

Grand Master of the Absurd Amid the Pachyderms



by A. ALVAREZ

CONVERSATIONS WITH EUGENE IONESCO

by Claude Bonnefoy
translated from the French by
Jan Dawson

Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 187 pp., \$4.95

PRESENT PAST PAST PRESENT: A Personal Memoir

by Eugène Ionesco
translated from the French by
Helen R. Lane

Grove/Random House, 192 pp., \$6

Eugène Ionesco was in his late thirties when *The Bald Soprano* (in England called *The Bald Prima Donna*) was first produced in 1950. By that age it is too late for apprentice work, and Ionesco's style was proportionately assured, weird, utterly his own. Yet he had written only one previous play, when he was thirteen, and had since had no truck with the theater. Indeed, like most intellectuals, he looked down on it. "I started writing for the theater," he once remarked, "because I hated it." Granted, it is a French principle never to pass up a good paradox, but here it is easy to see what he means. Genuinely "anti-theater," *The Bald Soprano* took the successful light comedy and stood it on its head. The setting is the conventional middle-class drawing-room and the dialogue the conventional clichés (Ionesco culled them from a language primer). The result was both put-on and dis-

covery. The platitudes, remorselessly swapped by two model British families, were subtly doctored into madness. What began as a joke finished as the poetry of banality, absurdity in the most literal sense of the then fashionable term. When Camus talked of the Absurd he meant life lived for itself in a universe that no longer made sense because there was no God to resolve the contradictions—which is what Kierkegaard had called despair. But for Ionesco, grand master of the Theater of the Absurd, absurdity was what it usually is: raging, hilarious farce.

Not that he hasn't had a whole army of metaphysical arguments to justify his every work. He has always been his own fervent defender, trotting out his theories in endless interviews, articles, and polemics against the critics. Like the girl in the song, in twenty-seven languages he couldn't say "no" to the seductions of controversy. Invariably his rationalizations are far less illuminating than the works themselves. The reason is simple: whatever his ambitions, Ionesco is not a dramatist of ideas but of images. Even *The Bald Soprano*, which is about language and the impossibility of communication, leaves you not with an argument but with a kind of single, vivid illumination—a roomful of stuffy suburbanites exchanging clichés until they go sedately berserk. The same is true in the other early plays. In *The Lesson* the rape of the mind becomes a literal rape as the timid professor is transformed into a sex murderer; the chairs, in the play by that name, invade the stage until it overflows with a vast imaginary audience; the bride in *Jack* has three noses to intensify her beauty; the corpse in *Amédée* grows until it fills the entire apartment; *The Killer* begins with the Radiant City and ends with oozing, muddy horror; in *Rhinoceros* the lumbering monsters take over the world.

The model for them all is the brilliant one-acter *The New Tenant*. A

SR: BOOKS

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A. ALVAREZ, a theatrical and literary critic, is the author of *Beyond All This Fiddle*. His next published work will be a study of suicide among writers, entitled *The Savage God*.

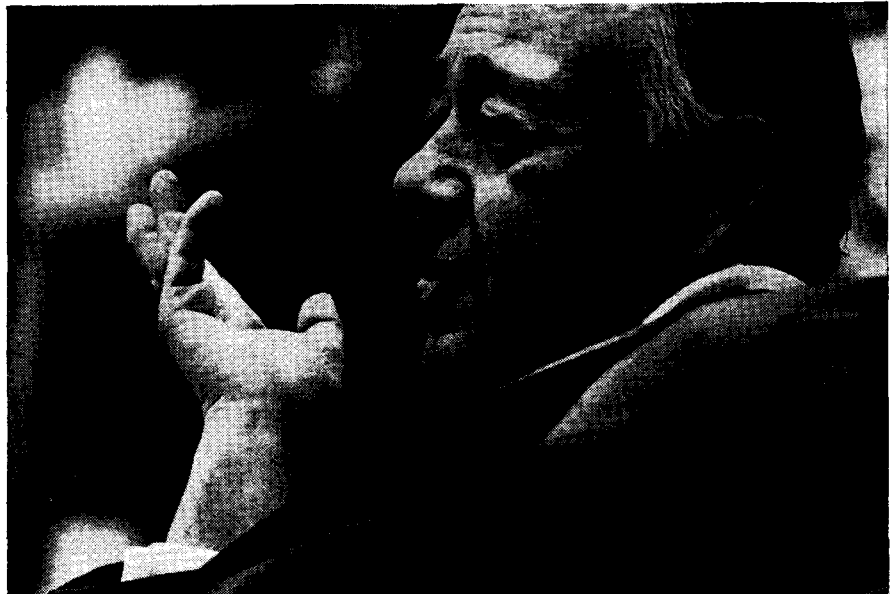
quiet little man moves into an empty apartment. Quietly he gets rid of an interfering caretaker; quietly he supervises the arrival of his furniture, meticulously arranging the exact position of each vase and knickknack. But the furniture keeps on coming, its size increasingly large, until finally the stage is piled to the flies with huge wardrobes, cupboards, and sideboards. Buried cosily in the center, out of sight, is the new tenant. As the moving men clamber toward the door, he calls after them, "Put out the light."

It is an image of extraordinary power and wit. But of what? Regression perhaps? The perennial desire to hide away in the comforting dark, surrounded and contained by one's own carefully chosen things? Not at all. According to Ionesco, in his fascinating conversations with the French critic Claude Bonnefoy, "the new tenant" is left alone in an encroaching and hostile world." He is *what*? Do you mean *alienated*, M. Ionesco? Alas, that apparently is precisely what he means. It's the old story: "Never trust the artist. Trust the tale." The impact of the play has little to do with the author's intentions or explanations.

Ionesco's genius, I think, lies not in his profundity but his ability to create dramatic images that are as immediate, affecting, and irredeemably strange as dreams, and then to let them work themselves out with a dream's irrational but compulsive logic. He makes it seem perfectly natural that there should be rhinoceroses in the street or a corpse expanding in the bedroom. Everything makes sense yet is beyond reason. He remarked to Bonnefoy, "The dream is pure drama. In a dream, one is always in mid-situation. . . . I think that the dream is a lucid thought, more lucid than any one has when awake, a thought expressed in images, and that at the same time its form is always dramatic."

At his best, Ionesco has been true to his dreams. He has put his nightmares on the stage, unadulterated, and with an uncanny sense of what works in that tight space framed by the proscenium arch. The result is pure nihilism. What, after all, can survive when the placid façade of middle-class life splits open and the submerged fantasies of violence and terror come pulsing through? Art, as Ionesco described it to Bonnefoy, is like an illness:

The creative period comes when my mental metabolism goes haywire, when I function erratically or abnormally. . . . Inside these moments all kinds of things loom up, the way they do at night. I don't know where they come from. I seize them as best I can. I stand them up facing each other. . . . It's much as though there were an earthquake in my microcosm, as



Ionesco—"not a dramatist of ideas but of images."

—Beverly Pabst

though everything were collapsing, and it's a kind of nighttime, or rather a mixture of light and darkness, a world of chaos.

I think this explains a number of the peculiarities of Ionesco's work. Why, for example, he almost never creates characters of any real depth or substance; the people in his plays are sudden and two-dimensional, like the figures in a dream. And, as in a dream, the complexity is all in their situation. It explains, too, why—at least in his earlier plays—it is impossible to extrapolate any political message, however hard his interpreters try. The dream is beyond, or before, politics. It explains, finally, the intensity of Ionesco's work; the tone may be farcical yet the effect is single and unhesitating, like that of a lyric poem. And this in turn may explain why many of his plays end unsatisfactorily. Ionesco complained to Bonnefoy that endings are always false. "The end will stop being artificial when we ourselves are dead." I suspect another, simpler reason. His brand of lyric inspiration is a precarious gift that sometimes fails to carry him through the whole play. When this happens, he opts for the easy way out—whimsy, that terminal disease of surrealism. Thus *Amédée* concludes with the hero wrapping the monstrous corpse around his body like an inflatable life belt and floating off, giggling, into the sky—a finale fit not for heroes but for a Babar story.

This insidious whimsy is the soft underbelly of Ionesco's nightmares. But there is another softening element at work: I mean his metaphysical ambition, his desire in his more recent plays to come on as a profound thinker. Earlier, this intellectual *Doppelgänger* was buried in the cellar, like

Count Dracula, the only Rumanian more famous than Ionesco. Gradually, however, he has crept into the light. Surreptitiously he has taken command, and now he stalks Ionesco's stage without a keeper. His influence, I think, is disastrous. His natural habitat is Ionesco's copious notebooks, a first selection from which was published three years ago as *Fragments from a Journal*.

This dealt at length with his dreams, with some kind of psychotherapeutic interlude and, above all, with the obsessional fear of death which became the theme of the wordy, slow-paced play *Exit the King*.

Now a new installment has appeared. As the title suggests, *Present Past Present* is another attempt to cope with death, this time to hold it off by re-creating the past. It is also a settling of accounts with his now dead father, an inflexible and menacing figure, who abandoned his wife and two children in Paris during World War I and returned to his native Rumania. There he became a powerful member of the Establishment, a lawyer and, at one point, chief of police. He used his political influence to get a shabby divorce and to gain custody of the children, whom he took back to Rumania in order, it seems, to treat them abominably. *Present Past* is the journal Ionesco kept in 1940-41 while in Bucharest waiting to escape from the Fascists and his father to unoccupied France. It is interspersed with long entries written in 1967. The dates have a gloomy patch of common ground: In 1940 the Iron Guard, banned in 1933 but still active as a terrorist organization, was carrying out its surrealistically savage pogroms:

A few hundred or a few thousand Jews

were massacred during the three or four days of civil war, castrated, hanged head down, stabbed. Among those who were hanged, there were some whose testicles had been stuffed in their mouths.

In 1967 came the Six-Day War, when the French Left distinguished itself by its equally surrealist anti-Zionism.

Anti-Semitism has always outraged Ionesco but it took a brave man to write as he did in Rumania in 1940, even if only for a private journal. Yet he did so as an essentially private act. His only real politics are those of distrust and hatred for everything totalitarian and anti-individual. Ionesco's target in 1940 was the totalitarianism of the Right; now it is of the Left. Hence his current unpopularity with the Parisian exponents of radical chic, who accuse him of being a closet fascist. Actually, he is a deeply antipolitical animal who acquired his distaste for all parties by watching his unspeakable father change his beliefs according to the ruling clique—not, says Ionesco, because he was an opportunist, but simply because he worshiped power and the state.

He describes these transformations shrewdly and at length. Ionesco also brilliantly conveys the slow contagion of Nazism, watching his friends, fascinated, as they change before his eyes into rhinoceroses. Page after page of his journal is haunted by the image of himself as the last of the human beings in a nation of pachyderms. This, remember, was written in 1940, twenty years before the play was produced. In one of his 1967 asides, Ionesco remarks that he had forgotten all about the idea. It is as though it had sunk into what Henry James called "the deep well of unconscious cerebration," to resurface years later in one of the flimsy little stories—now collected in *The Colonel's Photograph*—which were the basis for most of his plays. But only when Ionesco reworked the stories for the stage did they finally take on the weight and reverberations of serious art.

Oddly enough, in the context of the journals the image of the rhinoceroses triumphant is little more than a bright idea and not particularly important. What seems to matter to the young Ionesco are the long philosophical disquisitions on the Self and Other, History, Death, and Reality. (He apparently had a youthful vision of truth and radiance that has pursued him ever since.) Odder still, the 1967 additions show that nothing much has altered in twenty-seven years. The strain of being what he once called a "professional, card-carrying artist" has in no way dulled his appetite for metaphysics. He seems peculiarly proud of
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Book Forum

Letters from Readers

Eva Le Gallienne

IN "IBSEN THE SHY GIANT" [SR, Aug. 14] Eva Le Gallienne says, "Women's Lib would have nauseated [Ibsen]," and she agrees with Michael Meyer that "'A Doll's House' is no more about women's rights than Shakespeare's *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings. . . . Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person." What do Ms. Le Gallienne and Mr. Meyer think the theme of the women's liberation movement is?

Although Ms. Le Gallienne apparently cherishes some false labels and is helping to keep them in circulation, she does say about some she does not cherish that "false labels are hard to remove." Members of the National Organization for Women are also aware of the remarkable durability of false labels, since sometimes even the women and men who come to us for help express amazement and relief that we are not at all the kind of people they expected us to be. No visitor has ever vomited at any NOW meeting I have attended, and I doubt that Ibsen would have either!

MARY G. DABBS,
Atlanta, Ga.

IT WAS A THRILLING EXPERIENCE to read Eva Le Gallienne's essay on Ibsen. In 1926 and 1927 I often saw Miss Le Gallienne perform in Ibsen's great plays at the Civic Repertory Theater on 14th Street in New York. On one occasion, I vividly recall, well along in the first act of *The Master Builder*, some imbecile shouted, "Fire!" There was a moment of frozen anxiety in the audience. In a matter of seconds there could have been a disastrous stampede. Miss Le Gallienne interrupted her performance of Hilda Wangel, stepped forward, held up her hand, and said simply, "There is no fire." The situation was saved. All uneasiness vanished. It was a magnificent display of leadership.

Perhaps this story deserves a footnote. Anyone who remembers the Civic Repertory Theater will agree it was no place to be in case of fire.

EDWARD H. DARE,
Stamford, Conn.

Understanding Farrell

ROBERT PHILLIPS'S REVIEW of James T. Farrell's *Invisible Swords* [SR, June 12] is one of the very few understanding and perceptive critiques of Farrell's writing that have appeared for a number of years.

EDGAR M. BRANCH,
Berkeley, Calif.

Desensitized

AS I'VE TENDED TO LIKE Haskel Frankel's reviews, I'm overjoyed to weigh his remarks about George Axelrod's *Where Am I Now—When I Need Me?* [SR, Aug. 14]. So that's

the kind of stuff H. F. enjoys! It isn't often I'm granted the opportunity for feeling convinced I have superior taste, compared with that of an authority I've respected.

But, seriously, this tells me a lot about how really astute critics become desensitized after so much exposure to trash.

JOSEPH GANCHER,
Albany, N.Y.

It-Thou

MEYER LEVIN [SR, July 31] errs in assuming that Martin Buber was in a position to invite meaningful dialogue with Palestinian Arabs during the days of British rule. Dialogue occurred regularly between the occupier (Britain) and the beneficiary of the occupation (the Zionists), but the occupied (the Palestinians) were invited only to cooperate with the occupation and acquiesce to their own disfranchisement. The externally determined relationship precluded the promotion of the Palestinian from "it" to "Thou."

RAY L. CLEVELAND,
Regina, Canada

Tatters . . . trembled

IF THE REPETITION of "shreds," which I intended, for the passage from Gabriela Mistral [SR, July 17] does not create enough reverberation for translator Doris Dana [BOOK FORUM, Aug. 14], then why not pair "tatters" with "trembled" in the same line and achieve greater accuracy than with "flecks" and "fog"? Good translation can also be accurate—even literally so sometimes, as Miss Dana proves in her treatment of the rest of the poem.

A. F. GRONBERG,
San Diego, Calif.

Abomination

I DISAGREE WITH Maurice Samuel's *In Praise of Yiddish* [SR, July 17]. To anyone who speaks traditional (high) German, Yiddish is an abomination. It is a patois of the crudest kind and, while it has produced a few succinct words for which it is impossible to find substitutes in conventional languages, Yiddish by and large is about as much entitled to be dignified by the term "language" as is pigeon English or any of the other linguistic catchalls that the desperation of communication has produced.

Despite the fact that excellent literature has been written in Yiddish, this does not get away from the fact that it is a garbled, quasi-medieval German.

Hopefully it will disappear within a generation or two. It is guttural, crude, and has no grammar or elegance to speak of. But it did give us a few irreplaceable words such as *chutzpa*. Which may be Hebrew. I am no linguist. But I am Jewish and mention this lest I be accused of being anti-Semitic.

FELIX DE COLA,
Hollywood, Calif.