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The Miracle of Being
Exploring Humanness through the Thematic and Performative Elements
in the Plays of Eugène Ionesco

A Senior Thesis by
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Spring 2014
Theatre and Dance Department
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Introduction

“Who has any interest in prolonging this confusion? I don’t know. Let’s not try to know.”
- Eugène Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*

I was introduced to the plays of Eugène Ionesco when I was fifteen years old and played the Fire Chief in a scene from *The Bald Soprano* directed by a fellow high school student. The director had read the play for her French class and explained to us in general that the Theatre of the Absurd included plays that were silly and didn’t make much sense. To this day, performing this scene without laughing was one of my biggest acting challenges. The seemingly incomprehensible dialogue between the characters and the nonsensical randomness of their lines sent everyone in the cast into a fit of laughter each rehearsal.

I had not thought about Ionesco until four years later when I decided to direct a scene from *The Bald Soprano* for a directing class at Trinity. I felt so inspired by this play as a director because of the freedom it gave me to explore my personal directorial style.

When I began to consider a topic for my senior thesis, I knew very little about the Theatre of the Absurd. Was it just a genre of humorous, nonsensical plays? Why were these plays written? What did they mean? Or was that the point - that they meant nothing? I chose the topic of Ionesco and the Theatre of the Absurd because I loved Ionesco’s writing and had so much fun performing and directing his plays and I felt that there was some great truth lying in his plays, a truth that I was determined to uncover.

Through my research, I found what I believed was the core theme in Ionesco’s plays: exploring humanness. I found a large amount of research on the use of language and political themes in Ionesco’s plays, but I decided that the theme of what it means to be human was most

important. Ionesco wrote for theatre - an art form that is exclusively concerned with human exploration.

In this thesis I plan to explore the theme of what it means to be human in the plays of Eugène Ionesco. I will show how specific performative elements contribute to furthering this theme. I will begin by tracing the history of the Theatre of the Absurd in the context of European history (to help understand the emotional atmosphere of Europe at the time Absurdist playwrights began writing) and the artistic movements surrounding the development of the Theatre of the Absurd. I will then discuss Ionesco as a human being and a playwright and how his personal values and beliefs contributed to the themes presented in his plays. I will continue on to explore the thematic elements of what it means to be human and the performative aspects in Ionesco's plays. I will discuss thematic and performative elements in eight of Ionesco's plays that I chose scenes from for my thesis performance. I will conclude with a reflection on how all of my research and writing this year culminated in my thesis performance. Everything I studied about Ionesco and his plays as well as my own knowledge and experience was manifested onstage in the artistic medium that his ideas were meant to be expressed: theatre.

The specific plays I chose for my performance and will be exploring in this thesis are *Victims of Duty*, *The Lesson*, *Hunger and Thirst*, *Exit the King*, *The Chairs*, *Amédée*, *A Stroll in the Air*, and *The Killer*. Three of these plays feature a character named Bérenger, who appears in four plays written by Ionesco. Bérenger was my way into the world of Ionesco's plays. As Bérenger explored the absurd world in which he lived, I discovered the world of Ionesco.

Chapter 1

History of the Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd, though never a conscious movement (Esslin xviii), gained momentum in Paris (then spread throughout Europe) in the 1930s. Martin Esslin popularized the movement and gave it its name with his book, The Theatre of the Absurd, in 1961 (Brockett 513). Esslin explains that the Theatre of the Absurd cannot be confined to the conditions of a specific artistic movement because its essence lies in the uninhibited exploration of each individual playwright (168). For the purpose of consistency and clarity, I will refer to The Theatre of the Absurd as a genre, keeping in mind that, by Esslin's analysis, "genre" might not be the exact word to describe the body of works that fall into the Theatre of the Absurd category.

In The Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin explains that the term, absurd, has its roots in musical terminology, meaning "out of harmony" (xix). Merriam Webster Dictionary defines the absurd as "ridiculously unreasonable, unsound, or incongruous; having no rational or orderly relationship to human life" ("absurd").

In the introduction to his book, Esslin defines the Theatre of the Absurd through certain common elements. The Absurdist values are based on the idea that the "basic assumptions of former ages" have been discarded and discredited (Esslin xviii) and there is an overall sense of "metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition" (xix).

The plays of the Theatre of the Absurd do not offer a certain message about how humans should act faced with the ideas of the absurdity of human existence, rather, the playwrights merely express these ideas through performance. "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images of the absurdity of existence" (Esslin xx).

Values held by Absurdist playwrights were expressed throughout theatrical history even before 1940s. For example, in Germany in 1822 Christian Dietrich Grabbe's play *Comedy, Satire, Irony, and Deeper Meaning* used an innovative and unique chaotic structure to express his views of society as "a tangle of selfish interests, outworn clichés, and static conventions" (Brockett 331).

Ubu Roi, written in 1896 by French playwright, Alfred Jarry, became known as the first Absurdist drama. It depicted the world without human decency and showed the irrational, monstrous side of humans. In the 1920s, after World War I, Jarry attracted a surrealist following, leading to his place as the father of Absurdism. Following Jarry, Absurdist writers were widely produced in France, and all over Europe.

Absurdist playwrights explored ideas of the "senselessness of life, of the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity and purpose," like other playwrights of the time such as Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, but unlike them, the Absurdist characters were irrational and more human (Esslin xix). Through their writings, French existentialists Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) tried to organize the irrational and chaotic world in which they lived. Sartre's ideas denied the existence of God, and focused on fixed standards of conduct, verifiable moral codes, and the idea that humans are "condemned to be free" (Brockett 511). His plays feature characters faced with choices that force them to forge their own moral standards through self-examination. He began to ask the question, if life has no meaning, why don't all humans commit suicide (Esslin xix). Camus proposed that the human condition is absurd because of the gap between people's hopes and the irrational universe into which they are born. Though he denied being an existentialist, his views were very similar to Sartre's.

For the most part, the Absurdist writers that followed the existentialist philosophers accepted Sartre's views, but focused mainly on the irrationality of the human condition without any suggestion of what that portends for human existence. The worlds of their plays are chaotic, with characters that tried to find a way to survive and make sense of their absurd world. In their plays, the Absurdist experiment with the conventions of language to rationalize and organize the world, but their characters demonstrate an inability to do so through nonverbal, physical, and often humorous action.

In the first half of the 20th century, European children grew up with fear, destruction, pain, and confusion as their home was torn apart by constant violence. After World War II, artists explored ways to express the widespread frustration and terror that came with the invention of the atomic bomb. The artistic movements that reacted to the horrors of this time and longed for a new understanding of human existence are known as the avant-garde. Some influential artistic movements that led up to the Theatre of the Absurd were Dadaism, Surrealism, and "epic" theatre.

Dadaism arose in 1916 in Switzerland as a reaction to the horrors of World War I. It featured artists rejecting reason and logic and favoring nonsense, irrationality, and intuition. The movement was anti-war and anti-bourgeois, and attacked the art establishment and its conventions. Dada influenced works of visual art as well as theatre and spread to New York City, Germany, and Paris ("Dada").

Surrealism developed out of Dadaism in the early 1920s in Paris and explored irrationality and unexpected juxtapositions that "resolved the previously contradictory conditions of dream and reality" ("Surrealism"). Surrealism took place in art and literature, and rather than

focusing on the negative aspects of art like Dada, it expressed a more positive attitude. It strove to unite the unconscious and the conscious reality, joining dreams with the everyday world.

Theatre, in the beginning of the 20th century, was dominated by wealthy patrons, paying to see the “well-made play.” Playwrights, directors, and dramatists began to rebel against the ideas of realism and longed for a theatre that would more closely express the insecurities and frustrations of the European people. Jacques Copeau, in 1913, established the Théâtre du Vieux-Colombier, with the idea to rebel against realism in theatre, without completely abandoning naturalism (“Western theatre”). He strived to break down the barrier between the audience and the actor through specific staging and a reconstruction of the traditional theatre space.

1930s German playwright, director, and Marxist, Bertolt Brecht explored his idea of “epic” theatre, in an effort to rebel against the sedentary “catharsis” evoked by the Aristotelian play structure. He believed that theatre should appeal to the audience’s logic and critical eye. He used techniques of defamiliarization to remind them that they were watching a play, preventing over-identification with the struggles of the characters (Demaitre 216). His Marxist ideas influenced him to create theatre that would incite revolutionary actions from his audiences, and was widely influential to theatres even after Marxist revolutionary ideas were no longer significant.

At the same time, French director and playwright, Antonin Artaud, wrote The Theatre and its Double (1938), proposing the “theatre of cruelty,” which strove to revolutionize theatre through shocking audiences to release suppressed deep-rooted fears and anxieties. His surrealist form of theatre was based on ritual and fantasy, and forced people to reexamine their primal nature without hiding behind civility and social etiquette (“Theatre of Cruelty”).

Inspired by these artistic movements, four French-educated playwrights emerged to become the most widely-known playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd. The first of these playwrights was Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) who was the first of the Absurdists to win international fame with his play, *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett was Irish by birth but lived most of his life in Paris. His plays depict characters living in a seemingly post-apocalyptic world surrounded by destruction. In his subject matter, Beckett was “not so much concerned with people as social and political creatures as with the human condition in a metaphysical sense” (Brockett 512).

Arthur Adamov (1908-1971) was a Switzerland-educated Russian playwright that was originally attracted to surrealism. His plays present a comedically cruel world where characters are doomed to failure because of their inability to communicate with each other. His world, like the world created by other Absurdist playwrights is dreamlike, with an indefinite time and place (Brockett 512-513).

Jean Genet (1910-1986), another French playwright, spent much of his life in prison, giving him a unique perspective on human existence. His characters rebel against organized society and he shows that deviation is essential for humans to achieve integrity in their lives. The structure of his dramatic world is made up of a series of ceremonies and rituals to organize the nonsense of life (Brockett 512).

Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994) was born in Romania and moved to France shortly after he was born. Ionesco’s plays concentrate on human social relationships, especially in middle-class family situations and his use of language is an important tool that furthers his ideas of human communication and the influence of an authoritative society. Two of his major themes are “the

deadening nature of the materialist, bourgeois society, and the loneliness and isolation of the individual” (Brockett 512).

Absurdist drama is characterized by a philosophy that denies an overall purpose for human existence, resulting in a world of illogic and irrationality and a breakdown of communication, making human existence absurd (Quinney 36). Eugène Ionesco describes that the purpose of the Theatre of the Absurd is to put man onstage to face himself (qtd. in Plimpton 141). This idea inspired later playwrights such as Edward Albee, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Christopher Durang who carried the spirit of the Theatre of the Absurd into the 21st century.

Chapter 2

Eugène Ionesco

Understanding Ionesco's life and how it affected his worldview is helpful in order to understand the themes in his plays. His childhood disdain for his authoritarian father is manifested in the elements of *Rhinoceros* where the rhinoceroses symbolize the beastly, authoritarian figures that continue to multiply and oppress. Living through two world wars and the ever present threat of a nuclear attack instilled in Ionesco the very real possibility of death from a very young age. He recognized how those experiences shaped him as an artist: "[w]e are always influenced by what we live through, by what we see, by what we read - and the authors we read have in their turn been influenced by the age in which they live, by what they have read and seen and lived through" (qtd. in Bonnefoy 122). He witnessed the height of human violence and his plays, while comedic, also depict extreme human savagery.

Eugène Ionesco was born in Romania in 1909, and his family moved to Paris shortly after his birth. His younger sister, Marilina was born in 1911, and his brother was born in 1912, but died 18 months later from meningitis. Ionesco's father moved back to Bucharest in 1916 when Romania entered World War I, while Ionesco and his sister stayed with their mother in Paris. After the war, they had not heard from him and assumed he had died. They later discovered that he had not died but instead had remarried and began a new life with a new family.

In a Radio Canada interview, Ionesco characterized his childhood as an experience of "a child's fears, not nightmares. Real fear." He believed this childhood spent in fear helped dictate the kind of man he was. "[Childhood memories] mark you deeply. I am both timid and aggressive. I have trouble talking to others...I feel in constant danger. I'm never completely at ease with either myself or the world around me...I enjoy solitude" (Interview with Ionesco pt 1).

He very much kept the outlook of a child throughout his life, and it is evident in his plays.

Perhaps this was because he did not have a carefree childhood and had to adopt a fatherly role to help care for his mother and sister. Evident in his writings is his somewhat childlike view of the world; he sees the chaos of the world and fails to understand the meaning, so he chooses to laugh at its absurdity.

Ionesco moved back to Romania with his sister to live with his father, who was unfairly granted custody of his children in the divorce, and attend high school (college Sfântul Sava) in Bucharest. He then passed the baccalaureate at the secondary school in Craiova in 1928 and went on to study for a degree in French at the University of Bucharest from 1929 to 1933. It was at the University of Bucharest where he met his future wife, Rodica Burlineau, who was studying philosophy and law. During this time, he wrote and published works of poetry and articles in various Romanian journals, such as *Vremea* (Time), *Axa* (the Axis), and *Universul Literar* (Literary Universe). He married Rodica in 1936, and eight years later his daughter, Marie-France, was born. (“Eugène Ionesco’s Life”).

His first play, *The Bald Soprano*, was first performed in 1950, a year after it was written. He wrote numerous plays including *The Chairs*, *The Lesson*, *Rhinoceros*, *Exit the King*, *Amédée*, and *The Killer*. He also published a memoir, Present Past Past Present, as well as compilations of his speeches and writings, Notes & Counter Notes and Fragments of a Journal. In 1994, Ionesco died in his house in Paris.

Ionesco cared deeply about the power of art to express the truths of the time, as exemplified in the thematic elements of his plays. In fact, he expresses this view in his memoir, Present Past Past Present: “[w]e really ought to ask only artists and poets for new things and profound truths” (145).

Evident in Ionesco's plays is a clear contempt for authority, which can be traced back to his experiences with his authoritative father, whom he detested. Growing up, he developed contrary views to all the militaristic beliefs of his father. He acknowledges, in Present Past Past Present, that all of his actions and writings were more or less against his father. According to Ionesco, all opposition was right, and everything that represented authority was fundamentally unjust (16-18).

Theatre critic, Rosette Lamont, acknowledges that Ionesco's theatre began as "response to the demands of a given personal situation in history. His feelings are those of a man of his time, plunged in the agony of his century" (11). In his plays, Ionesco also comments on the society in which he lived, a society where constant dehumanization occurred; where fear dictated people's actions,

Ionesco stated his conviction that society itself formed one of the barriers between human beings, that the authentic community of man is wider than society. "No society has been able to abolish human sadness, no political system can deliver us from the pain of living, from our fear of death, our thirst for the absolute; it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice versa" (qtd. in Esslin 80).

He uses society as a subject in his plays in order to focus on humanity as a uniting force of individuals who have their humanness in common. The values in his plays are born of a certain time but are still relevant today because they are human truths.

Eugène Ionesco began his writing career as a critic and a poet, and only began writing plays twenty years later. It is interesting that Ionesco ended up writing for theatre because he wrote that he detested it. In Notes & Counter Notes, he explains that the theatre he was watching repulsed him and he didn't originally set out to write for the theatre.

When I saw actors, for example, identifying themselves completely with their parts and weeping real tears on the stage, I found it unbearable, positively indecent. When on the other hand I saw an actor who was too much in control of his part, out of character, dominating it, detached from it...I was just as dissatisfied. This too seemed to me an unacceptable mixture of true and false, for I felt a need for the essential transformation or transposition of a reality that only imagination and artistic creation can make more meaningful (18).

Though he hated theatre when he began his writing career, as a young child he was drawn to it, watching Punch and Judy shows in Luxembourg Gardens. He remembered being completely entranced while all the other children laughed. Watching the characters hit each other over the head and abuse each other in other violent ways, he realized that their absurdity made sense to him as truths of the world and human existence (Ionesco 20). Our existence itself is absurd and the world is comical because it is ridiculous and tragic. Because of this, he believed that theatre must be simplified and made grotesque because like life, it is absurd, ridiculous, and painful. There are clear influences of Punch and Judy in his plays, which will be explored later.

He believed that theatre chose him; in an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Conversations with Eugène Ionesco, Ionesco describes how he began writing for the theatre: “[p]erhaps it was to prove that nothing had any real importance, that everything was unlivable - literature, drama, life, human values, they were all unlivable” (55).

Ionesco notes that he was drawn to writing for theatre because that he was always naturally good at dialogue, but writing criticism (the form in which he began his writing career) was a challenge for him because he was so full of contradictions. In dialogue, contradictions are

accepted, even welcomed, because his characters are humans and humans are full of contradictions (Bonneyoy).

I will later explore emotional and logical contradictions in Ionesco's plays as an important aspect contributing to the theme of what it means to be human shown through his work. For now, I will merely express the contradictions that exist in himself as a writer and his writing process that he explains to Claude Bonneyoy. He describes a certain "semi-chaotic state" where he can think loosely and freely while also coherently; while writing in this state, Ionesco explains that the chaos takes shape and a coherent universe arises out of the chaos (Bonneyoy 67). He observes that "thinking 'clearly' is very often thinking in a completely conventional or inadequate way, according to established clichés, according to the mechanisms of apparent rationality, and is therefore 'not thinking'" (Bonneyoy 67).

Ionesco also observes that every play is written in a different way. Some plays start with a plan (*Macbett*, *Rhinoceros*) and others had no plan at all (*The Chairs*, *The Lesson*, *The Bald Soprano*). He recognizes the evolution of his characters from two-dimensional puppet-like people to more individual, psychologized characters (Plimpton 143). Throughout his career, he continuously struggled to find a way to express his ideas through the barriers of language. He expresses this struggle in Present Past Past Present: "[h]ow can I correct everything that has put me in a false light? And how, with the aid of words, can I express everything that words hide? How can I express what is inexpressible?" (168). He possessed a strong passion for the importance of theatre at helping people discover crucial truths about the human condition.

Chapter 3

Thematic Elements of Ionesco's Plays

It is possible to determine some of the values and beliefs held by Eugène Ionesco by reading his plays. Many of the personal struggles endured by his characters, particularly his most recurring character, Bérenger, were experienced by Ionesco himself.

Bérenger has been called the “everyman” by many Ionesco scholars, because he is the seemingly “normal” human facing the absurd, often cruel world and coming to terms with his own mortality. He is relatable to the audience through his experience of being human and the hardships and fears that accompany it. Like the audience, he explores the absurd world of the play with a sense of awe and wonder.

The theme that is particularly important in many of his plays is the idea of what it means to be human, explored through his characters. All people are connected by the shared experiences of being human. I have observed five major aspects of what it means to be human addressed in Ionesco's plays: death, individuality, instincts and violence, our absurd existence, and contradictions and morality.

Death

A reoccurring aspect of the theme of what it means to be human in Ionesco's works is the idea of coming to terms with one's own death. This is a truth with which Ionesco struggled greatly in his own life and talks about at length in his writings. To be human is to die. Death is the one inevitability of human life; and experience that is completely incomprehensible. The fact that we are all going to die connects us as humans on a very basic, biological level, and the fear

of our impending demise and that of those we love makes for extremely moving pieces of art and literature.

Ionesco became aware of his fear of death at an early age, as he recalls while speaking to Claude Bonnefoy in Conversations with Eugène Ionesco:

One day I asked my mother. ‘We’re all going to die, aren’t we? Tell me the truth.’ She said, ‘Yes.’ I must have been four years old, maybe five...suddenly I had begun to cry - she just looked at me in a sad, helpless way. I was very frightened. I kept thinking that she was certainly going to die one day. And I couldn’t stop thinking about it (11-12).

Death, namely, the fear of death, is what makes life absurd. As humans, we go to great lengths to make sure we stay alive, but what does it mean to live? Why do we try so desperately to avoid death, something that is inevitable? Of course, it is natural for us to preserve our lives, but the fact that we are so determined to protect an existence that can be very painful is absurd to Ionesco. He describes that in memoir: “[t]he most absurd thing is to be conscious of the fact that human existence is unbearable, that the human condition is unbearable, intolerable, and nonetheless cling desperately to it, knowing and complaining that one is going to lose what is unbearable” (Ionesco 81).

In order to cope with the fear of the death, many people turn to religion to give them hope of a life beyond our earthly, human existence. Ionesco, throughout his life, struggled with religion and the idea of God. In his memoir, he is clear that it is too hard for him to believe in the same kind of God he sees the people around him believing, but he does not completely reject the idea of a God. “I have always tried to believe in God. I am not naïve enough, not subtle enough. But I have not altogether cut off the bridges to God” (Ionesco 40).

Scholars have reflected on how Ionesco's own views of death are present in his plays and his characters, particularly Bérenger. Ionesco made it clear that he did not write about death to help himself come to terms with his own death. It is important to know that Ionesco did not seek to "change" the world or offer any type of message in his plays, which will be explored later. The depiction of his characters facing their deaths in his plays have helped people face that very human fear and have given them peace. In fact, two of Ionesco's translators were translating *Exit the King* on their deathbeds and they told him that the process of translating this particular play helped them come to terms with their impending death. In response, Ionesco says that writing those plays did not do the same for him because he is "not reconciled to the idea of death, of man's mortality" (qtd. in Plimpton 145). Obviously, Ionesco knew he was going to die at some point, but he also was honest about his fear and need to deny what he knew was inevitable.

Much of the time, Ionesco's characters "die by death," in the sense that the weight of the inevitability of death becomes too much of a burden to bear in life. The overwhelming weight of death is symbolized in the accumulating furniture in *The New Tenant* that smothers the tenant in his home (Plimpton 145). This idea of "dying of death" suggests a certain personification of death. It becomes a living entity that can consume rather than something that *happens* to someone (Plimpton 130). In plays like *Exit the King*, the main character "simply dies of dying; he dies of the destructive power of death. Ionesco, by stripping away all particularity as to the 'cause' of this death, has chosen to expose naked mortality, the sheer abstract necessity of having-to-die" (Wright 443).

Compared to other playwrights of his time, Ionesco had a very death-centered view of the world. He was so obsessed with death that social values became meaningless and absurd because the idea of personal extinction overshadows all; the ultimate truth is that man is mortal. Ionesco

believed that the progress of humanity and man's accomplishments are futile because the inevitability of death is so oppressive (Wulburn 229).

Though Ionesco focused on the truth that man is going to die, there is a sense of hope in his plays. He believed the purpose of his plays were "to introduce people to a different world, to encounter the miracle of being, that is important" (Plimpton 145). His plays explore how to live with this inevitability and make our lives meaningful. The fact that death is a certainty means that *life* matters. Our fears are all connected because we are all human; we must *be* human.

Individuality

The things that make us human connect us and provide us with a collective identity, but, as humans, we also strive to find our own individuality, something special about us that makes us unique and distinguishes us from others.

In his writings, Eugène Ionesco emphasizes the importance of both individual and collective identity. In a society that attempts to depersonalize people (experienced in his time and resonates today), it is important to understand our own individuality but also how we connect to the collective, human identity. Both individuality and collectivity are important: self-absorption and obsession with uniqueness can destroy human connection, but the loss of individual identity for that of a greater collective strips the individual of his or her humanity.

According to Ionesco, the essence of each individual person is unchangeable, so we must focus on what makes us universal and connects all humans. "To be oneself does not prevent one from being universal. It is necessary to emphasize what makes us identical, not what separates us" (105).

As far as the role of the individual in society, Ionesco despises the deindividualized mass, like the Nazis. He exemplifies this in many of his plays where Bérenger, is betrayed by his fellow humans. In *Rhinoceros*, everyone joins the movement to become rhinoceroses despite Bérenger's attempt to build resistance to the seductive power of strength gained by forming a group identity.

In social psychology, there is an idea about groups that establish a collective identity and strip their members of their individual identities. Thus, people are less inhibited to commit acts of violence in a group because they don't feel personal responsibility. This loss of self-awareness of an individual in a group is called deindividuation. Social psychologists study this phenomenon in cases like the Holocaust as well as mob mentality in riots ("Deindividuation").

Late 19th century French social psychologist, Emile Durkheim, also explored this group mentality, calling the phenomenon "collective effervescence." According to Durkheim, collective effervescence is the intense energy that is produced when humans come together to perform the same activity, rituals, and think the same thoughts, resulting in a stronger power of the whole over the individual (Quinney 37). This collective identity dehumanizes the individual by discouraging views that are not shared by the entire group. Not only do the people involved lose their inherent individuality, but they are also robbed of their humanity.

Instincts and Violence

Instinct is defined as "a way of behaving, thinking, or feeling that is not learned; a largely inheritable and unalterable tendency of an organism to make a complex and specific response to environmental stimuli without involving reason" ("instinct"). In other words, instincts exist

within the human brain; they are an automatic, non-reasoned response to certain stimuli, and are unchangeable.

From an evolutionary standpoint, our instincts have developed to ensure the survival of the human species. The human tendency for violence seems to arise out of a primal urge, sometimes exceeding the amount that might be necessary for personal defense. Ionesco focuses heavily on violent instincts in many of his plays like *The Killer* and *The Lesson*.

An example of this excessive violence is the violence the Nazis inflicted on the Jewish people and other minorities in the Holocaust. Ionesco experienced this violence and was angered by it; Nazi references can be found in his plays such as *The Lesson* and *Rhinoceros*.

As humans, we share these instincts and struggle with violent urges. We repress these urges because they resist societal expectations and norms of morality. Ionesco's characters often don't experience those struggles and the Killer in *The Killer* and the Professor in *The Lesson* freely murder whoever they want, which makes these situations absurd. The large amount of killing met with such a casual attitude is humorous, like in Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*.

Much has been studied and written about Ionesco's use of language in his plays, so I won't spend time discussing language, but it is important to point out that Ionesco uses language in his plays (like *The Lesson*) as a weapon of violence (Patterson 195).

Violence comes from a place of instinct and irrationality, untouched by logic. It is a visceral, animal reaction which we can't rationally invoke. Many of Ionesco's characters, not only the violent ones, are not led by logic and their actions give his plays their humor and absurdity. There is a truth in their actions in how we can relate to their irrationality, though we suppress it to abide by social and societal norms for behavior.

Our (sometimes violent) instincts connect us as humans as well as to the rest of the animal kingdom on this level. No matter how much we try to view ourselves as superior to animals, we have committed more horrific acts of unnecessary violence against members of our own species than any other animal. In his memoir, Present Past Past Present, Ionesco discusses the idea of cruelty in animals and humans: “[a]nimals are cruel. In fact, they are ferocious. I believe, however, that no animal species hates itself as much as we do” (74). Because of the guilt of possessing this violent instinct, man has developed a hatred of himself and his own species, which just leads to more violence in the world. He sees himself in others and reacts with violence and scorn.

Ionesco places an emphasis on understanding our instincts because they connect us as a human species. As we continuously make technological and social advancements, we can sometimes forget that we are human. Perhaps our feeling of superiority to other animals and our desire to separate ourselves causes us to try to suppress our instincts, which can then become violent. “Intelligence is only perhaps an inferior form of instinct, a step toward instinct. Only instinct reacts without making mistakes” (Ionesco 135). Ionesco’s characters are comedic because they are truthful and innocent, acting on their instincts. They are men without acquired logic and intelligence, men without the compulsion to follow social and societal norms for behavior.

Absurd World

Our existence is filled with prosperity, suffering, bliss, and pain. It seems as if there is no rhyme or reason as to why certain events occur in our lives. Ionesco failed to see the meaning behind the seemingly arbitrary events of cruelty and suffering that humans endure in this

lifetime. This lack of meaning makes the world absurd, and Ionesco portrays this idea in his plays.

The representation of people struggling to survive and create meaning in an absurd, chaotic world is not new to writers of this genre. In fact, Alfred Jarry's characters in *Ubu Roi* were like Jarry himself in the sense that they showed their contempt for the cruelty and stupidity of the universe by making their own lives incoherent and absurd (Lewis 17).

Ionesco was continually astonished by how he could see the world as both cruel and magnificent. "There are times when the world seems emptied of all expression, all content. There are times when we look at it as though we'd just that moment been born, and then it looks astonishing and inexplicable...we have this primordial feeling, this fundamental intuition, that we are here, that something exists and that this something demands to be explained" (qtd. in Bonnefoy 123). This sense of awe at the world is similar to that of a child's.

Ionesco was constantly amazed by the wonder of human existence and the characters in his plays reflect that. 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" (Ionesco qtd. in Plimpton 135). As audience members, we can see ourselves in the characters in these plays who are simply trying to find purpose in a vast existence that can all but swallow them up.

Ionesco believed that everything is meaningless and that there is no ultimate reason for why things happen. In regards to what that means for Ionesco's religious experience, he says in Present Past Past Present:

In order to believe that what I call chaos is not chaos, I must manage to believe in a God who doesn't have any play either in any possible human system. Let us not allow ourselves to be passively carried along by the currents of opinion, the ideologies, the

passions, and the fanaticisms of history. But let us allow ourselves to be carried along by the waves of chaos. Let us allow ourselves to go out onto this stormy sea, into reality (46).

The comedy in his plays comes from the absurd events that occur in the lives of his characters. These events have to be treated with humor to keep them from being devastatingly depressing. He uses comedy in his plays to show how wasteful and absurd it is to look for a reason to why suffering occurs.

It is possible to track history in a sequence of linear events of cause and effect, but it is impossible to understand exactly why this chain of events occurred in the manner they did. Men constantly create an absurd world through the contradictions in their actions (extreme violence as well as abundant beneficence). It is our very humanness that makes the world absurd. History and existence is absurd, and it is equally absurd to look for a reason as to why it is the way it is.

By viewing the world as absurd, one can discover certain truths about human existence, but the truths of Ionesco's reality do not just exist in the physical world - they are equally present in dreams. He expresses his belief that dreams are as much a part of reality as anything else, in Notes & Counter Notes.

I have always considered imaginative truth to be more profound, more loaded with significance, than everyday reality...Fiction preludes science. Everything we dream about, and by that I mean everything we desire, is true....There is nothing truer than myth: history, in its attempt to 'realize' myth, distorts it, stops halfway...Everything we dream is 'realizable' Reality does not have to be: it is simply what it is. It is the dreamer, the thinker or the scientist who is the revolutionary; it is he who tries to change the world (16).

He uses his own dreams in his writing: “[d]reams are reality at its most profound, and what you invent is truth because invention, by its nature, can’t be a life. Writers who try to prove something are unattractive to me, because there is nothing to prove and everything to imagine” (qtd. in Plimpton 144). In fact, the idea for *Exit the King* came out of a dream he had. His memoirs are filled with explorations of his dreams. He places a great deal of importance on dreams, as they offer profound truths about the dreamer.

Ionesco’s characters seem to be less rational and more incoherent than those of traditional theatre. For example, the characters in *The Bald Soprano* speak gibberish in a conversation, as casually as if they understood each other perfectly: “silly gobblegobblers, silly gobblegobblers” (Ionesco 41). However, these characters are arguably more human because they don’t have the answers for their problems. They are simply trying to survive in an existence where much of what happens to them is completely out of their control. Ionesco portrays “the absurdity of a world where man is left alone to fill in the void of God, give a name and a meaning to things and...create his own values” (Lamont 12).

Ionesco’s plays are not meant to teach a lesson; his characters are just people, given a certain circumstance and have to deal with it. Their moral code doesn’t concern Ionesco. If morality and ethics had an effect on what happened to people in his plays, it would contradict the Absurdist view that nothing happens for a greater reason, everything just *happens*.

Ionesco’s presentation of an absurd world for what it is, without discussion of morality or trying to teach a lesson, brings us to the next element of what it means to be human that exists in Ionesco’s plays. Julian H. Wulburn, summarizes this brilliantly in his dissertation, “Brecht and Ionesco: Aspects of Engagement”:

Ionesco is engaged in trying to portray the absurdity of a world divided among ideologies incompatible with one another...What he seeks to convey is the utter solitude and the fragile mortality of the man who has the courage to regard himself as an individual at the mercy of the machinery of modern society (21).

The humans in Ionesco's plays are presented more as receivers of the nonsensical events in life, rather than controllers of their own fate. Their fate is not based on the morality of their actions, contrary to common religious beliefs such as karma.

Like those of Beckett, Ionesco's characters are ultimately static, passive beings to whom things just happen: "they are on a treadmill which takes them nowhere, but upon which they continue to plod away purely as a matter of habit, of form" (Wulburn 220). These two-dimensional characters effectively exemplify this absurd world because they blow back and forth in the changing winds of fate, without any real control of what happens to them.

Contradictions and Morality

Ionesco, in his writing, acknowledges that he presents an idea as well as the contradiction to that idea because there is never one side to anything. He never offers a moral in his plays; part of being human is struggling with morality and understanding what is right and wrong.

Ionesco didn't believe that it was the job of the playwright to offer an answer or moral in his plays. "I believe that, as Nabokov said, an author should not have to deliver a message, because he is not a postman" (Plimpton 139).

After World War I, many playwrights embraced the idea that works of art and literature should serve an ideological or social purpose and should not be created for their own sake. Bertolt Brecht, a Marxist, wrote plays to incite revolution. Like Ionesco, he rebelled against the

traditional structure of naturalism in theatre and opposed the bourgeois outlook and values through satirization (Demaitre 215-218).

Unlike Ionesco, however, Brecht's theatre was created to encourage rebellion, in line with his Marxist sympathies. Ionesco was less concerned about promoting certain values, and merely wanted to create onstage a sense of how he viewed the world. He explored how reality is both concrete and imagined, and includes dreams, emotions, and fears (Demaitre 219-221).

One of his reasons for not offering a moral in his plays is that he was against ideologies, believing that they were responsible for Nazism and other repressive authoritative regimes. In Notes & Counter Notes, he expresses his belief that if he offers a type of ideology that motivated the characters in his plays, he would just be adding another ideology to "clutter up the brain" (210).

To be clear, just because Ionesco refused to offer a moral or ideology in his plays doesn't mean he didn't care about the impact of the ideas he presented. In fact, it is quite the opposite. By not offering a certain moral answer in his plays, he forces the audience to come up with one of their own. He cared deeply about his ability to offer hope to his audiences: "will I be listened to attentively enough, will people believe me, will they be moved? At the very most, I may save my personal life in this deluge. But I will not be able to save, along with the moral codes I believe in, the culture I cling to" (Ionesco 41). This seeming impossibility caused him great anxiety, as exemplified in his memoir, Present Past Past Present.

When speaking about his ideas on the reality he strives to present in his plays, Ionesco states that "[t]he illusion is reality. The only true thing is illusion. No one is like anyone else. Everyone is like everyone else. This is true too. The unique and the universal coexist" (147). He speaks of individuality that all humans search for as being inextricably linked to the universal as

well. The most fundamental ideas represented in his plays are presented with their opposites because they are equally true.

In retrospect, it makes sense that Ionesco viewed the world and humans as a mess of contradictions (even the title of one of his books, Notes & Counter Notes, is a contradiction) because Ionesco struggled with his hybrid Romanian and French identity his whole life (Quinney 38). He was born in Romania, but mostly grew up in France and, though he spoke both languages, felt that he identified more as French, and wrote his plays in that language.

In his work, seemingly opposites, comedy and tragedy, are inextricably linked. Critics constantly argue over whether his plays are comedies or tragedies, but the truth is that they are both. Ionesco believed that one could not exist without the other (Gaensbauer 75), and really the only way to witness the tragic situations he presents onstage is to view them from an outlook of humor. Viewing these situations as so tragic they have to be laughed at is what creates the Absurd. For example, Ionesco's recurring character, Bérenger, is most ridiculous and comedic when he is most anguished (Wulburn).

For Ionesco, theatre allows him to present these seemingly contradictory ideas together, as no other medium can allow.

...existence is sometimes unbearable, crushing, painful, heavy, and stupefying, and sometimes it seems to be the manifestation of God himself... 'incoherence' or contradictions can be given free rein in a play. In a play, the character can say anything, any kind of absurdity, all the nonsense that comes into their head, because it's not me who's saying it, it's my characters" (qtd. in Bonnefoy 63)

Plays present what is human, and humans are contradictions; they don't need to be (and usually are not) correct. To be human is to struggle with these contradictions. The characters in his plays are walking contradictions which makes them so relatable to the audience.

Chapter 4

Performative Elements of Ionesco's Plays

Exploring the performative elements of Eugène Ionesco's plays is crucial to further understand the significance and greater themes of his plays. The fact is, Ionesco wrote for the theatre, which means the performance of these plays is extremely important to their meaning. His plays are significant because of the unique effect they produce on their audiences. Ionesco's plays concern the exploration of what it means to be human, and theatre is human; it is the presentation of humans being human.

Comedy and Humor

Ionesco's plays evoke many different emotions, but as the title of the genre suggests, they are comedic. Of course, the type of humor varies from play to play and depending on the director it can be slapstick, physically comic or darkly humorous with a focus on language. On the textual level, Ionesco's plays are filled with irony, and the mere absurdity of events produces a certain laughter of disbelief in viewers.

Laughter of disbelief is unique to the Theatre of the Absurd and occurs when one witnesses an event that is ridiculous and sometimes physically impossible in reality, like people turning into rhinoceroses or a growing dead body. An event of this type is so shocking, it produces a laughter of disbelief, where the viewer may or may not necessarily know why he or she is laughing, but laughs all the same.

In his book, Comedy, Andrew Stott discusses comedy through historical, practical, and performative lenses. Comedy allows its audience members to become participants in the

performance through their laughter. In line with Ionesco's value of a collective human identity, laughter is a unifying force, unique to humans (Stott 127).

In the case of some of Ionesco's plays, comedy serves to engage the audience so the play can then suddenly disarm them with an unsettling reversal. For example, in *The Chairs*, the old couple talking to an empty room filled with chairs that they believe are filled with people is humorous, but the final moment turns the comedic atmosphere into an uncomfortable situation. The old couple commits a double suicide and the orator is left alone onstage, where the audience discovers the one person that can tell the story of the couple's life is unable to speak coherently, and his garbled scrawling on the chalkboard leaves the audience with an eerie image. This reversal provokes self-reflection and produces an uncomfortable feeling in an audience that has been laughing throughout the play.

In many cases, comedy is used to incite social reform by framing social and political messages of a particular piece of art within an approachable, comedic context (Stott 106). Comedy's subversive power is exemplified in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*. Throughout the play, the characters, one by one, begin to turn into rhinoceroses. This is absurd and humorous, but it is also a warning, as the rhinoceroses are symbolic of the dangerous Nazi movement (or any tyrannous political regime). It warns about how easily seemingly rational people could let themselves become part of a deindividualized mass of people who have the ability to brutally massacre millions of people.

Ionesco discusses his ideas of humor and his understanding of its importance in interviews with Shusha Guppy and Claude Bonnefoy. He notes that laughing at misfortune is important in theatre: "humor is becoming aware of absurdity while continuing to live in absurdity" (Bonnefoy 130). Ionesco also observes that there is a balance between comedy and

tragedy; they are both at play in all situations. It seems absurd to love and hate simultaneously but we do it all the same. “Humor enables you to experience a wide range of passions while realizing that they are absolutely meaningless” (Ionesco qtd. in Bonnefoy 131). Though his plays can seem dark and pessimistic, the humor in them shows how Ionesco himself was optimistic.

For Ionesco, laughing in the face of misfortune is essential in order to cope with misfortune. This laughter is not that of a lighthearted or carefree nature; it is a laughter informed of the many anguishes of life, but refuses to be swallowed by despair. Comedy and tragedy are intertwined, and comedy is not without its pain, as he explains in Notes & Counter Notes:

[f]or my part, I have never understood the difference people make between the comic and the tragic. As the ‘comic’ is an intuitive perception of the absurd, it seems to me more hopeless than the ‘tragic.’ The ‘comic’ offers no escape. I say ‘hopeless,’ but in reality it lies outside the boundaries of hope or despair” (27).

In Absurdist plays, many characters are two-dimensional and lack emotional depth, allowing the audience to experience the humor in their absurdity. Plays like *The Lesson* and *Exit the King* are filled with the misery of human life, but they are also humorous because of their absurdity.

Puppetry

Ionesco observes in Notes & Counter Notes that the physical presence of actors onstage made him uncomfortable; he was embarrassed for them losing themselves in their characters and experiencing these vulnerable emotions in fictional settings. “I realize now that what worried me in the theatre was the presence of characters in flesh and blood on the stage. Their physical presence destroyed the imaginative illusion” (17). Ionesco uses puppets and dummies in many of his plays to avoid having actors onstage and to heighten the imaginative illusion for the audience.

Puppets have the capacity to exaggerate human behavior and turn life into a farce, so the audience is transported into this absurd world, while still being reminded of the humans that the puppets are representing. Puppets represent humans enough to be able to get away with inhuman movements while still being believably human (von Kleist 24).

Ionesco was inspired as a young child by watching the Punch and Judy shows in Luxembourg Gardens. Unlike the other children, he did not laugh, but was rather mesmerized by their ability to capture what he realized was his image of the world. “It was the very image of the world that appeared to me, strange and improbable but truer than true, in the profoundly simplified form of caricature, as though to stress the grotesque and brutal nature of the truth,” he observes in Notes & Counter Notes (20). Perhaps this was the awakening of Ionesco’s understanding of his own worldview, leading him to write absurd plays that reflected this view.

Punch and Judy shows are extremely violent, but lack the physical repercussions of violence; therefore, the characters can be careless about death, so the audience is not compelled to worry about the physical welfare of the characters. “Punch delivers several short cracks to his opponent’s heads, and they drop down dead, much to the relish of an audience enjoying the vigor of it all, and laughing and cheering at the spectacle of death dealt without pain” (Craik 13). The characters’ verbal interaction is simple to complement their exaggerated, violent actions. These shows can be compared to the *Tom and Jerry* and *Wile E. Coyote and The Roadrunner* cartoons of today, where the characters’ determination to kill each other is funny, and the physical pain they endure when they fail is not taken seriously.

As the manipulator of the puppet, the human hand is also its soul. Puppets are like the characters in Ionesco’s plays in the sense that they are “ideal revisions of the human, unfallen and innocent actors uninfected by self-consciousness” (Katz and Gross). Punch, however, is not

this ideal human - he is more “contaminated,” his violent instincts cause him to kill anyone who tries to control him.

Punch’s vocation is to resist human manipulations; his voice has the properties of an anarchic instrument, a means of refusing human language and jumbling its rules. To the extent that he is called upon to resemble and miniaturize features of the human, Punch challenges not only the linguistic, but also the judicial and temporal order of the human world. The way that he mishears words of instruction suggests a rebellious knack for undermining legal authority (Katz and Gross).

Punch resists the human hand - his soul - and this internal struggle manifests in Punch’s extreme aggression. He is a grotesque human representation, but he is a puppet whose goal is to overthrow restrictions by which humans are also bound. His audiences release the tension of these restrictions and Punch becomes an object of laughter rather than one of fear.

Commedia dell’Arte and Clown Influence

In addition to Punch and Judy shows, Ionesco seemed to be influenced by the principles of commedia dell’arte, a sixteenth century form of Italian comedy, whose characters wore masks. Ionesco experiments with the use of masks in some of his plays such as *Jacques*, to achieve different effects. Masks can work on many levels, one of which is to depersonalize the characters, making them grotesque caricatures of humans.

The practice of lazzi (physical, comedic insertions into a play) is the most influential aspect of commedia dell’arte used in Ionesco’s plays. The third act of *The Killer* has many opportunities for lazzi, especially with the exchanges of identical suitcases. The drunk Man, the Old Man, and Édouard each try to steal the Old Man’s suitcase from each other and the

choreographed efforts of these characters can be quite comic (Ionesco 81). The stage directions clearly state that the purpose of these small physical scenes is to be comic: “it precipitates a scene of general chaos, which should be comic, involving everyone” (87).

Clown scenes were developed from commedia’s *lazzi*, where the comedy lies in the character’s inability to complete a small task, drawing out the attempt at completing a simple task into a comedic scene focused on one action. The characters in these scenes can seem to be of a lower intelligence than most humans because they misunderstand instructions and they are of a lower social status, but in reality they are highly clever.

The stakes in the world of a clown are always extremely high, so it makes sense that Ionesco has found comedy in his death-focused plays; the threat of death is the highest stake for a character. Every moment is extremely important to a clown, which makes the simplicity of their performed tasks humorous because those tasks are significant to them.

Physical Acting

The practice of *lazzi* and clown scenes require a certain amount of physical acting that exaggerates human behavior so that it becomes a comedic farce. The use of the body is very important in comedy, and the focus on the human body evokes many of Ionesco’s ideas about our humanness as supported by the themes of his plays.

Andrew Stott, in Comedy, speaks of the body in comedy through three lenses: beauty and abjection, the grotesque, and slapstick. The aspects of these three types of physical comedy connect to greater themes in Ionesco’s work. “The body in comedy is the medium through which humanity’s fascination with its instincts and animal nature are explored. The comic body is exaggeratedly physical, a distorted, disproportionate, profane, ill-disciplined, insatiate, and

perverse organism” (Stott 83). The human body is imperfect so clowns are imperfect, which makes them funny and relatable. Beauty is idealized in society because it evokes a sense of a higher power, but that is an inappropriate subject for comedy.

The body is both beautiful and graceful, but also the site of disease and excretion. The idea of the “abject” was developed by philosopher and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva. She describes the abject as the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between the self and the other (Kristeva 5). This occurs when humans witness objects such as corpses, excrement, and open wounds. It reminds us of our own corporeality, which threatens our sense of our own pureness. The body can be distorted, grotesque, and exaggerated to create a sense of ridiculousness, horror, and satirical bizarreness.

The grotesque can be described as an embodiment of the abject. The use of grotesque and distortion in the body achieves a satirical purpose:

The grotesque is a form of exaggerated and ambivalent social commentary produced by the violent clash of opposites, especially those that are comic and terrifying, existing in a state of unresolved tension. The site of the grotesque clash is the human body, resulting in deeply ambiguous and divided reactions to the horror of corporeality and oneself as an organism (Stott 87).

François Rebelais’ stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel in the early 1500s follow two giants through their absurd adventures, as they burp, pass gas, excrete, and copulate. Their oral, anal, and phallic obsession encourages readers to break away from the constraints of maintaining societally imposed manners (Stott 88).

In the third act of *The Killer*, Mother Peep and the drunk Man are described in the stage directions as struggling on the ground while people look on and shout. “Then, at the end of the

following dialogue, Mother Peep's head reappears alone, for the last time: it is hideous. Before disappearing, she says: 'My geese have liquidated him. But only physically.' Punch and Judy style" (Ionesco 83). Clearly, the shock of Mother Peep's hideous face and the following line has a satirical impact, a comment on the violent nature of political power. Similarly, in *Victims of Duty*, Madeline and the Detective are described as becoming "more and more grotesque, until they are almost clowning" (150). The grotesque nature and distortion of the body in clowning is an effective form of comedy.

Christopher Innes observes that Ionesco's appreciation of the Grand Guignol Puppet Theatre connects him to Alfred Jarry (Innes 203). The Grand Guignol Puppet Theatre (1897-1962) was a theatre in Paris that featured many plays focusing on themes such as "infanticide, insanity, vengeance, mysterious death, and the suffering of the innocent" ("Grand Guignol"). This theatre embodied and glorified the idea of the grotesque and, knowing that Ionesco likely attended some performances there, it is possible they influenced aspects of some of Ionesco's plays.

Slapstick comedy, the physical comedy practiced by clowns, such as that of the Three Stooges and Punch and Judy, deals with the previously discussed inflicted pain on the body where the body does not die. Similar to the experience of violence in puppetry, the audience doesn't gain sadistic pleasure from watching this infliction of pain but they also have no compulsion to empathize with the characters, making it easier to laugh at them. The protagonist is not in control of his body, and external forces attempt to take away his dignity: "we are presented with the projected body that draws attention to its surface and movement, placed among a world of things over which it cannot claim superiority" (Stott 93). Slapstick, as a form

of physical comedy, is concerned with the body's relationship to the world and how that relationship is constantly conflicted.

Chapter 5

My Performance: Play Analyses

In my performance, I decided that the best way to explore Ionesco's themes of what it means to be human was to combine elements from eight of his plays, which I believe to best exemplify those themes and form them into one new, cohesive plot. Using what I know of the performative aspects of Ionesco's plays, I could explore these rather serious themes in the comedic, absurd setting that I think Ionesco would have wanted. The plays I chose were *Victims of Duty*, *The Lesson*, *Hunger and Thirst*, *Exit the King*, *The Chairs*, *Amédée*, *A Stroll in the Air*, and *The Killer*. In this chapter, I will explore the thematic and performative aspects central to each of these plays that highlighted the themes I wanted to express in my performance.

Ronald Hayman's Eugène Ionesco and Robert Tener's "Scenic Metaphors: A study of Ionesco's Geometrical Vision of Human Relationships in the Bérenger Plays" influenced me greatly in understanding the thematic and performative elements, respectively, in the eight plays I chose. In Eugène Ionesco, Ronald Hayman, British critic and dramatist, analyzes each of Ionesco's plays, and his insights are extremely beneficial to the understanding of Ionesco as a playwright and how the themes of these plays connect to his own values.

Robert Tener's essay, "Scenic Metaphors: A study of Ionesco's Geometrical Vision of Human Relationships in the Bérenger Plays," discusses the geometrical patterns and the relationships of the characters to each other on a geometrical plane in the four Bérenger plays (though I only chose three Bérenger plays for my performance). I explored how those geometrical patterns could be present in the physicality and movement of my characters. Ionesco's plays explore the relationship of the outside world to the private world of his characters. This private world typically evokes the sense of suffocation of and being trapped by

one's surroundings as a manifestation of the mind. "For Ionesco the mind apparently creates its own world" (Tener 191). The outside world represents chaos which shows the clashing of harmony and logic or reflects the chaos of Bérenger's mind. Tener concludes that the chaos is a tool to show that "life or its representations tend to invade or contaminate not only the rational models but also the intuitive or idealized dreams mankind creates in an attempt to give life meaning by stopping its chaotic movement" (177).

Victims of Duty

Victims of Duty, written in 1952, was the first of five plays that Ionesco theatricalized from a short story he wrote. This short story-turned play is followed by four others like it, *Oriflamme* (which became *Amédée* in its play form in 1954), *La Vase* (1956), *The Colonel's Photograph* in 1962 (which became *The Killer* when it was written as a play), and *A Stroll in the Air* (1963) (Hayman 61).

The play opens with the main character, Choubert, discussing theatre with his wife, Madeline. They are interrupted by the appearance of the Detective, searching for information about the previous tenant, Mallot. Choubert journeys through his memory with the help of his wife, only find that he does not possess the answers that the Detective needs. The Detective proceeds to force feed him sharp, stale bread to repair his memory. Two characters appear: a female (Lady) who spends most of the play detached from the action, and Nicolas d'Eu, a deeply philosophical character. He joins the action of the Detective, Choubert, and Madeline but becomes angry at the Detective's values and eventually stabs him. The play ends with Nicolas, Choubert, and Madeline forcing each other to eat the stale bread.

In this play, there are allusions to some of Ionesco's major themes of what it means to be human: death, violence, contradictions, individual identity, and the absurd world. Ronald Hayman observes that the mud (through which Choubert has to walk in his memory) in *Victims of Duty* is an important landscape, similar to the shallow pool in *The Killer*. "I'm walking through the mud. It's sticking to the soles of my shoes...my feet are so heavy! I'm afraid of slipping" (Ionesco 129). Hayman notes that the weight of mud can be associated with death, depression, anxiety, and despair, and he references Ionesco's observation in Fragments of a Journal, "I felt myself becoming heavy again, thick, leaden, a thing of lead that can be eaten away by the void" (69). The weight of the fear of death as manifested in the muddy landscape can be contrasted with the weightlessness of the characters flying away in *Amédée* and *A Stroll in the Air* (Hayman 65-66).

In the play, Choubert fears death and expresses a desire for his wife to grow young again. Nobody had died and you'd never shed a tear...Where were all the others? In their graves, by the roadside. I want our happiness back again, we've been robbed and despoiled...Madeline, you must believe me, I swear it wasn't I who made you old! No...I won't have it, I don't believe it, love is always young, love never dies. *I haven't changed; Neither have you, you're pretending. Oh, but no! I can't deceive myself, you are old, so terribly old!...We don't grow old when we're in love. I love you, grow young again, throw away that mask and look into my eyes...Oh, if only we could go singing and skipping and jumping again!* (130).

Choubert expresses the urge to deny the inevitability of death like Bérenger in *Exit the King*. Also similar to characters in other Ionesco plays, he is attached to his wife and dependent on her as a source of strength.

In the end of the play, the possession of power over another human manifests itself in Nicolas' stabbing death of the Detective, like the Professor's murder of his Pupil in *The Lesson* (Hayman 70). In these two plays, the authoritative figures are indifferent to the pain of those they control and their power becomes so encompassing that they are driven to murder. These characters have also gained their authority during the course of the play: the Professor overcomes the Pupil's confidence by badgering her with questions she cannot answer, and Nicolas overcomes the Detective in defense of Choubert. I experimented with this idea of status and authority in my performance in main character's dominance over his murder victim. The conflict of control exists within himself as he struggles with the frustration that he can't control himself (his waning strength and overwhelming emotions).

The character of Nicolas presents the themes of contradictions and individual identity. Nicolas tells the characters that personality does not exist, that the only things inside us are forces that are either contradictory or consistent. "The characters lose their form in the formlessness of becoming. Each character is not so much himself as another" (Ionesco 158). In response to Nicolas' ideas, the Detective says that he doesn't believe in the absurd, that everything can be understood with time. He states that he is logical and sees connections in everything. His extreme, unprompted violence towards Choubert seems to contradict his claims about his own rationality.

Earlier in the play, the Detective has a line where he plays Choubert's father and tells Choubert how the history of the world led up to his birth, that the universe is forever changed because of his existence. I used this line in my performance because it connects to the idea that each individual has an effect on the living universe and every life is important, no matter how small it seems. This is the wish that Bérenger expresses as he is dying in *Exit the King* and the

old couple's goal in enlisting the help of the orator in *The Chairs*. Every human has this fear that the universe is so vast that there must be some reason for our existence; we strive to make an effect on the world. The Detective is saying that no matter what Choubert does in his life, the world is forever changed because of the very fact that he existed.

The Lesson

What is striking in *The Lesson* (1950) is the juxtaposition of absurd comedy and extreme violence. The Professor begins the play as unconfident and timid, while his Pupil enters enthusiastic and confident, but as the play progresses, they switch statuses as the Professor dominates her with language and knowledge.

During the course of the play his timidity will disappear progressively, imperceptibly and the lewd gleams in his eyes will become a steady devouring flame in the end. From a manner that is inoffensive at the start, the Professor becomes more and more sure of himself, more and more nervous, aggressive, dominating, until he is able to do as he pleases with the Pupil, who has become, in his hands, a pitiful creature (Ionesco 46). The Professor's rage increases to the point where he murders his Pupil by stabbing her in a manner evocative of rape (Hayman 27). Ionesco notes that humans are made up of contradictions, and with these contradictions constantly fighting against one another inside of us, it is difficult to establish a moral code by which to live. By his actions, it seems as if the Professor doesn't have any moral code, which could be due to the fact that these opposite states are present inside him, constantly struggling for domination.

On the surface, it seems like *The Lesson* is a very serious, tragic play. But the absurdity that frames this violence makes it comedic, like the mass murders committed by Père Ubu in

Ubu Roi (Hayman 27-28). When his maid reveals that this is the fortieth pupil he's killed, it is humorous because of how ridiculously high that number is. The maid's reaction of annoyance rather than horror makes this event absurd as well.

In addition to contradictions and morality, this play exemplifies other elements of what it means to be human, such as death, instincts and violence, and the absurd world. The Professor breaks down his Pupil to the point where she is passive enough for him to easily overtake and murder her, symbolizing authoritative figures like those in academia or government dominating and raping those underneath them (the average student or citizen). Ionesco uses death as a comic tool to show the absurdity of this situation and to shed light on his feelings towards figures of great power and authority over others.

Instincts and violence come into play through the lack of reasoning that drives the action of the Professor. The Professor's violent instincts overcome him and he kills his Pupil in an adrenaline-filled rage, only to realize what he'd done after the murder is over. Right after the murder, he is questioned by his maid and desperately denies killing her:

Professor: It wasn't I...it wasn't I...Marie...No...I assure you...it wasn't I, my little Marie...

Maid: And who was it? Who was it then? Me?

Professor: I don't know...maybe...

Maid: Or the cat?

Professor: That's possible...I don't know...

Maid: And today makes it the fortieth time! (Ionesco 76).

There is also no logic or reasoning in the Pupil's answers to the Professor's questions earlier in the play. She just recites what she knows from memorization because she cannot truly

understand anything, even simple math equations like $2 - 1 = 1$, but she can solve multiplication problems with absurdly high numbers even better than the Professor. Her inability to understand despite explicit explanation from the Professor is relentless. This play shows us that our own world, a world where pupils emerge from the education system with an impressively memorized knowledge of many facts but no understanding of simple reasoning is absurd.

As audience members, we believe the world Ionesco has created. Though we may ask, why does he still have a job if he keeps murdering his pupils? Where does he keep all the bodies? Why has he not been arrested? and other rational questions of the sort, it doesn't detract from the suspension of disbelief we experience while watching or reading the play. We accept that the world is absurd but also has striking similarities to our own world. Thus, we are able to laugh at the comedy that arises out of the absurdity of this and our own world.

The extreme status switch of these two characters suggests a grotesqueness to them (Hayman 28-29). They are no longer humans, which makes it easier for the viewer to experience the violence that occurs later in the play. As the characters change status, the beginning stage directions emphasize that they must change their physicality to emphasize this change. Though the dialogue of *The Lesson* is comedic, there is a darkness suggested in this grotesque change.

Hunger and Thirst

Among the many themes presented in *Hunger and Thirst* (1966), the theme of the fear of death was most significant to the building of my thesis performance. According to Ronald Hayman, *Hunger and Thirst*, like *A Stroll in the Air*, "is a play which both draws heavily on dreams and presents much of its action in a dreamlike form" (Hayman 138). Ionesco notes that

he is greatly inspired by his dreams; that dreams are just more real, if not more real than life itself, and he includes descriptions of dreams he's had in his memoir, Present Past Past Present.

Jean, the main character in *Hunger and Thirst*, is terrified of growing old and fears his own death. The knowledge that he is going to die paralyzes him and fatigues him. He mentions being “stuck in the mud” (Ionesco 29), connecting to the idea that mud is representation of anxiety and fear of death. He insists that he is “meant for something better” (29), but he still seems paralyzed in this fear.

Jean expresses a desire for a place where death is forbidden, and decides that the fresh air will make him young again. His denial of his own death and attempt to convince himself he can decide not to die reminds the reader of Bérenger's similar delusion in *Exit the King*.

Exit the King

Exit the King, first performed in 1962, is the third play in “The Bérenger Cycle,” following *The Killer* and *Rhinoceros* (1959), and followed by *A Stroll in the Air* (1963). *Exit the King* premiered at the Théâtre de l'Alliance Française in Paris.

While the other Bérenger plays feature him as the “everyman,” in *Exit the King*, Bérenger is an old king, who is presumed to have once been very powerful, preparing for the end of his life, with the help of his two wives, Maid, Doctor, and Guard. In each play of “The Bérenger Cycle,” Bérenger has different occupations, personalities, but he is always the protagonist, searching for a human truth.

The entire play takes place in his throne room and focuses on Bérenger's denial of his impending death. At the beginning of the play, it is stated that he will die by the end of the play. Throughout the play, he transitions from denial, to pleading, to anger, and finally to acceptance.

Towards the end, the characters, one by one, begin to disappear, leaving Béranger alone with his first wife, Marguerite, who helps him give up his Empire and prepare for his death. By the end, Marguerite too has disappeared, and the king is alone to “take his place” in death.

It is clear that this is a very different play from all of Ionesco’s other plays. It is Aristotelian in the sense that it focuses on one experience, where the end is determined from the beginning. Towards the end of his career, Ionesco dictated his plays to someone who would write them down, instead of writing them himself. *Exit the King* was one of these plays and it was written in twenty days. He discusses the process of writing this play with Claude Bonnefoy in Conversations with Eugène Ionesco:” [t]his play is an attempt at an apprenticeship in dying” (79). Elizabeth G. Wright explains that the play is not about the “subject” of death, but rather the lived experience of it, “It is death not as a ‘subject’ to write ‘about,’ but death as a felt experience – the sense of having-to-die as inwardly defining life – that engages Ionesco’s attention” (Wright 436). There is no other issue, no event except for the ultimate death of the king, and the way it happens in the play, even that is a “non-event” (Wright 437). A similar “non-event” can also be found in *The Chairs* and the plays of Samuel Beckett (*Endgame* and *Waiting for Godot*) where something is expected to happen (by the very virtue of a play being performed), but nothing ever does.

Ionesco said the idea for the play came to him in a dream, and he wrote this play in a different state than he wrote the others. He wrote the first part in ten days and had to stop when he got very sick. During this time he was scared, which helped him write the play he had been meaning to write for a long time. After he recovered he wrote the second half in the next ten days (Bonnefoy 78-79).

Though Ionesco himself continued to express his fear and denial of his own death, two translators who translated *Exit the King* on their deathbeds reported to him that the play gave them courage to face their impending death. “Two of my translators...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” (Ionesco qtd. in Plimpton 145).

Present in *Exit the King* is the human desire to know that we have made some kind of impact on the world before we die. Throughout the play, the king is constantly thinking about all that he will lose when he dies, and is unwilling to let it go. He is dependent upon people, life, power, and love. It seems as if he’s been able to delay death all these years, but he could not forever avoid it. He begs to be remembered, to be studied and revered as a god: “[o]h, please make them all remember me! Make them weep and despair and perpetuate my memory in all their history books” (Ionesco 48).

This connects to the idea that reoccurs in Ionesco’s plays that each human life has forever made an impact on the great, living universe, which raises the importance of individual human life to the status of the entire cosmos. In *Exit the King*, Marie says to Bérenger, “[e]verything that has been will be, everything that will be is, everything that will be has been. You are inscribed forever in the annals of the universe” (Ionesco 69), to console him to the fact that his death will not wipe out his memory or the fact that he did once exist. In *Victims of Duty*, written exactly ten years before *Exit the King*, the Detective has an almost identical line to Marie’s: “[e]ven when you are no more...nothing can alter the fact that you *have been*. You were here, forever inscribed in the archives of the universe, firmly fixed in the eternal memory of God” (Ionesco 139).

Bérenger also expresses the very real human near-death fear that he might have never really lived, or wasted the life he had. “But I was just about to start. Oh! If I could have a whole century before me, perhaps then I’d have time!” (Ionesco 38). Perhaps in this state, Bérenger can appreciate the beauty of what he’s had over all these years. “In his physical weakness Bérenger gains a sharpened awareness of life” (Wright 440). It is an understatement to say that Bérenger’s fears are relatable in their humanness, but nonetheless, this experience is extremely moving.

Death, as we all know, is an inherent truth of human existence, and though we may not like it, we spend our whole lives knowing that our existence will come to an end. Therefore, Bérenger’s denial and efforts to delay his own death are absurd: “I could decide not to die” (Ionesco 72). But knowing that Ionesco himself, portraying this absurdity, was still not reconciled to the idea that he was going to die, makes his audiences question their own feelings about this inevitable fact. On a rational and logical level, we understand that our human bodies cannot function after a certain number of years, as well as the fact that there are forces in the world that our bodies cannot withstand. But how many of us humans have actually accepted that this life, everything we know, will end and disappear? How many of us are unafraid of death? It is difficult to accept the occurrence of an event that we fear. This is precisely the thinking that comes out of the experience of *Exit the King*. We have to reexamine our own mortality, something we’ve known about our whole lives, but quite possibly never deeply considered.

Julian Wulburn in his dissertation, “Brecht and Ionesco: Aspects of Engagement,” ties Ionesco’s own ideas about his mortality to those of Bérenger in *Exit the King*. “It is true that [Ionesco] is obsessed with death in a way that Bérenger is not, at least at the outset of the play, but he is, like Bérenger, tied to life, and again like Bérenger, the closer death approaches, the more deeply he is bogged down in life, the less prepared he is to die” (217). At the end of his

life, Bérenger gains a heightened awareness of the uniqueness of his existence which in turn ties him to life. He fears that this awareness will be extinguished in death, causing his desperate urgency to cling to life (Wulburn 218).

Ionesco himself was interested in psychotherapy and inspired by Sigmund Freud's instinct theory: "[a]ccording to Freud, the life instinct, containing the zeal instinct and that of self-preservation, finds itself in a constant struggle for supremacy with the death instinct, which is a destructiveness directed against the self and seeking to return to an earlier tensionless state prior to birth, since 'the aim of all life is death'" (Dolamore 3). Ionesco constantly described the opposing forces inside humans, and though he feared his own death, in Present Past Past Present, he notes that there is another interaction at play in this fear: "[p]eople like killers. And if one feels sympathy for the victims it's by way of thanking them for letting themselves be killed. This complex, this state of mind is not so difficult to analyze now that we're acquainted with the various schools of psychoanalysis" (38). Our existence can be cruel and unbearable, but we cling to it, fervently desiring to continue living it.

In true Absurdist form, Ionesco allows for many comedic opportunities in the physicality and performance of this seemingly depressing play. Ronald Hayman observes that "[w]hen Bérenger keeps falling over and stumbling to his feet, the stage direction asks that the scene should be played like a tragic Punch and Judy show" (Hayman 132). In the midst of the King's dramatic journey to his death, there are elements of comedy in the absurdity of his belief that he can just decide not to die.

Marguerite helps Bérenger take his place in death and as he advances toward his throne, and when he does, she disappears along with all of the other set pieces until only the King and

his throne are visible and then they, too, disappear. A gray light and a sort of mist fill the stage, representing the emptiness of death (Wright 440).

The geometrical relationships in *Exit the King* are shown in the cyclical nature to the play, concerning the end of an era as the world that revolves around this king comes to an end. The king and his universe seem to be one in the same; the world seems to die as he dies. Tener notes that the spiraling movements in the play “seem to constrict and delimit King Bérenger until he is squeezed into nothingness” (Tener 184).

It is clear that this play has a larger significance than just one man’s journey to death. Bérenger is an extremely powerful king; his Empire is more than just a kingdom - it includes all of the cosmos that will die with him. Ionesco uses dramatic symbolism with the growing crack on the wall of the king’s throne room.

The cosmos of the play is the set, and we see the crack in the wall widening and other new cracks appearing as the frantic beating of the king’s heart, audible all over the auditorium, shakes the palace. The crack on the wall has already been interpreted - rather like the writing on the wall of Nebuchadnezzar's palace - a sign that there is no hope (Hayman 133).

In addition to the growing crack on the wall, there is a constant reminder on how much time the king has left to live, like a ticking time bomb. Marguerite counts down the hours and minutes left throughout the play: “In one hour and twenty-five minutes, you’re going to die” (Ionesco 34). These two devices constantly remind us and the king how much longer he has left to live. They are neutral stage devices around which all the action seems to revolve and end up becoming unavoidable, just like death.

The Chairs

The Chairs, written in 1952, explores many aspects of Ionesco's theme of what it means to be human, namely the human experience of coming to terms with our own mortality. But there are other aspects as well like the absurd world in which we live and contradictions that are constantly at play in our lives.

Throughout the play, the old couple prepares for their death in front of a mass of empty chairs, which they believe are filled with people attending their party. Ionesco says in Notes & Counter Notes that everything should be exaggerated: “[g]ive yourself up to this play, I beg you. Do not minimize its effects...everything should be exaggerated, excessive, painful, childish, a caricature, without finesse” (187). The only other actor onstage is the orator who they ask to spread the story of their lives after they die. They live in a seemingly post-apocalyptic world of nothingness similar to the world of Beckett's *Endgame*.

The play ends with the old couple committing a double suicide and the orator addressing the crowd of invisible people with meaningless, incoherent words. They are concerned with their legacy living on through the orator, connecting to the previously discussed human desire to be remembered after death. The Old Man announces, “I will not have lived in vain, since my message will be revealed to the world” and indicates the Orator, who he trusts to tell the story of his life to the world (Ionesco 157). Unlike many characters in Ionesco's other plays, the Old Man accepts his death and is grateful for the fullness of the life he led.

The emptiness of death is portrayed through the emptiness of the outside world and the stage full of chairs, empty of people. The vast nothingness of the outside world pervades the atmosphere of the inside world of the play. This sense of emptiness is conveyed in a note for Ionesco to a director of the play in Notes & Counter Notes: “[w]hat is needed is plenty of

gesture, almost pantomime...to create this emptiness, so that it grows and devours everything: absence can only be created in opposition to things present” (189). Like in *Exit the King*, it is suggested that the end of life is the same as the end of the world; when a person dies, his world dies with him.

As for the outside world of *The Chairs*, there is no life outside the home; the world is “full of ghosts” (Ionesco 171). The world is kept on the outside and unable to reach the old couple. The sound of a boat announcing the arrival of the invisible guests suggests an outside world, but all that is presented onstage is a void (Cirella 174).

There are contradictions within the play itself and the effect it produces on the audience. The stage becomes filled with empty chairs and the sounds of voices, but there are no other people to be seen. The old couple interacts with the invisible people sitting in the chairs and entering through the door. Zoran Milutinovi notes that onstage there is an invisible audience with only their voices being heard and in the theatre the audience is physically present but voiceless. “Like meaning, the audience is awaited and welcomed, but the actual audience sees that in fact, there is nothing, and that to await either the audience or the meaning of the Orator’s speech is a delusion” (Milutinovi 338). Again, Ionesco offers no moral in the end of his play, so the audience is left with only a feeling of uneasiness. The last hope of the couple’s message being bestowed upon the world is dashed with the revelation that the orator, the one person they relied on to bestow this message, is unable to communicate.

The audience is simultaneously embarrassed, moved, and amused, particularly by the fact that all this happens to an elderly couple.

“...all this is touching and funny at the same time because it penetrates into what is rudimentary in almost any situation involving a man and a woman. The man needs his

wife-mother to make him believe that he has something, a message that is worth passing on to other people, to make him believe that he is different from the others and has greatness within him...Ionesco is now able to embarrass, move, and amuse at the same time. The situation is one in which we cannot but recognize our own weaknesses, by the extreme grotesqueness of what is happening with such a very old man and such a very old woman makes it all the funnier and all the more touching” (Hayman 45).

There is a certain grotesqueness in this representation that causes the audience to recognize their own weakness, and be really touched by the ideas about the futility of life presented in the play. And, although the play is comedic, the unexpected reversal in the end produces the feeling of uneasiness in the audience as they leave the performance.

Ionesco also explores the husband and wife relationships in many of his plays, where the wife acts as both a wife and a mother figure. This is explored through Marguerite and Bérenger in *Exit the King* as well as Madeline and Amédée in *Amédée*. The Old Woman in *The Chairs*, too, acts as both a mother to her husband as well as a wife. Like Bérenger in *Exit the King*, the Old Man reverts back to an infantile dependence on his wife when faced with his impending death. As the play opens, the Old Man is anxiously waiting for his guests to arrive (whose arrival, we later learn, will indicate that he must die) and “seats himself quite naturally on the lap of the Old Woman” (Ionesco 13) like a child.

Amédée

Sharing many themes with *The Chairs* is *Amédée*. Written just two years later, it is the second of five plays Ionesco wrote first in short story form, called *Oriflamme* and produced in 1954 (Hayman 79).

Like *The Chairs*, *Amédée* features a couple effectively cut off from the outside world, facing the invasion of death into their private, isolated world. In *The Chairs*, the theme of death is exemplified in the couple's suicide, while in *Amédée*, death is represented by a corpse in the other room, steadily growing in size, trapping the couple in their home. Ionesco discusses the couple's dependence on each other with Claude Bonnefoy in Conversations with Eugène Ionesco:

The couple is the world itself, it's man and woman, Adam and Eve, the two halves of humanity who love one another, find one another, who are sick and tired of loving one another; who, in spite of everything, cannot not love one another, who cannot exist except together. The couple here aren't just a man and a woman, they might also be the whole of mankind, divided and trying to come together again, to become one (84).

The couples in both *The Chairs* and *Amédée* have endured together, and seem to have been together for a long time, similar to Ionesco and his wife, Rodica Burileanu.

The couples in *The Chairs* and *Amédée* live effectively isolated from the rest of the world, the world in *The Chairs* being a post-apocalyptic nothingness, and in *Amédée*, a suffocating social world, closing in on the couple in their home. Though the image of the growing corpse with glowing green eyes is very distinctive, the play is really about the couple's relationship, and how this corpse has managed to tear them apart emotionally while simultaneously creating a codependency in their marriage (Hayman 79).

The husband and wife in *Amédée* appear so intertwined that they are dependent on each other, like two halves of a person, unable to survive without the other. The demon in the other room binds the couple together, isolating them from the outside world. They are trapped - unable to live their lives because of the disruption caused by this corpse. As the dead body grows

stronger and larger, the living couple inside the house grows weaker and more trapped. The invasion of personal living space can also be seen in *The New Tenant*, where the main character slowly becomes trapped by the increasing amount of furniture in his new home. As the corpse continues to invade their space, Amédée and Madeline lose their freedom (Hayman 80).

Ronald Hayman observes that there is also a theme of infidelity present in *Amédée*. It is suggested that the corpse comes from a lover of Madeline's that Amédée killed in "a fit of spite or anger" (Ionesco 44). Even greater than that is the image of *Amédée* floating away from Madeline as the corpse lifts him off the ground. The image of man leaving or flying away from his wife can also be seen in *A Stroll in the Air* and *Frenzy For Two or More*, perhaps connecting to Ionesco's experience of his father leaving his mother when he was young (Hayman 84).

Like the growing crack on the wall or the constant reminder of time slipping away in *Exit the King*, dramatic symbolism exists in the growing corpse in *Amédée*. The corpse is resigned to the bed in the other room, invisible to the audience at the beginning, but throughout the play it grows so large that the couple cannot move around their apartment because of the corpse's leg taking up all the space. When Amédée finally begins to pull the corpse out of the apartment through the window, it takes an extremely long time for the corpse to clear the apartment, and by then, Amédée is halfway down the next block. By the time the legs are pulled out of the room Amédée is "still in the street, pulling, he must have gone some distance already...his voice sounds a long way off" (Ionesco 64).

Death infects life in Amédée's home. The fear of death can paralyze people; the corpse paralyzes the couple and prevents them from living their lives. Death is intertwined with life; the decomposing corpse gives life to mushrooms that begin to sprout up from the floor of Amédée's apartment. The presence of this corpse is a constant reminder of Amédée's crime, as if the dead

never forget. Killing this man did not solve the problems between Amédée and Madeline and the corpse reminds them of that every day. It continues to grow, suffocating and trapping the couple inside their home the longer they fail to face this problem.

Amédée and Madeline are very human. They are three dimensional characters with human emotions and human contradictions. Horror and beauty coexist in the atmosphere of the play. Two seemingly contradictory experiences are a constant presence in their lives.

A Stroll in the Air

A Stroll in the Air, produced in 1963, was theatricalized from a short story. The play itself has a dreamlike quality because it was inspired by a reoccurring dream Ionesco had about flying. It is the fourth and final play in “The Bérenger Cycle,” and it is observed that this Bérenger is closest to Ionesco himself in his views and values (Hayman 116).

This Bérenger constantly expresses his fear of dying, “...I suppose we could put up with anything providing we were immortal. I am paralyzed by the knowledge that I’m going to die...I want to be cured of death” (Ionesco 23). His fear of death keeps him from living, like many of Ionesco’s characters in the plays I chose for my performance. To Bérenger, death is a disease without a cure from which all humans suffer.

The theme of death is made even clearer when a visitor from the Anti-world - the world after death - appears to the characters. Ronald Hayman views the Anti-world as a manifestation of the human need for something greater than this life:

This is the kind of assumption which is recurrent in Ionesco’s thinking: that the desire to believe in something implies its existence in reality. The psychological need for religion

means that God probably exists; since none of us want to die we must have been *intended* to be immortal (119).

As humans, we fear death and meaninglessness, but Absurdist values hold that life is absurd; there is no meaning to what happens to humans and there are no deeper connections to a great, master plan. We search for meaning in our lives and create the idea of an all-powerful being that has a plan for us after we die, and we make this belief our reality in order to cope with the haunting fear of death.

The theme of instincts and idea of naturalness is also present in this play, when the characters discuss flying. They argue about the naturalness of the act of flying, if humans were *meant* to fly, but remain on the ground because they forget how to be free. One of the characters, John Bull, mentions that humans should rise above their instincts, arguing that our instincts are what tie us to the animals, and we should continue advancing in technology and all the things that separate humans from animals. Bérenger argues that we rise above our instincts when we fly (Ionesco 76-78). The act of flying and rising above the limitations of our humanness is desired, but ultimately impossible.

Staging this play can be a challenge because it was originally theatricalized from a short story, where the fantastic elements of flying and ghosts appearing, are more easily portrayed. In the stage directions when one of the characters from the Anti-world appears, Ionesco discusses that fear and humor can coexist; laughter does not weaken the effect of this terrifying figure: “he is terrifying, of course, but that need not prevent the audience from laughing. They can laugh and be frightened at the same time” (Ionesco 97). The comic and terror duality is characteristic of Ionesco’s plays and the plays in the Theatre of the Absurd. The reactions of laughter and fear

may seem to be opposites, but the Theatre of the Absurd works to allow each of them to coexist without weakening the effect of the other.

While the metaphorical movement in *Exit the King* is spherical, *A Stroll in the Air* “shifts from horizontal to dominant vertical scenic images with an overpowering sense of enclosure” (Toner 187). The world of *A Stroll in the Air* is dreamlike and abstract, in the sense that it is the world of the afterlife, where souls wander aimlessly.

The Killer

The Killer is the first play in what is known as “The Bérenger Cycle,” featuring Bérenger, an average man, with a normal human need for a moral code, logic and reason, and a thirst to understand. *The Killer* was first performed in 1959, eleven years after Ionesco wrote his first play. The play is in three acts, first performed at the Théâtre Récamier in Paris.

The play opens with Bérenger and an Architect exploring a utopian city. Ionesco connects the image of this “radiant city” to a moment when he was a teenager and he was walking in a provincial town and suddenly felt unafraid of death. He explained to Claude Bonnefoy that he felt that everything was clearer, brighter, and more pleasant, and he felt true, fearless, joy (Bonnefoy 32).

Ronald Hayman observes that this utopian city is a reference to Ville Radieuse, an unrealized plan for social reform in 1924 by French-Swiss architect, Le Corbusier, proposing a utopian city based on the idea of uniting man with a well-ordered environment (“Ville Radieuse”). Bérenger’s excitement at the beauty of the city is cut short, however, when the Architect reveals to him that there is a Killer in town, drowning people in an ornamental pool after offering to show them a “picture of the colonel,” but Bérenger is safe as long as he stays

with the Architect because the Killer doesn't attack civil servants. The radiant city is described in the stage directions as cold and gray, which is reflected in the flowers that like the cold, suggesting that in reality, this ideal city is anything but radiant, because it is haunted by death. This dreamlike atmosphere sets the scene for a terrible, nightmarish confusion later in the play (Hayman 92).

Bérenger meets Dany, with whom he instantly falls in love. Dany quits her job in the civil service, despite warnings from the Architect, and she is later murdered by the city's killer. Distraught by the loss of the woman he loves, Bérenger leaves the radiant city and enlists the help of his friend, Édouard to catch the Killer and bring him to justice in the second act.

The third act opens with Mother Peep and her flock of geese campaigning in front of a large crowd. Bérenger and Édouard, while on their way to find the Killer, are distracted by having to search for Édouard's briefcase. Mother Peep, a Drunk Man, an Old Man, Policemen, and Soldiers all get involved with the briefcase chaos, until slowly, one by one they all disappear, leaving Bérenger alone onstage, finally facing the Killer, similar to the end of *Exit the King* where Bérenger is left alone onstage to face his death.

Bérenger then has a long speech to the Killer (intermittently interjected by chuckles coming from the unseen Killer) where he threatens him, tries to understand him, and finally gives up, when the Killer's lack of response breaks him down. He ends the confrontation by questioning the worth of human existence, and, weak with despair, he succumbs to the Killer's advance. The final monologue reveals a lot about Bérenger's character. Bérenger, as described as the "everyman," strives to know and understand everything, which is why he confronts the Killer instead of taking him straight to the police or killing him himself. Throughout the play, he

repeats “morally speaking,” suggestive of a moral code for which Bérenger is searching, and he is so frustrated because cannot find it in the Killer.

The third act highlights Ionesco’s theme of coming to terms with one’s own mortality and facing death as a part of being human. As Édouard mutters in act three, “[w]e are all going to die. That’s the only alienation that counts” (Ionesco 83). According to Ionesco, the last scene of the Killer is a short act in itself, and is supposed to be unbearable in order to bring about the “breaking down of Bérenger” (Esslin 121). It reveals the relentlessness and inevitability of death, as Bérenger fights against it. This becomes clear earlier in the play when Bérenger is stunned to realize that everyone knows the ruse the Killer uses and that he kills people in broad daylight and no one can stop him. The Killer represents death, or the inevitability of death, and no matter what we do, we can’t avoid it. “Death is the photograph of the colonel, which exercises such a fatal fascination on the Killer’s victims. No argument of morality or expediency can prevail against the half-witted, idiotic futility of the human condition” (Esslin 122).

At the end, Bérenger realizes that the Killer killed without reason and therefore can’t be stopped; death was inevitable (Hayman 100). Bérenger is relatable to the audience because together they discover the chaos that occurs in this radiant city. Bérenger is the clown character who sees reality anew, which causes the audience to question the strange reality that they have accepted as normal. The ultimate demise of Bérenger leaves the audience with an uneasy feeling at the end of the play. This final moment is so important to me that I included it as the final moment in my thesis performance. Though the play ends on an ominous note, it speaks to an essential theme of human existence: death is not happy or pretty but it is inevitable, and it is final. Bérenger represents hope in the face of death, but hope is irrelevant to Ionesco (Purdy 423).

The horror of these murders is occurring in this radiant city, making it anything but radiant. Toner describes the utopian city in terms of what it represents and what that portends for the characters within it: “[l]ogically it is the ideal city. But logic is not life in Ionesco’s dramatic world. Because it models an abstraction, like the ideal group gathering to hear the ideal speech, we cannot see it directly, being told about it by Bérenger, who intrudes by chance into this ideal region” (178). Perhaps Ionesco is reminding us that darkness exists behind even the most euphoric of times; that nothing can be perfect, no matter how hard we strive to make it so (Esslin 122). As humans we strive for perfection, but it simply cannot be achieved. There is always darkness and imperfection; like us, the world is full of contradictions.

The tension between the utopian city and the home of Bérenger creates a sense of uneasiness in Act II with the sudden shift from the chaos of the radiant city to the isolation of Bérenger’s home just outside of the city. Bérenger’s apartment is cut off from this world while existing within it (or just outside this city); voices around the apartment are heard, but no one is seen. These noises seem to “engulf” the apartment, further isolating Bérenger from the outside world - a world of “emotional chaos...that does not function logically” (179). Toner also observes that, rather than being a source of strength, the power of Bérenger’s apartment is contaminated because of the constant intrusions (Toner 178-179).

The performative elements of *The Killer* include instances of physical comedy, lazzi, offstage voices, and puppets. The first half of the third act of *The Killer* provides many opportunities for physical comedy and lazzi with the mixing up of the briefcases. These scenes provide comic relief from the feeling of hopelessness underlying the events of the play. They also serve to demonstrate the ridiculousness of the political figures, like the nightmarish Police Officers and Mother Peep and her geese running for government office. The stage directions suggest that

puppets can be used for the Soldiers to lessen the amount of actors needed onstage as well as to portray them as 2-dimensional figures that serve only a satirical purpose.

Chapter 6

Performance Reflection

My research on Ionesco's life and plays was crucial for the performance of my thesis. By understanding the thematic and performative elements of his plays, I approached my role as a director with confidence and an abundance of ideas to create a performance that I believed Ionesco would enjoy. Based on the way I felt after reading all of his plays, I knew I wanted to create an uneasy feeling in the audience at the end of the play by juxtaposing comedic and horrific elements. I knew a challenge would be to honor the text and find the comedy in the seeming heaviness of its subject matter (man discovering his mortality).

I wanted to explore the theme of what it means to be human, and I found the elements of this theme present in many of his plays, but I couldn't find one play that perfectly exemplified what I wanted to explore. So, as I re-read his plays, I began to identify *scenes* that I felt exemplified these themes. As I continued with this, I realized there were so many scenes that fit into this thematic through-line that they created a new narrative all on their own. Once I saw this narrative, I arranged the scenes so that a story would be clear, and I ended up with my own Ionesco play made up of eight of his plays (*Victims of Duty*, *The Lesson*, *Hunger and Thirst*, *Exit the King*, *The Chairs*, *Amédée*, *A Stroll in the Air*, and *The Killer*).

In my performance, there are two parts, separated only by a blackout and 30 seconds of sound effects. The play opens with a recording in the blackout with the voice of Bérenger:

All the plays that have ever been written, from Ancient Greece to the present day, have never really been anything but thrillers. Drama's always been realistic and there's always been a detective about. Every play's an investigation brought to a successful conclusion.

There's a riddle, and it's solved in the final scene. Sometimes earlier. You seek, and then you find. Might as well give the game away at the start (Ionesco 119).

A square of light appears on the upstage right wall, and the shadow of the Man murdering his pupil is projected on the wall. After he realizes what he's done, he calls his wife and she calmly forms a plan about how to dispose of the body and the "thirty-nine others" he's killed. Part one jumps through time in this couple's life, spending moments with their baby boy, the Man's exploration of his fear of death, and the Woman, his wife, helping him overcome his fear of death with the assistance of a voodoo doll. Part one ends with the Man and Woman, now extremely elderly, telling their now-grown son to spread the message of their lives on the world and they proceed to commit double suicide and jump out their windows into the ocean.

The second part begins in a blackout with sounds of outside noises, growing louder until they suddenly cut off with the image of the Man and Woman's son, Bérenger, complaining about a feat of strength he has to perform. He is urged on by his wife, Madeline, who reveals that Bérenger must move the body of a woman he presumably killed out of the apartment. It appears that Bérenger and Madeline are living in the same apartment where Bérenger's parents lived. It becomes clear that Bérenger's father's presence is still alive in the apartment, and Bérenger is suffering in the wake of his father's sins, refusing to take responsibility for his life. Suddenly the ghost of his father appears (after Madeline finds the voodoo doll in a box of stuffed animals she finds in a different room), and after explaining to Madeline from where this ghost might have come, Bérenger finally confronts his father with the misery he's suffered and questions he struggled with his whole life. The performance ends with the monologue from *The Killer*, ending with Bérenger submitting to the idea that maybe there is no point to life.

The process of creating this performance helped me discover new depths in Ionesco's plays and give life to my ideas about his themes. Again, his words and themes inspired me as an artist, and I felt the freedom to make my own decisions within my particular directing style.

As a director, I find value in having a specific reason for each movement and action, even if that reason is not clear to the audience. I decided to explore natural, authentic movements which would occur in any human interaction and exaggerate them beyond what would be considered a normal gesture.

For example, after reading "Scenic Metaphors: A Study of Ionesco's Geometrical Vision of Human Relationships in the Bérenger Plays" by Robert Tener, I was inspired by the geometrical relationships of the characters. The article explored how the movements of the characters in *Exit the King* can be circular and curved, while the characters from *A Stroll in The Air* have linear movements (straight lines and diagonals). As an exploration of each individual character's inner geometry, I asked the actors to explore the internal geometry of their characters and bring it into their movement. Because the character of the Woman was very decisive and dominant, she moved in decisive, straight lines. On the contrary, the Man was indecisive and timid so he moved in curves and circles, wanting to commit to movements like her decisive lines, but not confident enough to do so.

Because the actors in my thesis (Chanel, Travis, Connor, and Maggie) were fellow students, and this whole process was about exploration, I really wanted them to have a voice in the process. I encouraged them to offer their ideas about their characters' relationships and desires. They each brought their own experiences and life to their characters, and my goal was to foster an atmosphere of open and safe exploration. I found that my actors responded well to this approach, and felt comfortable asking me questions and offering their own ideas in the process.

I began with a single chair onstage, to provide architecture to which the actors could respond. This chair ended up being the central set piece in the performance, residing mostly in the center of the stage, and occasionally being moved down and upstage center. The only other set pieces (besides an unimposing coat rack in the upstage right corner) were two parallel windows (out of which the old couple jumped), facing the outside walls of the theatre, so that the sides of the windows faced the audience. Like the chair, they stayed a part of the set the entire performance. I wanted the set to be uncluttered to focus attention on the movement of the actors. The windows were symmetrically placed on either side of the stage, the same distance away from the chair (which was center) at all times. This set contributed to the evocation of my vision of clear, geometrical relationships in the performance.

The performance began to take on a shape of its own, and we were able to find the comedy that came out of the joyful nature of our rehearsals. It was really important to me to make sure there were instances of lazzi in this play because I noticed them in many of the plays that I chose for my performance (*The Killer* and *Exit the King*). When the Man and Woman reach their final stage in life, I wanted them to become caricatures of old people, in line with this grotesque exaggeration of characters found in many Ionesco plays. The actors played with acting like stereotypical old people, and, as an exercise, I asked them to improvise the scene with each other, to discover the relationship between this couple and get the feeling in their bodies of what it feels like to be old. Out of this improvisation came a lazzo where the Man fell down and the Woman had to find a way to pick him up. We rehearsed this lazzo that they had discovered in their improvisation in line with the clowning “rule of three.” The “rule of three” is the idea that repeating an action three times escalates the comedy of the action to a climax at the third repetition. If it is repeated an extra time, the action loses its humor (Raymond). In my lazzo, the

old Woman fails two times and succeeds the third time to pick up the old man, trying a different tactic each time to pick him up. The more they played with this lazzo - as a break in their set of memorized lines to explore this physical moment - they found new interactions between their characters; this lazzo became one of the funniest moments of the performance.

Ionesco's observation in Notes & Counter Notes about how the physical presence of actors onstage destroyed his imaginative illusion in theatre really interested me when I began to approach staging his plays. He used puppets, dummies, offstage voices, shadows, and other methods to keep from having actors on the stage the whole time and as a way to represent minor, two-dimensional characters that only served as a satirical representation of certain social and political figures or ideas. Like Ionesco, I used puppets, shadows, and offstage voices to create this imaginative illusion.

I added a voodoo doll to represent the Man, used in the opening of the play to immediately disarm the audience and immerse them into the world of the play. The Woman onstage tying the red strings to the doll suggested that she was beginning to create the world of the play and this action connected the characters from the beginning. It was then used intermittently throughout the play; a constant reminder of the lingering, dangerous presence of the man, infecting the lives of the living, even after death, like the growing body in *Amédée*. The use of the doll established its connection with the Man in the first part and, in the second part, it exemplified the idea that the dead (especially those who carry with their spirits a demonic aura) stay with those they've affected no matter how hard they try to hide from the past.

I used shadows in the beginning of the play where the man kills his pupil. I decided that the actual murder was not important, but rather the chain of events that it set in motion, so I wanted to preserve the imaginative illusion of the murder and force the audience to imagine what

was happening backstage, only slightly aided by the man's shadow on the wall, shuffling through the light as he looked at what he'd done.

Along with the shadows, I staged scenes with one character offstage to suggest that there is more to the setting than just the space that the audience can see. Many times the actors would exit (to, presumably, another part of the house) but continue their lines, forcing the audience to imagine what that other character was doing offstage. In the final scene when Bérenger faces the ghost of his father, the laughter came from the man backstage with a microphone, the voice resonating around the theatre, without a body of origin, disorienting the audience because they could not see the source of the voice.

The idea of the outside world closing in on the characters in their home onstage, isolated from, while simultaneously being suffocated by, the outside world in plays like *Amédée*, inspired my use of sound effects in the beginning of the second part of my thesis performance. I decided to combine street sounds like sounds of traffic, car horns, people talking, dogs barking, and sirens in a blackout that would slowly accumulate and rise in volume until it became uncomfortable to listen to it. Suddenly, the noises ceased and the image of Bérenger in a spotlight with his head in his hands appeared onstage. The other sound effect I used was a cartoon sound of falling and a splash into the water to serve two purposes: the first was to clarify the event of the old couple just having jumped into the sea, and the second was to create a sense of uneasiness for the audience to experience during the following blackout. By applying the juxtaposition of contradictory emotions (this funny cartoon sound paired with the horror of watching an old couple commit a double suicide) my goal was to create a feeling of discomfort as the audience wondered what to feel about that moment.

Because of time restrictions in the black box in which I was working, I was given a proscenium setup for my performance, with all chairs in the front of the stage, forcing me to reconsider my original ideas about the seating arrangement. Working within these restrictions, I had to adjust my idea so that the effect I wanted to achieve could still make sense with this arrangement. I decided that this traditional theatre setup would be beneficial to me because it gives the audience entering a certain comfort in a familiar space upon their arrival, only for that comfortable feeling to disappear in the course of the performance. Sometimes in a traditional proscenium setup, the audience has a sense of solidarity with each other where they can sit back from the show and judge it, and not necessarily get involved. I took this as a challenge to be able to include my audience in a way they weren't originally expecting, and still create a feeling of discomfort, separating them from each other mentally, without physically changing their position in the space to automatically achieve a disorienting effect.

Because I used parts of eight previously written plays and combined them into my own narrative, I expected that the plot would not be completely clear to everybody. However, I was not concerned because the performance was short enough that they would not stop trying to understand. As long as they didn't completely understand the plot, they were a bit off balance, and did not gain that certain ownership of the play that comes with understanding it fully. The thirty-five minute performance was short enough to keep the audience engaged and involved but long enough to produce a significant effect.

In the end, I think I achieved my desired effect on the audience. Some comments I received from them were that it was "creepy" and "crazy" but they also said they left the theatre not exactly sure what to feel. It was important to me that they didn't have an opinion right away, but it would be significant enough to sit in their mind and slightly nag at them for reasons they

wouldn't be able to identify. The contradictions of funny moments and depressing or horrific moments created a sense of uneasiness in my audience and I was happy that I was able to keep them engaged even with these disorienting contradictions. In the spirit of Ionesco, the fact that the audience didn't know what to feel fell in line with the lack of a moral in the performance.

Reflecting on my performance experience, I greatly enjoyed working with the actors I chose. I appreciated the different dynamic between the two couples and the differing atmospheres of their respective rehearsals. Chanel and Travis offered me enthusiastic support and rehearsals were energetic and joyful. Though Chanel at times could be dominating, I appreciated the challenge to assert myself as a director and have confidence in my decisions. Maggie and Connor had a quieter demeanor; their rehearsals were quite focused and they grew a lot as actors. They were concentrated on furthering their abilities as actors and I appreciated the opportunity to help them grow. Though I sometimes felt blocked from ideas when directing them, I learned to be patient and trust that the decisions I made would be best for the show and there was no "right" decision - I could not fail, nor should I focus on trying to force something to be "different" or "exciting."

If I were to do the whole process over again, there would not be much I would change. I would have finished my script earlier so I could have casted the play earlier and I wouldn't have felt so desperate at the beginning of the semester to find someone - anyone - to act in my thesis. In the end, I was incredibly proud of the performance and proud to display it as my senior thesis performance. I was pleased to see my actors excited about their roles and as eager as I was to share the performance; I was glad I could help them grow in their own acting abilities.

I felt a sense of satisfaction and pride while watching the final performance of my thesis. It was an accumulation of my research, writing, and the ideas I developed about what was

essential in the plays of Ionesco. I believe I achieved my goal in the performance: to explore Ionesco's ideas of what it means to be human in a way that Ionesco would have appreciated.

I never would have imagined, when I had my first glimpse into the world of Ionesco at age fifteen, that I would use everything I studied from then until now in this exploration. Throughout this process, I have gained a respect and appreciation for the ideas of Ionesco and the values of the Theatre of the Absurd, and I connect to them deeply. I, too, am drawn to theatre because it explores humans as they are, with all their flaws, living their lives. Through the self-doubt, pain, death, and absurdity in our existence, we still hope. After all, this is our time.

“Life is very simple, really. Go on and kiss each other.”
- Eugène Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*

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An Odd Collection

Based on the plays by Eugène Ionesco
Conceived and directed by Carolyn Toner

Characters

MAN, a professor
WOMAN, his wife
BERENGER, their son
MADELINE, his wife

Part I: Man and Woman

VOICE OF BERENGER

All the plays that have ever been written, from Ancient Greece to the present day, have never really been anything but thrillers. Drama's always been realistic and there's always been a detective about. Every play's an investigation brought to a successful conclusion. There's a riddle, and it's solved in the final scene. Sometimes earlier. You seek, and then you find. Might as well give the game away at the start.

MAN

Bitch...Oh, that's good, that does me good...Ah! Ah! I'm exhausted...I can scarcely breathe...Aah! What have I done! What's going to happen to me now! What's going to happen! Oh! dear! Oh dear, I'm in trouble! Young lady, young lady, get up! Come now, young lady, the lesson is over...you may go...you can pay another time...Oh! She is dead...dea-ead...And by my knife...She is dea-ead...It's terrible. Marie! Marie! My good Marie, come here! Ah! Ah! No...don't come in...I made a mistake...I don't need you, Marie...I don't need you anymore...do you understand?

MAN

[Enters, followed by WOMAN] I don't need you, Marie...

WOMAN

Then you're satisfied with your pupil, she's profited by your lesson?

MAN

Yes, the lesson is finished...but...she...she's still there...she doesn't want to leave...

WOMAN

Is that a fact?

MAN

It wasn't I...it wasn't I...Marie...No...I assure you...it wasn't I, my little Marie...

WOMAN

And who was it? Who was it then? Me?

MAN

I don't know...maybe...

WOMAN

Or the cat?

MAN

That's possible...I don't know...

WOMAN

And today makes it the fortieth time!...And every day it's the same thing! Every day! You should be ashamed, at your age...and you're going to make yourself sick! You won't have any pupils left. That will serve you right.

MAN

It wasn't my fault! She didn't want to learn! She was disobedient! She was a bad pupil! She didn't want to learn!

WOMAN

Liar!...Now didn't I warn you, just a little while ago: arithmetic leads to philology, and philology leads to crime...

MAN

You said "to calamity"!

WOMAN

It's the same thing.

MAN

I didn't understand you. I thought that "calamity" was a city and that you meant that philology leads to the city of Calamity...

WOMAN

Liar! Old fox! An intellectual like you is not going to make a mistake in the meanings of words. Don't try to pull the wool over my eyes.

MAN

I didn't kill her on purpose!

WOMAN

Are you sorry at least?

MAN

Oh, yes, Marie, I swear it to you!

WOMAN

I can't help feeling sorry for you! Ah! you're a good boy in spite of everything! I'll try to fix this. But don't start it again...It could give you a heart attack...

MAN

Yes, Marie! What are we going to do, now?

WOMAN

We're going to bury her...along with the thirty-nine others...that will make forty coffins...I'll call the undertakers and Father Auguste...I'll order the wreaths...

MAN

Yes, Marie, thank you very much.

WOMAN

Well, that's that. And perhaps it won't be necessary to call Auguste, since you yourself are something of a priest at times, if one can believe the gossip.

MAN

In any case, don't spend too much on the wreaths. She didn't pay for her lesson.

WOMAN

Don't worry...The least you can do is cover her up with her smock, she's not decent that way. And then we'll carry her out...

MAN

Yes, Marie, yes. There's a chance that we'll get pinched...with forty coffins...Don't you think...people will be surprised...Suppose they ask us what's inside them?

WOMAN

Don't worry so much. We'll say that they're empty. And besides, people won't ask questions, they're used to it. Outside this house, outside us two, outside us three, anywhere else is nowhere.
[WOMAN exits]

MAN

[During time lapse] I'm so tired...fatigue holds me back, my legs are like jelly, my head's like lead. I'm frightened to death again.

WOMAN

[Entering with a baby in her arms] I've hung the baby's nappies up to dry. Isn't it sweet? It's your birthday today. Every day's a birthday. The anniversary of something. I've brought you some pretty pictures, chocolate and cigarettes. Every day I bring you a heart new-born.

MAN

Every day's a birthday. Every day reminds me of old age, every morning fills me with despair. Soon I shall disintegrate. Lassitude can kill and so can fear.

WOMAN

You're sick with fear, you're scared wherever you are. When he's far away and all alone, he'll be more frightened than ever. And he wants to go roaming around like a mad thing! He's got all he needs, he's got everything here, but he wants to go roaming about!

MAN

Is it too late? I'll conquer my fears. Is this the last chance, is there still time? Everyone knows my address. If I stay, they'll surround the house and mount guard: at any moment they'll be here to stop me going. I don't want to be like them, I won't get stuck in a rut or just drift along like the rest. Their destiny's not mine, my life is somewhere else.

WOMAN

Yes, darling! Yes, my little pink baby! He loves you. He loves us both, more than words can tell.

MAN

Fatigue wonders what's the point of going. Old age suggests I stay where I'm well off. Caution warns I'll do myself no good, an goodness says I'll do harm to others. And duties? Obligations? Deep-rooted affections? And reason? They won't catch me with their arguments. They bore me stiff with their "Experience". Because *they* never dared. They want *me* to stick in the mud. I'm meant for something better.

WOMAN

I love you, you love me, you love him. We love one another so much. You'll always be here, always always be. Even if you go to the ends of the world, even if you *think* you're alone, I am and shall be with you. But will you be able to go? Will he be able to go? He's not used to walking. He overestimates his strength, he doesn't know how tired he'll feel. He can't last out two hundred yards on foot. He's out of training. Not to speak of the hardships and the dangers. [*She exits*].

MAN

[*During the time lapse*] I'll take my boots, my stick, and my hat. I need healthy surroundings. The clean air will wake me up, give me back my strength. I must have mountain air, somewhere like Switzerland, a hygienic country where nobody dies. A land where the law forbids you to die. When you enter that land, you must make a declaration. A promise not to die. You have to sign it. Death is not allowed. Attempt it, you get a fine and a prison sentence. That way you're forced to exist.

MAN

[*WOMAN enters*] I don't like being shut in. Open the doors. [*Exits*]

WOMAN

A little patience. The doors will soon be open wide.

MAN

[*Enters*] The doors...the doors...what doors?

WOMAN

Were there once some doors? Was there once a world, were you ever alive?

MAN

I am.

WOMAN

Keep still. Moving tires you.

MAN

I am...Sounds, echoes, coming from a great distance, fainter and fainter, dying away. I am deaf.

WOMAN

You can still hear *me*, you'll hear me all the better. Sometimes you have a dream. And you get involved, you believe in it, you love it. In the morning, when you open your eyes, the two worlds are still confused. The brilliance of the light blurs the faces of the night. You'd like to remember, you'd like to hold them back. But they slip between your fingers, the brutal reality of day drives them away. What did I dream about, you ask yourself? What was it that happened? Who was I kissing? Who did I love? What was I saying and what was I told? Then you find you're left with a vague regret for all those things that were or seemed to have been. You no longer know what it was that was there all around you. You no longer know.

MAN

I no longer know what was there all around me. I know I was part of a world, and this world was all about me. I know it was me and what else was there. What else?

WOMAN

There are still some cords that bind you which I haven't yet untied. Or which I haven't cut. There are still some hands that cling to you and hold you back.

MAN

Me. Me. Me.

WOMAN

This you is not the real you. It's an odd collection of bits and pieces, horrid things that live on you like parasites. And it's that ball and chain dragging at your feet which make it so difficult to walk. A ton weight, they must weigh at least a ton. That's better! How did you manage to trail them around all your life?

MAN

No.

WOMAN

The dreamer comes out of his dream. There you are!

MAN

Me.

WOMAN

Oh no! He imagines he's *everything*! He thinks *his* existence is *all* existence. Nothing will be forgotten. It's all quite safe in a mind that needs no memories. Ah, that's it! Straighten up! Now you're not round-shouldered, no more pains in your back, no more stiffness! Wasn't it a heavy weight to bear? Now you feel better. You can go forward now, go on! Come along, come along! Still trying to resist! I'll guide you, don't be frightened! You can do it now, can't you? It's easy, isn't it? You'll have your strength back by then. Don't turn your head to see what you'll never see again, think hard, concentrate on your heart, keep right on, you must!

MAN

The Empire...has there ever been another Empire like it? With two suns, two moons and two heavens to light it. And there's another sun rising, and there's another! A third firmament appearing, shooting up and fanning out! As one sun sets, others are rising...dawn and twilight all at once....Beyond the seven hundred and seventy-seven poles.

WOMAN

Go further, further, further. Go on!

MAN

Blue, blue.

WOMAN

He can still distinguish colors. Give up this Empire too! And give your colors up! They're leading you astray, holding you back. You can't linger any longer, you can't stop again, you mustn't! Yes, that's right. Put your best foot forward! Now the other! Now turn and face me!

Look at me! Look right through me! Gaze into my unreflecting mirror and stand up straight!
 There you are, you see!
 [*BERENGER enters*]

MAN

[*Noticing BERENGER*] I was overcome with delirious joy, for you, dear child, existed, you, a flickering star in an ocean of darkness, an island of being surrounded by my lips brushed your eyes: 'Oh God, oh God!' I sighed. I was grateful to God, because if the creation had never been, then *you* would never have been, my son, and all the history of the world really led up to you. I had forgiven the world, for the love of you. Everything was saved, because now nothing could ever wipe out the fact of your birth into the living universe. Even when you are no more, I told myself, nothing can alter the fact that you *have been*. You were here, forever inscribed in the archives of the universe, firmly fixed in the eternal memory of God.

MAN

[*To WOMAN*] I have nothing more to ask of life. My existence can come to an end in this apotheosis...thanks be to heaven who has granted us such long and peaceful years... My mission is accomplished. I will not have lived in vain, since my message will be revealed to the world...If I have been long unrecognized, underestimated by my contemporaries, it is because it had to be...What matters all that now when I am leaving to you, to you, my dear son... make known to the universe my philosophy. Neglect none of the details of my private life, some laughable, some painful or heartwarming, of my tastes, my amusing gluttony...tell everything...

WOMAN

Yes, yes, let's die in full glory...let's die in order to become a legend...At least, they'll name a street after us...

MAN

O my faithful helpmeet!...you who have believed in me, unfailingly, during a whole century, who have never left me, never...

Above all I had hoped
 that together we might lie
 with all our bones together

within the selfsame skin
 within the same sepulchre
 and that the same worms
 might share our old flesh
 that we might rot together...

WOMAN

...Rot together...

MAN

Alas!...alas!...

WOMAN

Alas!...alas!...

MAN

Our corpses will fall far from each other, and we will rot in an aquatic solitude...Don't pity us over much.

WOMAN

What will be, will be!

MAN

We shall not be forgotten. The eternal Emperor will remember us, always.

WOMAN

Always.

MAN

We will leave some traces, for we are people and not cities.

MAN AND WOMAN

We will have a street named after us.

WOMAN

Now you've lost the power of speech, there's no need for your heart to beat, no more need to breath. It was a lot of fuss about nothing, wasn't it? Now you can take your place.

MAN

Let us be united in time and in eternity, even if we are not together in space, as we were in adversity: let us die at the same moment...One last time...I place my trust in you...I count on you. You will tell all...bequeath my message...Farewell to all. Farewell, Marie.

WOMAN

Farewell to all!...Farewell, my darling!

[The WOMAN and MAN at the same moment throw themselves out the windows. Blackout, we hear the noises of bodies falling into water.]

Part II: Berenger and Madeline

BERENGER

Forget...when that's all we're waiting for, just waiting for time to pass...I've got palpitations already...

MADELINE

It'll be a nasty moment...but I'll be there, I'll help you.

BERENGER

The worst part, the worst part of all, I'll have to do myself..

MADELINE

Well, it's your turn now.

BERENGER

...and the most dangerous part...

MADELINE

It's just as dangerous for both of us...

BERENGER

...And the physical effort...

MADELINE

You're a man.

BERENGER

I never went in for sport. I never did any manual labor. I'm no good, even at odd jobs. I've a sedentary occupation, I'm an intellectual...

MADELINE

You never had a proper education or you'd have kept fit...

BERENGER

I realize that now...too late, too late...But whoever would have dreamt...that I should have to...

MADELINE

You have to be ready for everything in life, for any eventuality...

BERENGER

That's true. My parents didn't look ahead...No use blaming them now...

MADLINE

And yet at times, usually the wrong times, you do have bursts of energy...You managed to kill her all right...pity your strength didn't fail you then, you might have had a bit more today!

BERENGER

Listen, there's no real proof that I did kill her. I'm not at all sure I did.

MADLINE

Off you go again!

BERENGER

But I told you before!

MADLINE

Are you crazy or just being awkward?

BERENGER

I'm willing to admit it, as I can't see any other reasonable explanation...I admit it *looks* as if I was the one who killed her...

MADLINE

Well, that's something...

BERENGER

But it's so easy to find the energy, the sudden strength you need, to kill someone in a fit of spite or anger...It just *happens*...Anybody could do it...It's the prolonged physical effort that frightens me...Will it be too much for me?...The physical effort, the mere thought of it, the premeditated effort, the waiting, that's what's killing me. I will do it, because I must...because I must...

MADLINE

It's all quite simple, then. Try and stop worrying, That'll help. Pretend nothing's the matter. This is a day like any other...just as dreary but no drearier...Write your play. That'll put the neighbors off the scent as well. We mustn't give them the slightest suspicion...

BERENGER

No need to worry about the neighbors. They're not thinking about us. Listen....not a sound...

MADELINE

They're there all right. No fear of that. In their flats, with their ears glued to the walls or the floorboards, or at their windows, peering out, perhaps, behind the curtains...or downstairs, in silent groups, standing round the concierge...

BERENGER

You're exaggerating...

VOICE

There's something very peculiar going on in this house...

VOICE 2

Yes, they're a rum lot!

MADELINE

Did you hear? And it's not the first time I've heard remarks like that...

BERENGER

Oh, people say anything. Just gossip, it doesn't lead to anything...

MADELINE

Until they find out and the trouble starts...We'll be the talk of the neighborhood. And it won't stop at that!

BERENGER

All right. I told you I'd get rid of her and I will. I promise.

MADELINE

When? When? When?

BERENGER

Tomorrow...Let me have a little rest first.

MADELINE

Tomorrow, tomorrow...I know your promises, your 'tomorrow'...A whole lifetime has slipped away between your tomorrows...It's no tomorrow, it's this very day that you've got to make up your mind. Understand?

BERENGER

Very well. If you'd rather, I'll get rid of her for you today.

MADELINE

If only you meant it! You do intend to get rid of her for *both* of us, I suppose, and not just for me? You'll do it a little for your own peace of mind, too?

BERENGER

Oh, if I was alone, you know, I'd get used to it somehow. I suppose we could put up with anything providing we were immortal. I am paralyzed by the knowledge that I'm going to die. There's nothing new about that truth. But it's a truth we forget...so that we can *do* something. I don't want to *do* anything anymore, I want to be cured of death. [*MADELINE exits*]

MADELINE

And it seems you never *feel* any older. You have to rely on other people *telling* you. You're always just there, at the center of things, you look all around you but you don't know. And when it happens, someone else has to tell you. I want to *know*.

BERENGER

You have to get used to dying. It's more decent that way. You must be polite when you go. You must have time to say your good-bys. Without too many tears.

MADELINE

My dear, it seems it's terribly easy. You get used to it so quickly. It's really quite amazing. You can give up everything straightaway, all at once, just like that.

BERENGER

It's incredible. Do you think it's true?

MADELINE

[*Madeline enters, with a bin full of toys, rifling through them*]

I'm sure it is; it's very easy. You only have to close your eyes. And everything slips gently away.

BERENGER

No, *I* can't get used to it. Perhaps you're right, perhaps...But I can't get used to it. I supposed the time hasn't come for me yet, I'll get used to it later on. When I'm old.

[*Madeline pulls out doll, BERENGER sees The Killer in the distance*]

BERENGER

Father? Show yourself, Father, show yourself.

MADELINE

Who is this gentleman you're talking about? You must be seeing things.

BERENGER

No I'm not. Didn't you see him with his pipe upside down? And the smoke going down instead of up?

MADELINE

You really are seeing things.

BERENGER

Now be careful, we can't possibly know what he's really like. Even if he's from the Anti-World the nearest to our own, he still can't have white hair, it must be black. The only picture we can see is like a negative. If he seems old to us, perhaps it's because he's really young, and then what do "actually" and "Really" really mean? Let's stick to our own world.

MADELINE

What is the Anti-World?

BERENGER

The Anti-World, the Anti-World, how can I explain it? There's no proof that it exists, but when you think about it, you can find it in your own thoughts. The evidence is in your mind. There's not just one Anti-World. There are several universes, and they're all interlocking.

MADELINE

How many are there?

BERENGER

There are numbers and numbers of them. An unknown quantity of numbers. These worlds interlink and interlock, without touching one another, for they can all coexist in the same space. I know it's difficult to imagine. But that's how it is.

MADELINE

Is this gentleman what people call a ghost?

BERENGER

It's a popular belief that when people die they go to the Anti-World. There are a few little facts that seem to confirm this belief. As soon as someone passes on and is put into a coffin, the dead body disappears.

MADELINE

That explains why coffins weigh so little. What happens to the bodies?

BERENGER

Those who leave us settle down, so to speak, for good in the Anti-World, and they have anti-heads, anti-limbs, anti-clothes, anti-feelings and anti-hearts.

MADLINE

So if there's no such thing as ghosts, we can still have visitors?

BERENGER

Or re-visitors. Why has he come?

MADLINE

Perhaps he has to tell you something.

BERENGER

My father's dead, my mother's dead, all my family are dead. The neighbors who used to know us have left the town where I was born and scattered all over the world. I've never heard from them since. There's no one left, not a soul in the world. I'm so tiny in this gigantic world of ours. I'm like a frightened little ant that's lost his way, looking for his companions.

MADLINE

There's all the rest, all the other people. There are lots of people.

BERENGER

I don't know them and they don't know me. They're strangers...Once I had my parents who were big and strong. And they took me by the hand to guide me through life. Nothing frightened *them*. They just marched straight on. With them I had nothing to fear...In those days I had nothing to fear, nothing to fear...Except the fear of losing them. All the time I used to think that I would have to lose them. That was inevitable. I knew it, I knew it. And then very quickly that day came, too quickly I'm afraid! It's such a long time, such a long time now since I've been all alone, such a long time since they left me by myself. ..And I've never got used to them not being here. And I never shall. Never, never...I've been left all alone and I'm frightened, I'm so frightened. I'm lost and I just wander about...No one knows me and no one loves me, I mean nothing to other people. For them I don't count. For them I just don't count.

MADLINE

I'll soon be as strong as your mother was. I'll protect you.

BERENGER

I fight to protect myself, in my despair, as best as I can. Fear has taught me how. The clawing fingers of fear have driven me on. And I fight tooth and nail.

MADELINE

You must love people. If you love them, they won't be strangers to you anymore. If you stop being afraid of them, they won't be monsters any more. Deep down in their shells, they're frightened too. Let them. Then hell will exist no more. [*During this line, MADELINE walks behind the chair CSC, and when the line is done she steps back away from the chair*]

BERENGER

There he is again! Look! Did you see him this time?

[*Looks around, doesn't see MADELINE*]

So it's you then! Nothing but the dark plain all around... You needn't tell me, I can see that as well as you. I'm not afraid of you! I want to understand. You're going to answer my questions. After all, you were a human being. You had reasons perhaps. You must explain, or else I don't know what... You're going to tell me why... Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Anyone who does what you do does it perhaps because... Listen... you've stopped me from being happy, and stopped a great many more. You would have been happy, happiness would have come even to you, and it would have spread, perhaps you didn't know, perhaps you didn't believe it... You were wrong... Well, it's your own happiness you've destroyed as well as mine and that of all the others.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

I suppose you don't believe in happiness. You think happiness is impossible in this world? You want to destroy the world because you think it's doomed. Don't you? That's it, isn't it? Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

I suppose you never thought for a single moment that you'd got it wrong. You were sure you were right. It's just your stupid pride.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

You're a pessimist?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

You're a nihilist?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

An anarchist?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Perhaps you don't like happiness? Perhaps happiness is different for you? Tell me your ideas about life. What's your philosophy? Your motives? Your aims? Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Listen to me: you've hurt me personally in the worst possible way, destroying everything...

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

One of those women, you know the one I mean, that young redhead, what had *she* done to you? What had you got against *her*? Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

We'll suppose you hate women, then: perhaps they betrayed you, didn't love you.

Perhaps you think the human race is rotten in itself. Answer me!! You want to punish the human race.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Perhaps you killed all those people out of kindness! To save them from suffering! For you, life is just suffering! Perhaps you want to cure people of the haunting fear of death? I suppose you want to carry out a sort of universal mercy-killing? Well you're mistaken, you're wrong. Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Anyway, if life's of little value, if it's too short, the suffering of mankind will be short too: Let people suffer if that's what they want. Let them die in their own time and it will all be over quite soon. Everything will flicker out and finish on its own. Don't hurry things up, there's no point.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Tell me: do you hate mankind? Do you hate mankind?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

But why? Answer me!

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Do you believe the existence of the universe is a mistake?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Why can't you answer me, answer me! Oh! Argument's impossible with you. Listen, you'll make me angry, I warn you! No...no...I mustn't lose my self-control. I *must* understand you. Don't look at me like that with your glittering eye. I'm going to talk frankly. I was furious with you. You are my father, a human being, we're the same species, we've got to understand each other, it's our duty. I love you, because you are my father, and if I hate *you*, I can't help hating *myself*...

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

You've always loathed sloppy sentimentality. Yes, I can see it's no good trying to touch your feelings. All men are brothers, of course, they're like each other, but they're not always alike. And they've one thing in common. There must be one thing in common, a common language...What is it? What is it?

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

I'm not blaming you, I don't despise you.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

Listen I'm going to make you a painful confession. Often, I have my doubts about everything too. I doubt the point of living, the meaning of life, doubt my own value and every kind of rational argument. I no longer know what to hang on to, perhaps there's no more truth or charity.

[*The Killer chuckles softly.*]

I don't know. It may be my fault, it may be yours. It may not be yours or mine. It may not be anyone's fault. What you did may be wrong or it may be right, or it may be neither right no wrong. I don't know how to tell. It's possible that the survival of the human species is of no

importance, so what does it matter if it disappears....perhaps the whole universe is no good and you're right to want to blast it all...or perhaps that's wrong. I don't know any more, I just don't know. You may be mistaken, perhaps mistakes don't really exist, perhaps it's we who are mistaken to want to exist...say what you believe, can't you! *I can't, I can't.*

[The Killer chuckles softly.]

Some think just *being* is a mistake, an aberration.

[The Killer chuckles softly.]

You killed without reason in that case.

[The Killer chuckles softly.]

Oh God! There's nothing we can do. What can we do...What can we do...

[The Killer still chuckling, but very softly. Blackout.]