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Dramatist of the Absurd Truth

EUGÈNE IONESCO, 1909-1994

By WILLIAM A. HENRY III

WHEN ASKED TO MUSE ON THE avant-garde of the generation before his own, the man who became probably the most influential avant-garde dramatist of the 20th century savored the historical joke. "They all wanted to destroy culture," he said, "and now they're part of our heritage." The same thing happened to the father of "theater of the absurd"—who preferred the label "theater of derision."

In 1950 Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* opened in Paris to catcalls, and his *The Lesson* concluded one night with the lead actor bolting out ahead of spectators demanding their money back. But by 1957 a Paris theater began a permanent double bill of those two plays; they have now been running for nearly 12,000 performances. By 1970 the Romanian-born Ionesco was elected to the pantheon of tradition, the Académie Française. His death last week was announced by France's Ministry of Culture rather than by his wife of 58 years, Rodica.

At his peak in the early 1960s, Ionesco attracted such collaborators as Jean-Louis Barrault, who magically staged *A Stroll in the Air*; Laurence Olivier and Zero Mostel, who both played the lead in *Rhinoceros* (with Mostel winning a Tony Award on Broadway); and Alec Guinness, who starred in *Exit the King*. The playwright was hailed as someone who might bridge the gap between literature and entertainment.

Instead his work grew more remote and austere, and his audiences dwindled. *Rhinoceros* failed in a film version, despite the presence of Mostel. The other plays were rarely revived in major venues. *Journeys Among the Dead*, his swan song, was withdrawn before its scheduled opening at New York City's Guggenheim Museum in 1980. The public seemingly wearied of his linguistic tricks and astringent comment. "It's not a certain society that seems ridiculous to me," Ionesco said. "It's mankind."

Despite this popular decline, he re-

mained an enduring if indirect influence on intellectual life. His eccentric mix of humor and despair, of nonsense and inarticulate profundity, spoke to writers from Britain's Tom Stoppard and Spain's Fernando Arrabal to America's Edward Albee. In addition, Ionesco was widely read in universities and probably helped shape the surrealist sensibility of much contemporary television comedy.

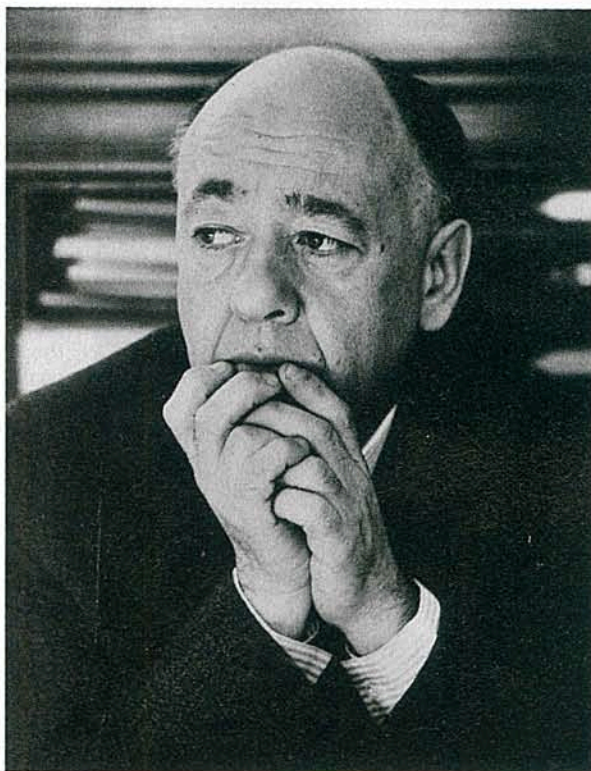
He described himself as part of a

memoir, *Present Past Past Present*, he described seeing an image on a magic lantern and crying out, "Again," when it was supplanted. "Was this," he asked, "the first word I ever said?" If so, it was fitting. He delighted in reiterating and thereby "destroying" language—although in later years he expressed wistfulness that others had taken his deconstructionist impulse too far.

Ionesco was past 40 when *Bald Soprano* made its debut. Until then he had been working in a Paris firm that published legal books, from which he retained a skewering aptitude for bureaucratism. *Soprano's* incantatory repetition of fatuous observations derived from trying to learn English via a primer. Despite that study, Ionesco claimed to speak English not at all—"except to order a double Scotch and soda."

When he was a child, the family shuttled between his mother's France and his father's Romania. While still a college student, the young Ionesco broke with his father, who was successively a fascist and a Stalinist, on political grounds. Long afterward he wondered whether he had been harsh: "What I reproached him for was going in the same direction as history." The adult Ionesco often described himself as an anarchist and objected to dissenters as much as those in power, terming the opposition merely a state in the making. Among the ironies of his career was that Americans, who gave *Rhinoceros* its warmest reception, misunderstood it as light comedy.

To Ionesco, a city where everyone but the hero turns into a rhinoceros was a brutal metaphor. In a journal note dated "around 1940," two decades before the play, he wrote, "The police are rhinoceroses. The judges are rhinoceroses. You are the only man among the rhinoceroses. The rhinoceroses wonder how the world could have been led by men. You yourself wonder: Is it true that the world was led by men?" The horror that prompted this question never left him. The jokes of his plays were the jokes of almost all the 20th century avant-garde—a whistling in the dark outside a graveyard. ■



At his peak in 1963, Ionesco was a celebrity name in gossip columns and a colleague of stars from Barrault to Olivier

"Paris school" that included Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet. *The Chairs*, in which an old couple at a lighthouse fill a room with furniture to prepare for an orator who speaks only by growling, could have been written by Beckett, while *The Killer*, about serial murder, could have come from Genet. But Ionesco's plays tended to be funnier and more verbal than Beckett's, and he used ritual and repetition for joking rather than the psychological revelation sought by Genet.

Ionesco often said he felt a deep debt to silent film comedy and even more primitive entertainment, including Punch and Judy puppet shows. In a