges I have gone to to speak I have found an eager, friendly and knowledgeable audience, an audience which is as dismayed by the Broadway scene as any proselytizer for the avant- garde. I have found among young people an audience which is not so preconditioned by pap as to have cut off half of its responses. (It is interesting to note, by the way, that if an off- Broadway play has a substantial run, its audiences will begin young and grow older; as the run goes on, cloth coats give way to furs, walkers and subway riders to taxi-takers. Exactly the opposite is true on Broadway.)

The young, of course, are always questioning values, knocking the status quo about, considering shibboleths to see if they are pronounceable. In time, it is to be regretted, most of them--the kids--will settle down to their own version of the easy, the standard; but in the meanwhile. . .in the meanwhile they are a wonderful, alert, alive, accepting audience.

And I would go so far as to say that it is the responsibility of everyone who pretends any interest at all in the theatre to get up off their six-ninety seats and find out what the theatre is really about. For it is a lazy public which produces a slothful and irresponsible theatre.

Now, I would suspect that my theatre-friend with the infallible intuition is probably right when he suggests that The Theatre of the Absurd (or avant-garde theatre, or whatever you want to call it) as it now stands is on its way out. Or at least is undergoing change. All living organisms undergo constant change. And while it is certain that the nature of this theatre will remain constant, its forms, its methods--its devices, if you will--most necessarily will undergo mutation.

This theatre has no intention of running downhill; and the younger playwrights will make use of the immediate past and mould it to their own needs. (Harold Pinter, for example, could not have written "The Caretaker" had Samuel Beckett not existed, but Pinter is, nonetheless, moving in his own direction.) And it is my guess that the theatre in the United States will always hew more closely to the post-Ibsen/Chekhov tradition than does the theatre in France, let us say. It is our nature as a country, a society. But we will experiment, and we will expect your attention.

For just as it is true that our response to color and form was forever altered once the impressionist painters put their minds to canvas, it is just as true that the playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd have forever altered our response to the theatre.

And one more point: The avant-garde theatre is fun; it is free-swinging, bold, iconoclastic and often wildly, wildly funny. If you will approach it with childlike innocence--putting your standard responses aside, for they do not apply--if you will approach it on its own terms, I think you will be in for a liberating surprise. I think you may no longer be content with plays that you can't remember halfway down the block. You will not only be doing yourself some good, but you will be having a great time, to boot. And even though it occurs to me that such a fine combination must be sinful, I still recommend it.

Edward Albee is a 33-year-old playwright with several plays to his credit, perhaps the best- known of which is "The Zoo Story." He is at present working on a new play, "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" for fall production.

[READ THE ORIGINAL ARTICLE \(Subscription to NYT Required\)](#)

In Godot We Trust

by David Smith

The Guardian

March 7, 2009

As major new productions of Samuel Beckett's masterpiece *Waiting for Godot* open in Britain and on Broadway, David Smith argues that the playwright's genius lay in creating a work that, more than half a century on, still speaks to audiences, particularly in troubled times. Below, we speak to those involved in some landmark productions.

Two homeless old men wait in a bare road with a single tree. They are in no particular time or place - nowhere and everywhere. Over two days they argue, get bored, clown around, repeat themselves, contemplate suicide, and wait. They're waiting for the one who will never come. They're waiting for Godot.

Vivian Mercier wrote in the *Irish Times* in 1956 that Samuel Beckett had "written a play in which nothing happens, twice". Fifty-six years after its first performance, a watershed in world drama at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris, nothing is still happening, twice - twice over. A new UK production of *Waiting for Godot*, with Sir Ian McKellen as Estragon and Patrick Stewart as Vladimir, began a national tour last week at the Malvern Festival Theatre and comes to the West End at the end of April. And an American revival, with Nathan Lane and Bill Irwin as the time-torn tramps, opens next month on Broadway.

Does theatre have a purpose when the world's financial system is in downturn, or rather recession, or rather depression? There may be a play to come that will dissect the avarice, incompetence and structural causes of the malaise. But often the most eloquent response is the most indirect. *Man on Wire*, the Oscar-winning documentary about Philippe Petit's high-wire walk between New York's Twin Towers in 1974, has been described as the most powerful 9/11 film yet made, precisely because it does not mention 9/11.

Waiting for Godot seems to have a unique resonance during times of social and political crisis. As a modernist existential meditation it can at first appear bleak: "They give birth astride of a grave," says Pozzo. "The light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." But it is also funny and poetic, and reveals humanity's talents for stoicism, companionship and keeping going.

Now it resonates again. Another towering human structure, capitalism, is trembling at the foundations. Where there was certainty, there is now doubt and angst. Consumerism is on the retreat, and the acquisition of material objects is a dead end. It is a moment for introspection and stripping down to bare essentials. There is no drama more stripped down and essential than *Godot*, whose mysteries Beckett refused to elucidate beyond "the laughter and the tears".

"It speaks to us in extremis," says Sean Mathias, director of the new UK production. "It's perfect timing to do it here because many individuals are affected by what's happening in the world with economics. The ground is shifting - for some dramatically, for others subtly - underneath our feet. When you have to rearrange your outside life - people worrying about their lack of money and all those kinds of things - it can't not have an effect on your inside life.

"This play speaks about what it is to be human at the most animal and spiritual level, so subtly that it's like a big beautiful poem or piece of music. It doesn't lecture you, it's not polemic, it's not coarse. It's

written so subtly that its lessons are almost biblical. It teaches you in a very gentle, intelligent way and I think it's very relevant today."

Landmark productions of the play in the past half century have touched a nerve, or been designed as a catalyst for change, in troubled societies all over the world. An all-black *Godot* in South Africa implied a wait for the end of apartheid. Productions in California's San Quentin prison and in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina captured a restless present and yearning for renewal.

Susan Sontag's production in a Sarajevo under siege in 1993 was dubbed "Waiting for Clinton". She said simply: "Beckett's play, written over 40 years ago, seems written for, and about, Sarajevo." There were objections that its world view was too pessimistic for people already in despair. She replied that not everyone, even in a war zone, craves popcorn escapism. "In Sarajevo, as anywhere else, there are more than a few people who feel strengthened and consoled by having their sense of reality affirmed and transfigured by art."

It might have been about Sarajevo, but it is about all the other places, too. Like Shakespeare, *Godot* is a receptacle into which audiences can pour their preoccupations. Even a great work such as Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* operates on two discernible levels: the literal story of the Salem witch trials, and the metaphorical narrative of McCarthyism. But Beckett is taut and unyielding, his art abstract, his conclusion opaque. An explanation would be an intrusion. Who, or what, is *Godot*? Whatever you want it to be.

Sir Tom Stoppard, who first saw it in Bristol in the late 1950s, says: "The play is a universal metaphor precisely because it wasn't designed as being a metaphor for anything in particular. The true subject matter of *Waiting for Godot* is that it's about two tramps waiting for somebody. It's not the case that the true subject matter is in the metaphor. Plays which are designed to be a metaphor for particular correlatives have, I imagine, a very short lifespan. And then of course, there's the writing and the humour.

"On one level *Godot* is like a long poem. Certainly it doesn't need to gain strength from its time and place; it has its own strength. It's one of the few plays that really stand the test of time because there's just nothing spare in it. When plays and books go off like fruit, the soft bits go first. *Godot* doesn't really have any of those."

If it is like anything, *Godot* is a piece of music, reaching beyond the literal. Ronald Pickup, who worked with Beckett in the 1970s ("it was like meeting Mandela or Gandhi"), recalls: "One of the great discoveries I had working with him was his huge sense of rhythm. When we follow the sheer music - because, along with everything else, he's a great poet - the play flows and eddies and twists and turns and stops and sweeps quite beautifully."

Pickup, who plays Lucky in the new British production, adds: "It is simply so tuned to people in any situation, whether in Sarajevo, or here in London in the recession, or in Zimbabwe with everything that's going on there. There is so much to instantly relate to without even having to make an effort. It leaps off the stage and is hugely emotional and compassionate and funny. You forget it's a metaphor and just engage with it."

Beckett stayed true to his writing. A recurring theme emerges from those who worked him: he had no wish to "explain" the metaphor, to clear up the mystery of *Godot*'s identity. Sir Peter Hall, who directed the British premiere at the Arts Theatre in 1955, and has come back to the play four times since, recalls: "He didn't operate like that. It was practicalities: he would say, Estragon and Vladimir are like a married

couple who've been together too long, they grow old day by day. If you said to Sam, 'What does that line mean?' he'd take the book and say, 'What does it say?' That's quite a good thing for a dramatist to do.

"It's fairly obvious Godot can be anything you want. The great thing Beckett did was to say there is such a thing as metaphorical theatre. Godot's a metaphor for religions, philosophy, belief, every kind of thing you can think of, but it never arrives. We do die, however - this we know. But Sam didn't talk about death, he didn't give lectures about what his play meant."

Director Anthony Page, currently rehearsing the new Broadway Godot, worked with Beckett when he directed Britain's first uncensored version of the play in 1964. "Beckett didn't want to theorise," he remembers. "He said he'd written the play without knowing what was going to come next. He just wrote it, hearing these voices. He simply wanted to communicate the tone of the voice, what was happening between the characters. He said that the laughter and the tears were all that mattered."

Neither of the new productions will attempt to spin a directorial interpretation around the crashes of the City or Wall Street. For the text is the perfect statement of futility and redemption, of lying in the gutter but looking at the stars, and audiences who seek the pattern of their own fears will find it for themselves. A hundred years from now, the recession, it must be hoped, will be in the history books, but Vladimir and Estragon will still be on a stage somewhere - still waiting for Godot.

- Waiting for Godot is on tour until 25 April then at Theatre Royal Haymarket, London SW1, from 30 April. Details at waitingforgodottheplay.com

Émigré's Delight: Gombrowicz at the Beinecke Library

by Alan Lockwood

BrooklynRail.org

December 2004 - January 2005

Through January 15, Yale's Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library exhibits *The World of Witold Gombrowicz*, selections from the archive of the caustically funny Polish émigré writer who worked out of obscurity, then was the favorite for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1969, the year he died. Curated by Vincent Giroud, the exhibit is part of *Gombrowicz Autumn*, a series of stateside events taking place concurrently with centenary celebrations in Poland—where Gombrowicz didn't set foot for the second half of his life, and where his books weren't openly available until 1986. An international conference met at Yale, with *Hell Meets Henry Halfway*, a recent theater adaptation of Gombrowicz's serial novel *Possessed*, playing at SoHo's Ohio Theater, and Anthology Film Archives screening feature films (the 2003 New York Film Festival premiered Jan Jakub Kolski's take on the novel *Pornografia*). Three September publications are English firsts: Yale University Press's *Polish Memories* (written for Radio Free Europe broadcast), some wry, late-life philosophy lectures, and Archipelago's *Bacacay* story collection—"a very good place to start," suggests curator Giroud: "So original, so unusual, so fascinating."

In her forward to Yale's 2000 translation of the novel *Ferdydurke*, Susan Sontag cited it as the sole Nietzschean comedy, adding that "few writers' lives have so clearly taken the shape of a destiny." Gombrowicz encompassed two world wars, massive cultural repressions, and an exile's hard lot. Hot on the 1930s Polish avant-garde scene, he took a journalistic jaunt in 1939 on a new ocean liner to Buenos Aires, then stayed when the Blitzkrieg struck Poland days after docking. During the 24 years he lived and worked in Argentina, his work was forbidden, first under the Nazis and then under Poland's communist regime. The 1957 thaw brought new editions at home, then a new crackdown—but those new editions were translated rapidly across Europe. Edged out by Saul Bellow in 1966 for the International Prize for Literature, then the most prestigious after the Nobel, Gombrowicz won the following year for his novel *Cosmos* (out in a new Yale translation next year) and placed second for 1968's Nobel.

Grove Press published 1960s translations from French and German editions, then Northwestern brought out his much-lauded *Diary*, but Gombrowicz remains little known here—a particularly scandalous fact in the theater world, where his three great plays make him, in Giroud's words, "one of the most performed playwrights of the 20th century." Yale's current Theater magazine is devoted to Gombrowicz, and the Beinecke exhibit includes "kindest personal regards" from Ingmar Bergman, who staged *Ivona, Princess of Burgundy* in 1995, and Albert Camus's enthusiasm for Gombrowicz's second play, *The Marriage*. On a mini-screen, Jorge Lavelli's Berlin Festival production of that play startles in black and white, as does the renowned Argentine director's lavish, colorfully histrionic musical production of *Operetta*. Correspondence with Nobel laureate and fellow émigré Czeslaw Milosz, painter Jean Dubuffet, and composer Mauricio Kagel (who refers to "the spiritual Baedeker of your *Diary*") are on view, as is that of legendary Polish theater director Tadeusz Kantor, who incorporated *Ferdydurke*'s opening school sequence in his famous 1975 production, *The Dead Class*. Argentine supporters smile from photos, and a postcard shows the liner on which Gombrowicz returned to Europe in 1963 on a CIA-funded Ford Foundation fellowship to Berlin, among the first artists invited to bolster the recently walled city.

Vincent Giroud facilitated Yale's acquisition of the Gombrowicz archive from the writer's widow (and greatest champion), Rita, to join that of Milosz at Beinecke. The following excerpts come from a chat with the Rail at an Upper East Side luncheonette.

Rail: You quote Józef Wittlin (a major émigré ally), saying that Gombrowicz's books "have such explosive force that they upset all of our intellectual and affective resources."

Vincent Giroud: Gombrowicz is a great debunker. Comparisons with Nietzsche are very apt: he's a disturbing writer because he questions the established values and such unquestioned attitudes as self-respect, adulthood, rationality, and hierarchy. Young Poles fell in love with his work, then continued to read it—clandestinely—because they saw him as a liberator from the communist regime that told them how to think. Here, today, he can be seen as a liberator from the opposite of that.

Rail: In Poland, his French translator noticed that "part of the youth spoke Gombrowiczian," with Ferdydurke's phrase "rape through the ears" being, in your words, "recycled politically to mean Stalinist propaganda." Seems a useful tool to resist the current anti-thinking climate of our day.

Giroud: Totally. The farcical element is extremely important in Gombrowicz's work. He sees humor as that explosive force, as a weapon, as Molière did, as Alfred Jarry did, too. Gombrowicz was a very famous man in Europe by the time he died, but mention him to people important in the theater world here and you'll get no particular reaction. He was way before his day: *Ivona* was written in 1938, then when it was first performed 20 years later, one thought, oh, my, yes, it's Ionesco, it's Beckett.

Rail: Who in fact were writing 10 and 15 years later.

Giroud: Exactly. His prescience is one of the many paradoxes of Gombrowicz as a writer.

About the Author

Alan Lockwood wrote about La MaMa's ongoing Puppet Series in the October Rail. In February, check for his piece on the Abrons Arts production of *A Couple of Poor, Polish-speaking Romanians*, by Dorota Maslowska.

Billington's assault on absurdism

by: Jim Rutter

The Broad Street Review

January 31, 2011

Absurdism, a European artistic response to the senseless horrors of World War II, has lost its relevance, according to critic Michael Billington. Yet from Greece to the Tea Party to the Occupy movement, millions of people today wander in aimless stupor like the hoboes in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*.

Absurdism isn't relevant? Don't be absurd!

The Guardian's Michael Billington began his recent series on modern theater by discussing the contemporary irrelevance of absurdism, a European artistic response to the senseless horrors of World War II. Absurdist writers such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and Albert Camus captured the post-war zeitgeist of humans cut off from all meaning and trudging onward in useless striving.

But that was then. Billington argues that today's audiences want more from playwrights than a "cry of anguish" at the absurd human condition; they want "information and enlightenment." Absurdism, by contrast, remains a historical curiosity that served its era, and Billington dismisses its ability to explain "the complexities of today's world." (See "A is for absurdum.")

His dismissal assumes much about what audiences want to see and absurdist literature, and even more about the human condition.

Fukuyama's fallacy

Billington's insistence on audience's desire for "information" over philosophy reflects a sentiment asserted by the political scientist Francis Fukuyama in his 1992 book, *The End of History and The Last Man*. Fukuyama's work argued that the fall of the Berlin Wall ushered in an end of social and economic changes, after which all humanity would live under market-based, liberal democratic conditions.

Billington, similarly blinded, would have us believe that all remaining theater— especially political theater— must pose and answer questions within this liberal-democratic-market framework, where "enlightenment and information" consists of fact-based answers and policy-driven solutions. But his argument excludes those in Western society have reached the end of that rope and would turn to theater for an answer to the "Why should we live?" rather than the much easier question of "How should we live?"

Billington doesn't see that millions today wander in aimless stupor like the hoboes in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. Many more feel— like Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern*— trapped in the bowels of a ship, flipping a coin in symbolic illustration of the forces that have placed them in their station. All those protesters in Greece, Portugal, Russia and Britain might well ask: Who cares about enlightenment when the answers to life's fundamental questions of value and meaning still elude us?

America's widespread Occupy movement has been widely characterized as an assortment of dropouts who lack a coherent agenda or demands. That sounds an awful lot like a cry of anguish to me.

Waiting for a message

As for the absurdist works themselves? Two examples staged recently in Philadelphia by Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium suggest the contemporary relevance of absurdism.

Ionesco's *The Chairs* depicts a couple living in a lighthouse, where they anxiously await an orator whose message will bring meaning to their lives. I can imagine such a play resonating with John the Baptist before Christ's arrival and also with the 40% of the U.S. electorate who intend to vote against President Obama without yet knowing his opponent's identity.

Max Fritsch's *The Arsonists* portrays a similar husband and wife living fearfully in a world of moral decay; although they know that arsonists are burning down civilization, they nonetheless invite the firebugs into their home— after all, one must keep an open mind about everything, even arsonists.

To be sure, Billington acknowledges this play's relevance to today's debates over how to fight subversion and terrorism. But for the most part he insists that absurdism speaks only to continental Europe after World War II.

Nietzsche's experiment

Absurdism as a description of existence first appeared in the works of Søren Kierkegaard, a 19th-Century theist who saw the absurd as rational man's inability to grasp God's intended reason and meaning in life. Since we can't know the correct action, Kierkegaard maintained, every choice tosses the individual into a state of despair and anguish.

Nietzsche subsequently abandoned God but picked up where Kierkegaard left off. Unlike every philosopher since Aristotle, Nietzsche refused to look on the world in wonderment. Instead, he saw existence as meaningless and filled with horrors, which we can't ameliorate or eliminate but only ignore, endure or resist.

Yet Nietzsche found a way to make sense of this nightmare: *amor fati*, or "love of fate." In *The Gay Science*, he proposed a thought experiment:

Imagine that a demon told you that you must live your entire life over and over again, eternally. Would the thought cause you to gnash your teeth in anguish? Or have you experienced even one ecstatic moment that would make you wish nothing were different for all eternity?

The notion that life is senseless has always plagued human beings— not just Europeans who survived World War II. Somewhere on this planet, it's safe to say, absurdism will always find an audience and serve a useful purpose, even in an ostensibly civilized place like Philadelphia.

Misalliance

by Joe Glantz

joeglantz.com

February 3, 2015

Early in the performance of G.B. Shaw's *Misalliance*, staged by the Idiopathic Ridiculopathy Consortium at the Walnut Street Theater Studio 5, two characters discuss whether books should be about plot or about ideas. Make no mistake about it – in *Misalliance*, the discussion of ideas wins – so much so that when the father, John Tarleton (a successful seller of underwear and owner of the home where the play takes place) says he's run out of things to say - the play ends.

This isn't to say there isn't a plot. There are several plot lines: a plane that falls out of the sky, an intruder who threatens to kill the father as well, and seven or eight different marriage proposals of the father's daughter and the acrobatic passenger who was a passenger in the plane. And there is some character development thought it's mainly to learn which performer is the aristocrat, the socialist, the businessman, the gentleman (he's so sophisticated he has three fathers) and so forth.

Mostly and quite directly (as Shaw and the director, Tina Brock, intend) - this is a play about the topics of day. Throughout, our successful achieving father Tarleton pats himself on the back and constantly admonishes everyone to read – "Read Ibsen, Read Shakespeare, Read Chesterton..." even though he clearly hasn't read any of them and is totally surprised to find that the person threatening him actually has. This also explains why there are not 1, but 12 versions of the Bible, in his house.

The central thrust of the play is the relationship between men and women and what roles each should play and can play in 1910 Edwardian England. The daughter, Hypatia Tarleton, wants adventure as much or more than she wants romance as in this wonderful line - "I don't want to be bothered about either good or bad: I want to be an active verb." The acrobatic adventuress, Lina Szczepanowska (just saying her name is an adventure), is in many ways the woman Hypatia wants to be. She prides herself in being part of a family line that for over 100 years has tried some death defying stunt – which is why she was on the plane in the first place.

The men: Hypatia's fiancé, brother, father and the father of the fiancé - all have their own ideas of relationships beginning with the conviction that the engagement between Hypatia and Bentley, the spineless son of an aristocrat, is the first of many mis-alliances. Other misalliances (and other topics for Shaw's discussion) include parent-child relationships, business vs. aristocracy, fiction vs. real life, socialism vs. everything else and body (food and exercise) vs. brains. The only character who doesn't seem to clamor for change (ala Downton Abbey's constant refrain) is Hypatia's mother, Chicabiddy Tarleton.

Since there are soooo many ideas and the dialogue is so intense, the difficulty in this play and any of Shaw's discussion plays (*Man and Superman* and *Major Barbara* for starters) is to keep the audience entertained enough to keep the constant changes in discussion focused and alive so you want to stay in the theater instead of going home and "reading" the play. In this respect, Ms. Brock manages a wonderful balance especially in the second act where the wit of Shaw's lines, the discussion points, the plot and different characters all forge into a wonderful blend. All the performers keep true to the roles in solid and entertaining performances. The father, John Tarleton, played by David Bardeen, stands out. The setting, a backyard indoor porch and the costumes are all professionally done. My only complaint was that the acrobat's accent came on a little too strong. My main wonder is how many of these discussion points

would have played when they were first performed in 1910. The secondary one is that over 100 years later, they still resonate today.

The play and production did make me understand why G.B. Shaw and G. K. Chesterton were good friends even though Shaw was a Fabian socialist and Chesterton a conservative. Shaw discussions are diatribes but they don't completely take a point a view. Misalliance has many of Chesterton's paradoxical thoughts - "Everyone's business is nobody's business," "If nobody disagrees with you, how do you know you're not a fool?" and "Democracy reads well but it doesn't act well." It's easy to see Shaw saying "Every fool believes what his teachers tell him, and calls his credulity science or morality as confidently as his father called it divine revelation." And Chesterton rebutting "Without education, we are in a horrible and deadly danger of taking educated people seriously." Other of Shaw's notable influences in the play include Henrik Ibsen, Robert Browning, Tennyson and John Stuart Mills.

The setting, Studio 5 at the Walnut, is an intimate setting of about 50 seats.

Joe Glantz practiced law in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, for 14 years and designed large scale databases for AT&T for five years. He currently works for NextLevel Web Strategies, a legal marketing firm based in Princeton, NJ. He is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, received his J.D. from George Washington Law School and he has a Masters Degree in Computer Science from Drexel University.

Joe's book, Philadelphia Originals (amazon.com website), was released for publication by Schiffer Publishing in 2009. The book shows that the unique styles (how Philadelphians paint, sing, practice law, tell a joke, cook) of Philadelphia's most notable professions can be traced back to the perfect complement of the spiritual William Penn and the practical Benjamin Franklin.

His second project, Philadelphia Before You Were Born, is a study of the last time Philadelphia newspapers used artists for all their illustrations. It was published in 2011.

Joe's many other published writings include a humorous look at book clubs for the Bucks County Writer and the literary stages of a baseball season for the Philadelphia Inquirer. He also writes the Interviews with the Famously Departed Column for the Wild River Review.

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[Also by Joe Glantz: Interviews with the Famously Departed: George Bernard Shaw Speaks by Joe Glantz](#)

The Art of Theater No. 6

By Eugene Ionesco

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Interviewed by Shusha Guppy

The last few years have been exceptionally busy for Eugène Ionesco. His seventieth birthday was celebrated in 1982 with a series of events, publications, and productions of his work, not only in France but worldwide. *Hugoliades*, Ionesco's satirical portrait of Victor Hugo, which he wrote at the age of twenty, was newly published by Gallimard. In Lyons, Roger Planchon, the director of the Théâtre Nationale Populaire, staged *Journey Among the Dead*, a collage of Ionesco's dreams, autobiographical writings, and extracts from his latest play, *The Man with Suitcases*. The show, which toured France to both critical and popular acclaim, was due to be staged at the Comédie Française in Paris. Recently, the cast of Ionesco's two early plays *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* gave a birthday party for the playwright which also celebrated both plays' twenty-fifth year of uninterrupted runs at the Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris.

Over the past thirty years, Ionesco has been called a "tragic clown," the "Shakespeare of the Absurd," the "Enfant Terrible of the Avant-Garde," and the "Inventor of the Metaphysical Farce"—epithets that point to his evolution from a young playwright at a tiny Left Bank theater to an esteemed member of the Académie Française. For the past forty-five years, Ionesco has been married to Rodika, his Romanian wife. They live in an exotic top-floor apartment on the Boulevard Montparnasse above La Coupole, surrounded by a collection of books and pictures by some of Ionesco's oldest friends and colleagues, including Hemingway, Picasso, Sartre, and Henry Miller. Our interview took place in the drawing room, where Miró's portraits, Max Ernst's drawing of Ionesco's Rhinoceros, and a selection of Romanian and Greek icons adorn the walls.

Ionesco, a small, bald man with sad, gentle eyes, seems quite fragile at first glance—an impression which is immediately belied by his mischievous sense of humor and his passionate speech. Beside him Rodika, also slight, with dark slanted eyes and an ivory complexion, looks like a placid oriental doll. During the course of the interview she brought us tea and frequently asked how we were getting on. The Ionescos' steady exchange of endearments and their courtesy with one another reminded me of some of the wonderful old couples portrayed by Ionesco in many of his plays.

INTERVIEWER

You once wrote, "The story of my life is the story of a wandering." Where and when did the wandering start?

EUGENE IONESCO

At the age of one. I was born near Bucharest, but my parents came to France a year later. We moved back to Romania when I was thirteen, and my world was shattered. I hated Bucharest, its society, and its mores—its anti-Semitism for example. I was not Jewish, but I pronounced my r's as the French do and was often taken for a Jew, for which I was ruthlessly bullied. I worked hard to change my r's and to sound Bourguignon! It was the time of the rise of Nazism and everyone was becoming pro-Nazi—writers, teachers, biologists, historians . . . Everyone read Chamberlain's *The Origins of the Twentieth Century* and books by rightists like Charles Maurras and Léon Daudet. It was a plague! They despised France and England because they were yiddified and racially impure. On top of everything, my father remarried and

his new wife's family was very right-wing. I remember one day there was a military parade. A lieutenant was marching in front of the palace guards. I can still see him carrying the flag. I was standing beside a peasant with a big fur hat who was watching the parade, absolutely wide-eyed. Suddenly the lieutenant broke rank, rushed toward us, and slapped the peasant, saying, "Take off your hat when you see the flag!" I was horrified. My thoughts were not yet organized or coherent at that age, but I had feelings, a certain nascent humanism, and I found these things inadmissible. The worst thing of all, for an adolescent, was to be different from everyone else. Could I be right and the whole country wrong? Perhaps there were people like that in France—at the time of the Dreyfus trials, when Paul Déroulède, the chief of the anti-Dreyfussards, wrote "En Avant Soldat!"—but I had never known it. The France I knew was my childhood paradise. I had lost it, and I was inconsolable. So I planned to go back as soon as I could. But first, I had to get through school and university, and then get a grant.

INTERVIEWER

When did you become aware of your vocation as a writer?

IONESCO

I always had been. When I was nine, the teacher asked us to write a piece about our village fete. He read mine in class. I was encouraged and continued. I even wanted to write my memoirs at the age of ten. At twelve I wrote poetry, mostly about friendship—"Ode to Friendship." Then my class wanted to make a film and one little boy suggested that I write the script. It was a story about some children who invite some other children to a party, and they end up throwing all the furniture and the parents out of the window. Then I wrote a patriotic play, *Pro Patria*. You see how I went for the grand titles!

INTERVIEWER

After these valiant childhood efforts you began to write in earnest. You wrote *Hugoliades* while you were still at university. What made you take on poor Hugo?

IONESCO

It was quite fashionable to poke fun at Hugo. You remember Gide's "Victor Hugo is the greatest French poet, alas!" or Cocteau's "Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo." Anyway, I hated rhetoric and eloquence. I agreed with Verlaine, who said, "You have to get hold of eloquence and twist its neck off!" Nonetheless, it took some courage. Nowadays it is common to debunk great men, but it wasn't then.

INTERVIEWER

French poetry is rhetorical, except for a few exceptions like Villon, Louise Labé, and Baudelaire.

IONESCO

Ronsard isn't. Nor are Gérard de Nerval and Rimbaud. But even Baudelaire sinks into rhetoric: "Je suis belle, O Mortelle . . ." and then when you see the actual statue he's referring to, it's a pompous one! Or: "Mon enfant, ma soeur, songe à la douceur, d'aller là-bas vivre ensemble . . ." It could be used for a brochure on exotic cruises for American millionaires.

INTERVIEWER

Come on! There were no American millionaires in those days.

IONESCO

Ah, but there were! I agree with Albert Béguin, a famous critic in the thirties [author of *Dreams and the Romantics*], who said that Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, et cetera . . . were not romantics, and that French romantic poetry really started with Nerval and Rimbaud. You see, the former produced versified rhetoric; they talked about death, even monologued on death. But from Nerval on, death became visceral and poetic. They didn't speak of death, they died of death. That's the difference.

INTERVIEWER

Baudelaire died of death, did he not?

IONESCO

All right then, you can have your Baudelaire. In the theater, the same thing happened with us—Beckett, Adamov, and myself. We were not far from Sartre and Camus—the Sartre of *La Nausée*, the Camus of *L'Étranger*—but they were thinkers who demonstrated their ideas, whereas with us, especially Beckett, death becomes a living evidence, like Giacometti, whose sculptures are walking skeletons. Beckett shows death; his people are in dustbins or waiting for God. (Beckett will be cross with me for mentioning God, but never mind.) Similarly, in my play *The New Tenant*, there is no speech, or rather, the speeches are given to the Janitor. The Tenant just suffocates beneath proliferating furniture and objects—which is a symbol of death. There were no longer words being spoken, but images being visualized. We achieved it above all by the dislocation of language. Do you remember the monologue in *Waiting for Godot* and the dialogue in *The Bald Soprano*? Beckett destroys language with silence. I do it with too much language, with characters talking at random, and by inventing words.

INTERVIEWER

Apart from the central theme of death and the black humor which you share with the other two dramatists, there is an important oneiric, or dreamlike, element in your work. Does this suggest the influence of surrealism and psychoanalysis?

IONESCO

None of us would have written as we do without surrealism and dadaism. By liberating the language, those movements paved the way for us. But Beckett's work, especially his prose, was influenced above all by Joyce and the Irish Circus people. Whereas my theater was born in Bucharest. We had a French teacher who read us a poem by Tristan Tzara one day which started, "Sur une ride du soleil," to demonstrate how ridiculous it was and what rubbish modern French poets were writing. It had the opposite effect. I was bowled over and immediately went and bought the book. Then I read all the other surrealists—André Breton, Robert Desnos . . . I loved the black humor. I met Tzara at the very end of his life. He, who had refused to speak Romanian all his life, suddenly started talking to me in that language, reminiscing about his childhood, his youth, and his loves. But you see, the most implacable enemies of culture—Rimbaud, Lautréamont, dadaism, surrealism—end up being assimilated and absorbed by it. They all wanted to destroy culture, at least organized culture, and now they're part of our heritage. It's culture and not the bourgeoisie, as has been alleged, that is capable of absorbing everything for its own nourishment. As for the oneiric element, that is due partly to surrealism, but to a larger extent due to personal taste and to Romanian folklore—werewolves and magical practices. For example, when someone is dying, women surround him and chant, "Be careful! Don't tarry on the way! Don't be afraid of the wolf; it is not a real wolf!"—exactly as in *Exit the King*. They do that so the dead man won't stay in infernal regions. The same thing can be found in the Tibetan Book of the Dead, which had a great impact on me too. However, my deepest anxieties were awakened, or reactivated, through Kafka.

INTERVIEWER

Especially the Kafka of *Metamorphosis*?

IONESCO

Yes, and of *Amerika*. Remember how his character, Karl Rossmann, goes from cabin to cabin and can't find his way? It is very oneiric. And Dostoyevsky interested me because of the way he deals with the conflict between good and evil. But all this already had happened by the time I left Bucharest.

INTERVIEWER

How did you manage to return to Paris—I believe at the age of twenty-six—and stay for good?

IONESCO

I had a degree in French literature and the French government gave me a grant to come and do a doctorate. In the meantime, I had married and was working as a teacher. My wife, Rodika, was one of the few people who thought the same as I did. Perhaps it's because she comes from that part of Romania which is very Asiatic—the people are small and have slit eyes. Now I'm becoming a racist! Anyway, I was going to write a thesis on "The Theme of Death and Sin in French Poetry." There's the grand title again.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write it?

IONESCO

Oh no! As I researched, I noticed that the French—Pascal, Péguy, et cetera—had problems of faith, but they had no feeling for death and they certainly never felt guilty. What they had plenty of was the feeling of age, of physical deterioration and decay. From Ronsard's famous sonnet about aging, "Quand tu seras vieille . . ." to Baudelaire's *La Charogne* [The Carrion], to Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* and *Nana*—it's all degradation, decomposition, and rot. But not death. Never. The feeling of death is more metaphysical. So I didn't write it.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why you also gave up dramatizing Proust, because his preoccupation with time is different from yours?

IONESCO

Precisely. Also, *Remembrance of Things Past* is too long and difficult, and what is interesting is the seventh volume, *Time Regained*. Otherwise, Proust's work is concerned with irony, social criticism, worldliness, and the passage of time, which are not my preoccupations.

INTERVIEWER

When you settled in Paris, did you try to meet the authors whose works you had read, and get into the literary world?

IONESCO

I did research at the National Library and met other students. Later, I met Breton, who came to see my play *Amédée* in 1954. I continued seeing him until his death in 1966. But he had been dropped by the literary establishment because, unlike Aragon, Eluard, and Picasso, he refused to join the Communist Party, and so he wasn't fashionable anymore.

INTERVIEWER

You also got involved with the Collège de Pataphysique. Could you tell me about it?

IONESCO

Quite by chance, I met a man named Sainmont, who was a professor of philosophy and the founder, or Le Providateur Général, of the Collège de Pataphysique. Later I met Raymond Queneau and Boris Vian, who were the most important and active members. The Collège was an enterprise dedicated to nihilism and irony, which in my view corresponded to Zen. Its chief occupation was to devise commissions, whose job it was to create subcommissions, which in turn did nothing. There was one commission which was preparing a thesis on the history of latrines from the beginning of civilization to our time. The members were students of Dr. Faustrol, who was an invented character and the prophet of Alfred Jarry. So the purpose of the Collège was the demolition of culture, even of surrealism, which they considered too organized. But make no mistake, these people were graduates of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and highly cultured. Their method was based on puns and practical jokes—le canular. There is a great tradition of puns in Anglo-Saxon literature—Shakespeare, Alice in Wonderland—but not in French. So they adopted it. They believed that the science of sciences is the pataphysique and its dogma, le canular.

INTERVIEWER

How was the Collège organized, and how did one join it?

IONESCO

It was organized with great precision: there was a hierarchy, grades, a pastiche of Freemasonry. Anybody could join, and the first grade was that of Auditeur Amphitéote. After that, you became a Regent, and finally a Satrap. The satrap was entitled to be addressed as Votre Transcendence, and when you left his presence you had to walk backwards. Our principal activity was to write pamphlets and to make absurd statements, such as “Jean Paulhan does not exist!” Our meetings took place in a little café-restaurant in the Latin Quarter, and we discussed nothing, because we believed—and I still do—that there is no reason for anything, that everything is meaningless.

INTERVIEWER

Is that not contradictory to your religious conversion?

IONESCO

No, because we exist on several different planes, and when we said nothing had any reason we were referring to the psychological and social plane. Our God was Alfred Jarry, and, apart from our meetings, we made pilgrimages to his grave near Paris. As you know, Jarry had written *Ubu roi*, which was a parody of Macbeth. Much later I wrote a play based on Macbeth too. Anyway, the Collège gave decorations, the most important of which was La Gidouille, which was a large turd to be pinned on your lapel.

INTERVIEWER

How did you acquire the honor of becoming a satrap?

IONESCO

By writing *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, since the plays made fun of everything. They both had a conventional format—scenes, dialogue, characters—but no psychology.

INTERVIEWER

Did those at the Collège ever play a practical joke on you?

IONESCO

Yes. At the premiere of *The Bald Soprano*, twenty to thirty of them turned up wearing their *gidouilles* on their lapels. The audience was shocked at the sight of so many big turds, and thought they were members of a secret cult. I didn't produce many puns, but I did contribute to the *Cahiers de Pataphysique*, the Collège's quarterly magazine, with letters in Italian, Spanish, and German—all the languages I don't speak. The letters just sounded Italian, Spanish, and German. I wish I had kept some but I haven't. The chief makers of puns and canulars were Sainmont and Queneau. They invented a poet named Julien Torma, who of course never existed, and they published his works in the *Cahiers*. They even invented a biography for him, complete with a tragic death in the mountains.

INTERVIEWER

When did the Collège cease to exist?

IONESCO

When the founders and guiding spirits—Vian, Sainmont, and finally Queneau—began to die. There was an honorary president, a certain Baron Mollet, who was not a baron at all, but a madman who had once been Guillaume Apollinaire's valet. But the *Pataphysique* is not dead. It lives on in the minds of certain men, even if they are not aware of it. It has gone into "occultation," as we say, and will come back again one day.

INTERVIEWER

To get back to your work: After you dropped your thesis in favor of your own writing, why did you choose the theater and not another literary form?

IONESCO

The theater chose me. As I said, I started with poetry, and I also wrote criticism and dialogue. But I realized that I was most successful at dialogue. Perhaps I abandoned criticism because I am full of contradictions, and when you write an essay you are not supposed to contradict yourself. But in the theater, by inventing various characters, you can. My characters are contradictory not only in their language, but in their behavior as well.

INTERVIEWER

So in 1950 you appeared, or should I say erupted, on the French stage with *The Bald Soprano*. Adamov's plays were staged almost simultaneously, and two years later there was Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—three avant-garde playwrights who, though very different in personality and output, had a great deal in common thematically and formally, and who later became known as the chief exponents of the "theater of the absurd." Do you agree with this appellation?

IONESCO

Yes and no. I think it was Martin Esslin who wrote a book with that title about us. At first I rejected it, because I thought that everything was absurd, and that the notion of the absurd had become prominent only because of existentialism, because of Sartre and Camus. But then I found ancestors, like Shakespeare, who said, in *Macbeth*, that the world is full of sound and fury, a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing. *Macbeth* is a victim of fate. So is *Oedipus*. But what happens to them is not absurd in the eyes of destiny, because destiny, or fate, has its own norms, its own morality, its own laws, which cannot be flouted with impunity. *Oedipus* sleeps with his Mummy, kills his Daddy, and breaks the laws of fate. He must pay for it

by suffering. It is tragic and absurd, but at the same time it's reassuring and comforting, since the idea is that if we don't break destiny's laws, we should be all right. Not so with our characters. They have no metaphysics, no order, no law. They are miserable and they don't know why. They are puppets, undone. In short, they represent modern man. Their situation is not tragic, since it has no relation to a higher order. Instead, it's ridiculous, laughable, and derisory.

INTERVIEWER

After the success of *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* you became suddenly and controversially famous. Were you lionized? Did you start frequenting literary salons and gatherings?

IONESCO

Yes, I did. Literary salons don't exist any longer in Paris, but in those days there were two. The first was the salon of Madame Dézenas—a rich lady who liked literature and the arts. All sorts of celebrities came there: Stravinsky, Etiemble, young Michel Butor, Henri Michaux . . . The second salon was La Vicomtesse de Noailles's. I went there once and met Jean-Louis Barrault. I remember how a ripple of excitement, a frisson, ran through the gathering when Aragon and Elsa Triolet were announced. "Here come the Communists!" they all said. Aragon was in a dinner jacket and Elsa was covered in jewelry. But I went there to drink whiskey and to meet friends, not out of worldliness.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think worldly distractions, social life and parties, dissipate a writer's concentration and damage his work?

IONESCO

Yes, to a certain extent. But there have been great writers who have been great partygoers at the same time, such as Valéry, Claudel, and Henry James. Valéry used to get up at five in the morning, work until nine, then spend the rest of the day having fun in one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think success can be damaging for a writer, not only as a distraction but because it could make him seek out easy options and compromises?

IONESCO

It depends on how you use it. I detest and despise success, yet I cannot do without it. I am like a drug addict—if nobody talks about me for a couple of months I have withdrawal symptoms. It is stupid to be hooked on fame, because it is like being hooked on corpses. After all, the people who come to see my plays, who create my fame, are going to die. But you can stay in society and be alone, as long as you can be detached from the world. This is why I don't think I have ever gone for the easy option or done things that were expected of me. I have the vanity to think that every play I have written is different from the previous ones. Yet, even though they are written in a different way, they all deal with the same themes, the same preoccupations. *Exit the King* is also *The Bald Soprano*.

INTERVIEWER

You also wrote a play called *Macbett*, which is very different from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What made you go for a remake of the Bard?

IONESCO

My Macbett is not a victim of fate, but of politics. I agree with Jan Kott, the Polish author of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, who gives the following explanation: A bad king is on the throne, a noble prince kills him to free the country of tyranny, but ipso facto he becomes a criminal and has to be killed in turn by someone else—and on it goes. The same thing has happened in recent history: The French Revolution liberated people from the power of the aristocrats. But the bourgeoisie that took over represented the exploitation of man by man, and had to be destroyed—as in the Russian Revolution, which then degenerated into totalitarianism, Stalinism, and genocide. The more you make revolutions, the worse it gets. Man is driven by evil instincts that are often stronger than moral laws.

INTERVIEWER

This sounds very pessimistic and hopeless and seems at variance with your mystical and religious tendencies.

IONESCO

Well, there is a higher order, but man can separate himself from it because he is free—which is what we have done. We have lost the sense of this higher order, and things will get worse and worse, culminating perhaps in a nuclear holocaust—the destruction predicted in the Apocalyptic texts. Only our apocalypse will be absurd and ridiculous because it will not be related to any transcendence. Modern man is a puppet, a jumping jack. You know, the Cathars [a Christian sect of the later Middle Ages] believed that the world was not created by God but by a demon who had stolen a few technological secrets from Him and made this world—which is why it doesn't work. I don't share this heresy. I'm too afraid! But I put it in a play called *This Extraordinary Brothel*, in which the protagonist doesn't talk at all. There is a revolution, everybody kills everybody else, and he doesn't understand. But at the very end, he speaks for the first time. He points his finger towards the sky and shakes it at God, saying, "You rogue! You little rogue!" and he bursts out laughing. He understands that the world is an enormous farce, a canular played by God against man, and that he has to play God's game and laugh about it. That is why I prefer the phrase "theater of derision," which Emmanuel Jacquart used for the title of his book on Beckett, Adamov, and myself, to "theater of the absurd."

INTERVIEWER

I think Esslin was dealing with the first period of your work—*The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *Jacques*, and *The Chairs*. With the introduction of your central character, *Béranger*, the plays seem to change somewhat. The dislocation of language, the black humor, and the element of farce are all still there, but not to the same degree. Instead, you develop new elements of both plot and character. How did you come to choose the name *Béranger*, and did the creation of this character help with the transition?

IONESCO

I wanted a very common name. Several came to my mind and I finally chose *Béranger*. I don't think the name means anything, but it is very ordinary and innocuous. In the first plays the characters were puppets and spoke in the third person as one, not as I or as you. The impersonal one, as in "one should take an umbrella when it is raining." They lived in what Heidegger calls "the world of one." Afterwards, the characters acquired a certain volume, or weight. They have become more individualized, psychologized. *Béranger* represents the modern man. He is a victim of totalitarianism—of both kinds of totalitarianism, of the Right and of the Left. When *Rhinoceros* was produced in Germany, it had fifty curtain calls. The next day the papers wrote, "Ionesco shows us how we became Nazis." But in Moscow, they wanted me to rewrite it and make sure that it dealt with Nazism and not with their kind of totalitarianism. In Buenos Aires, the military government thought it was an attack on Perónism. And in England they accused me of being a petit bourgeois. Even in the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica* they call

me a reactionary. You see, when it comes to misunderstanding, I have had my full share. Yet I have never been to the Right, nor have I been a Communist, because I have experienced, personally, both forms of totalitarianism. It is those who have never lived under tyranny who call me petit bourgeois.

INTERVIEWER

The misunderstanding of your work in England and the fact that your plays have not been widely produced there or in America dates back to your quarrel with the late critic Kenneth Tynan in the early sixties.

IONESCO

That's right. I didn't much care for the Angry Young Men whose work Tynan was backing. I thought them very petit bourgeois and insignificant. I found their revolutionary zeal unconvincing, their anger small and personal, and their work of little interest.

INTERVIEWER

Also, Brecht was enjoying a vogue at the time, and you were definitely not Brechtian.

IONESCO

I think that Brecht was a good producer, but not really a poet or a dramatist, except in his early plays, *Three-penny Opera*, *Baal*, and a couple of others. But his committed plays don't work. I believe that, as Nabokov said, an author should not have to deliver a message, because he is not a postman.

INTERVIEWER

Sam Goldwyn said the same thing about films, "Leave the messages to Western Union."

IONESCO

Did he say that? I quite agree. In France everybody was Brechtian—Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes—and they wanted to rule the theater. Later, Tynan asked me to write something for his erotic revue, *Oh! Calcutta!*, which I did. Then he said: "You have so much talent, you could be Europe's first dramatist." So I said, "What should I do?" and he said, "Become Brechtian." I said, "But then I would be the second, not the first."

INTERVIEWER

Now we seem to have come full circle. A Brechtian, Roger Planchon, has just produced *Journey Among the Dead*, your autobiographical play, and you are considered one of the greatest dramatists of our time. You have been sitting in the French Academy since 1970, next to some of the people who rejected your plays at first. I understand that the process of election to the Academy involves writing letters and calling on each member personally, pleading your case and asking to be elected. There are many famous rejections, like Baudelaire's heartbreaking letters to the members of the Academy, begging them to vote for him. And Zola. It seems a humiliating process. Yet you, a rebel, why did you go through with it?

IONESCO

I didn't. There were people who wanted me there, like René Clair, Jean Delay, and others; and I said I would apply on the condition that I would not have to call on people and write letters. I simply presented my letter of candidacy and I was elected by seventeen votes against sixteen.

INTERVIEWER

How do the meetings of the Academy compare with those of the Collège de Pataphysique in the old days?

IONESCO

All the members of the Academy are pataphysicians, whether consciously, like the late René Clair, or unconsciously. Anyway, I don't go there that often, only a couple of times a year for the elections of new members, and I always vote against them!

INTERVIEWER

Against whom?

IONESCO

Against everybody! Unfortunately, I'm such a poor intriguer that I have not succeeded in keeping out certain undesirable persons, and there are people I would like to see as members who have not yet been elected. But the elections are fun. Claudel used to say that they were so amusing that there should be one every week. You see, the French Academy is an association of solitaires: Jean Delay, the inventor of modern postpsychoanalytic psychiatry; Lévi-Strauss, the creator of modern anthropology and structuralism; Louis de Broglie, one of the founders of modern physics; and George Dumézil, a great specialist in religions. These are the most cultured men in France, truly liberated minds and free spirits. I assure you, only third-rate journalists denigrate the French Academy, the petit bourgeois who think they are intellectuals and who would not dream of mocking the Soviet Academy—where the members must accept all manner of indignity, pay allegiance to the Communist Party, and be censured constantly.

INTERVIEWER

You said that you didn't care much for the Angry Young Men of the theater. What about those, like Pinter and Albee, whose works were clearly influenced by yours and Beckett's?

IONESCO

Pinter's first play, *The Caretaker*, was derived from Beckett and was very good. Since then, he seems to be doing what I call *du boulevard intelligent*—which is to say, he is writing clever, well-made commercial plays. In truth, these playwrights were influenced only by our language, not really by our spirit. Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was admirable. I also liked Albee's *The Zoo Story*, but I haven't read anything in the same vein since. Several French playwrights, Dubillard and a few others, tried their hands, but it didn't really go anywhere. What we tried to do was to put man on the stage to face himself. That is why our theater was called *metaphysical*. In England, where people like Edward Bond write plays in which terrible things happen, it is still on the political level. The sacred and the ritual are missing. Did I tell you that I recently went to Taiwan? It is a nice American place, and everybody speaks English. But they seem to have lost touch completely with their own traditions, their own sages, and I, not a particularly erudite amateur, had to tell them about Confucius, Buddha, Zen. In the West, also, people have lost the feeling for the sacred, *le sentiment du sacré*. We tried to bring it back by going to our sources, to the theater of antiquity. In Racine, adultery is considered a very important crime, punishable by death. In the theater of the nineteenth century, adultery is a *divertissement*, an entertainment—the only entertainment! So although we are considered modern, too modern, even *avant-garde*, we are the real classicists, not the writers of the nineteenth century.

INTERVIEWER

After four plays—*Amédée*, *The Killer*, *Exit the King*, and *Rhinoceros*—you dropped *Béranger*. Did you think you had said enough about him?

IONESCO

I changed his name because I thought people might get bored. I called him Jean, or *The Character*.

INTERVIEWER

In your new play, which is a kind of oneiric biography, he is called Jean again. In the opening scene, there are two coffins, Sartre's and Adamov's, and you are standing behind them. Why did you choose those two from among all the people you have known?

IONESCO

Adamov was a great friend of mine for years, until my plays really caught on; then he turned against me. I resented him for giving in to pressure and becoming "committed," Brechtian, and pro-Communist, although he never actually joined the party. We finally broke up over some silly literary dispute. I think I accused him of stealing my dreams! With Sartre it was different. It was a case of a missed appointment, un rendez-vous manqué, as one journalist put it. I had loved *La Nausée*, which had influenced my only novel, *Le Solitaire* [The Hermit], but he annoyed me with his constant ideological changes. He was given solid proof of concentration camps in Russia, yet he did not publicize it because he feared it would disillusion the workers and strengthen the bourgeoisie. Towards the end, when the New Philosophers arrived on the scene, people like Foucault and Glucksmann, he told them that he was no longer a Marxist. He always had to be aligned with le dernier cri, the latest ideological fashion. I would have preferred him to be more obdurate, even if in error. He was called "The Conscience of Our Time"; I feel he was rather the Unconscience of our time—L'inconscience.

But he was always nice and courteous to me, and my plays were the only ones he allowed to be put on a double bill with his, so I am sad that I didn't get close to him. I had a dream about him recently: I am on a stage in front of a huge, empty auditorium, and I say, "That's it, nobody comes to see my plays anymore." Then a little man walks onstage, and I recognize him as Sartre. He says, "Not true, look there, up in the gallery, it's full of young people." And I say to him, "Ah, Monsieur Sartre, how I would like to talk to you, at last." And he replies, "Too late . . . too late." So you see, it was a missed appointment.

INTERVIEWER

This play, *Journey Among the Dead*, has been a great success with the public as well as with the critics. It's coming to the Comédie Française in the spring. With that out of the way, have you started work on something else?

IONESCO

It's a play about the life and martyrdom of a modern saint, who has just been canonized by the Church—or is it beatified? Which comes first? I'm not sure. Anyway, his name was Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Pole, and he died in Auschwitz. They were going to send some prisoners to a mine, where they would die of hunger and thirst. Father Kolbe offered to go instead of a man who had a wife and children and didn't want to die. That man is still alive.

INTERVIEWER

Does it matter to you if the Church canonizes him or not? And what about the recent allegations of anti-Semitism regarding him?

IONESCO

Oh dear! It won't matter to me at all whether the Church canonizes him or not. The important thing is that such a man existed. As for his anti-Semitism, I have not heard anything. People always try to find base motives behind every good action. We are afraid of pure goodness and of pure evil. I very much doubt that such a man could have been remotely anti-Semitic.

INTERVIEWER

For this play, you already had a clear idea of the character and the plot. Do you always start with an idea?

IONESCO

It depends. Some plays start with a plan. For example, *Macbett* was a conscious parody of Shakespeare. I already had the idea for *Rhinoceros*. But I had no idea at all where plays like *The Chairs*, *The Lesson*, and *The Bald Soprano* would lead. I had the idea of the corpse for *Amédée*, but the rest came bit by bit.

INTERVIEWER

How do you work?

IONESCO

I work in the morning. I sit comfortably in an armchair, opposite my secretary. Luckily, although she's intelligent, she knows nothing about literature and can't judge whether what I write is good or worthless. I speak slowly, as I'm talking to you, and she takes it down. I let characters and symbols emerge from me, as if I were dreaming. I always use what remains of my dreams of the night before. Dreams are reality at its most profound, and what you invent is truth because invention, by its nature, can't be a lie. Writers who try to prove something are unattractive to me, because there is nothing to prove and everything to imagine. So I let words and images emerge from within. If you do that, you might prove something in the process. As for dictating the text to my secretary, for twenty-five years I wrote by hand. But now it is impossible for me; my hands shake and I am too nervous. Indeed, I am so nervous that I kill my characters immediately. By dictating, I give them the chance to live and grow.

INTERVIEWER

Do you correct what she has written afterward?

IONESCO

Hardly. But to get back to my new play, I tried to change the incoherent language of the previous plays into the language of dreams. I think it works, more or less.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a favorite among your plays?

IONESCO

Until recently it was *The Chairs*, because the old man remembers a scene from his childhood, but very vaguely, like the light of a dying candle, and he remembers a garden whose gate is closed. For me that is paradise—the lost paradise. This scene is far more important to me than the end, which is more spectacular.

INTERVIEWER

We have talked about the metaphysical and ritualistic aspects of your work, but there is a comic element as well, which has greatly contributed to your popularity.

IONESCO

Georges Duhamel used to say that "humor is the courtesy of despair." Humor is therefore very important. At the same time, I can understand people who can't laugh anymore. How can you, with the carnage that is going on in the world—in the Middle East, in Africa, in South America, everywhere? There is awfully little that is conducive to mirth.

INTERVIEWER

Whatever happens in the future, your place in the literary history of our time is secure. What is your own assessment of your work?

IONESCO

I'll tell you about a dream I had recently. When I was a schoolboy in Bucharest, my father used to come into my room in the evening and check my homework. He would open my drawers and find nothing but bits of poetry, drawings, and papers. He would get very angry and say that I was a lazybones, a good-for-nothing. In my dream, he comes into my room and says, "I hear you have done things in the world, you have written books. Show me what you have done." And I open my drawers and find only singed papers, dust and ashes. He gets very angry and I try to appease him, saying, "You are right, Daddy, I've done nothing, nothing."

INTERVIEWER

Yet you go on writing.

IONESCO

Because I can't do anything else. I have always regretted having gotten involved with literature up to my neck. I would have preferred to have been a monk; but, as I said, I was torn between wanting fame and wishing to renounce the world. The basic problem is that if God exists, what is the point of literature? And if He doesn't exist, what is the point of literature? Either way, my writing, the only thing I have ever succeeded in doing, is invalidated.

INTERVIEWER

Can literature have any justification?

IONESCO

Oh yes, to entertain people. But that is not important. Yet, to introduce people to a different world, to encounter the miracle of being, that is important. When I write "The train arrives at the station," it is banal, but at the same time sensational, because it is invented. Literature can also help people. Two of my translators, a Romanian and a German, were dying of cancer when they were translating *Exit the King*. They told me that they knew they were going to die, and the play helped them. Alas, it does not help me, since I am not reconciled to the idea of death, of man's mortality. So you see, I am contradicting myself a little by saying that literature can be significant. People who don't read are brutes. It is better to write than to make war, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

So, perhaps writing has been a way of exorcising your basic anxiety about death? Or at least learning to live with it?

IONESCO

Perhaps. But my work has been essentially a dialogue with death, asking him, "Why? Why?" So only death can silence me. Only death can close my lips.

How Nonsense Sharpens the Intellect

By Benedict Carey

The New York Times

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In addition to assorted bad breaks and pleasant surprises, opportunities and insults, life serves up the occasional pink unicorn. The three-dollar bill; the nun with a beard; the sentence, to borrow from the Lewis Carroll poem, that gyres and gimbles in the wabe.

An experience, in short, that violates all logic and expectation. The philosopher Soren Kierkegaard wrote that such anomalies produced a profound “sensation of the absurd,” and he wasn’t the only one who took them seriously. Freud, in an essay called “The Uncanny,” traced the sensation to a fear of death, of castration or of “something that ought to have remained hidden but has come to light.”

At best, the feeling is disorienting. At worst, it’s creepy.

Now a study suggests that, paradoxically, this same sensation may prime the brain to sense patterns it would otherwise miss — in mathematical equations, in language, in the world at large.

“We’re so motivated to get rid of that feeling that we look for meaning and coherence elsewhere,” said Travis Proulx, a postdoctoral researcher at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and lead author of the paper appearing in the journal *Psychological Science*. “We channel the feeling into some other project, and it appears to improve some kinds of learning.”

Researchers have long known that people cling to their personal biases more tightly when feeling threatened. After thinking about their own inevitable death, they become more patriotic, more religious and less tolerant of outsiders, studies find. When insulted, they profess more loyalty to friends — and when told they’ve done poorly on a trivia test, they even identify more strongly with their school’s winning teams.

In a series of new papers, Dr. Proulx and Steven J. Heine, a professor of psychology at the University of British Columbia, argue that these findings are variations on the same process: maintaining meaning, or coherence. The brain evolved to predict, and it does so by identifying patterns.

When those patterns break down — as when a hiker stumbles across an easy chair sitting deep in the woods, as if dropped from the sky — the brain gropes for something, anything that makes sense. It may retreat to a familiar ritual, like checking equipment. But it may also turn its attention outward, the researchers argue, and notice, say, a pattern in animal tracks that was previously hidden. The urge to find a coherent pattern makes it more likely that the brain will find one.

“There’s more research to be done on the theory,” said Michael Inzlicht, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Toronto, because it may be that nervousness, not a search for meaning, leads to heightened vigilance. But he added that the new theory was “plausible, and it certainly affirms my own meaning system; I think they’re onto something.”

In the most recent paper, published last month, Dr. Proulx and Dr. Heine described having 20 college students read an absurd short story based on “The Country Doctor,” by Franz Kafka. The doctor of the title has to make a house call on a boy with a terrible toothache. He makes the journey and finds that the boy has no teeth at all. The horses who have pulled his carriage begin to act up; the boy’s family becomes

annoyed; then the doctor discovers the boy has teeth after all. And so on. The story is urgent, vivid and nonsensical — Kafkaesque.

After the story, the students studied a series of 45 strings of 6 to 9 letters, like “X, M, X, R, T, V.” They later took a test on the letter strings, choosing those they thought they had seen before from a list of 60 such strings. In fact the letters were related, in a very subtle way, with some more likely to appear before or after others.

The test is a standard measure of what researchers call implicit learning: knowledge gained without awareness. The students had no idea what patterns their brain was sensing or how well they were performing.

But perform they did. They chose about 30 percent more of the letter strings, and were almost twice as accurate in their choices, than a comparison group of 20 students who had read a different short story, a coherent one.

“The fact that the group who read the absurd story identified more letter strings suggests that they were more motivated to look for patterns than the others,” Dr. Heine said. “And the fact that they were more accurate means, we think, that they’re forming new patterns they wouldn’t be able to form otherwise.” Brain-imaging studies of people evaluating anomalies, or working out unsettling dilemmas, show that activity in an area called the anterior cingulate cortex spikes significantly. The more activation is recorded, the greater the motivation or ability to seek and correct errors in the real world, a recent study suggests. “The idea that we may be able to increase that motivation,” said Dr. Inzlicht, a co-author, “is very much worth investigating.”

Researchers familiar with the new work say it would be premature to incorporate film shorts by David Lynch, say, or compositions by John Cage into school curriculums. For one thing, no one knows whether exposure to the absurd can help people with explicit learning, like memorizing French. For another, studies have found that people in the grip of the uncanny tend to see patterns where none exist — becoming more prone to conspiracy theories, for example. The urge for order satisfies itself, it seems, regardless of the quality of the evidence.

Still, the new research supports what many experimental artists, habitual travelers and other novel seekers have always insisted: at least some of the time, disorientation begets creative thinking. A version of this article appeared in print on October 6, 2009, on page D1 of the National edition.