

BACKSTAGE

Eugene Ionesco sits in the living room of his friend's apartment. He seems at home here, surrounded by the tasteful furnishings placed around the room with obvious care. The apartment is situated in one of Hollywood's seedier areas, so its warmth and old world charm are both unexpected and pleasant.

Just down the street his *Ionesco Tales* plays on weekends at the Stages theatre. He is in town, in the spring of 1983, to see a presentation of a fifth tale and to participate in a festival held in his honor.

There will be many functions to attend and countless people to greet, but the seventy-one-year-old playwright remains undaunted. The activities and social functions agree with him. He says he enjoys the United States and is delighted to have the opportunity to share his work with American audiences.

Born in Rumania, Ionesco left his homeland permanently in 1938 and became a French citizen. He wrote his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, at age thirty-eight. Since then he has been considered one of the most prolific and controversial of contemporary playwrights.

Along with Samuel Beckett and other playwrights of the Paris avant-garde, his impact on dramatic form has been great. He delights in mystifying his audiences and uses elements of humor, pathos, farce, and absurdity to create plays that never submit to ready-made explanations.

Other works include *Rhinoceros*, *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, *Jack or the Submission*, *Exit the King*, *Victims of Duty*, *Amedee* or *How to Get Rid of It*, *The New Tenant*, and *The Killer*.

His latest play, *Return of the Voyage of the Dead*, retitled *Ionesco*, has received critical acclaim in Lyon and will soon open in Paris.

Ionesco works constantly. When we talked he was writing an opera; he said he continues to use his dreams and his nightmares as a basis for new plays. When he is not writing, he paints or produces lithographs.

The phone in the apartment rings and Ionesco answers it. He listens intently and then politely tells the caller he does not speak English and hangs up.

He smiles as he finds a comfortable position on a stack of yellow silk cushions he is using for a chair. With a few exceptions, he says he likes interviews because his plays are often misunderstood and interviews give him an opportunity to explain his approach to the theatre.



Eugene Ionesco

By Ellen Surrey Marsh
Translated by Catrine Filloux

You have said that culture and politics cannot be disassociated from one another. Is it possible for theatre to remain independent from political influence?

This is a problem. Politics are part of culture. But politics should be the art of dealing with the harmonious interactions between people and allowing individuals to be free. However, politics have taken precedence over the other manifestations of the mind's life, over science and even over sports. Unfortunately, art also has had to submit to political power.

*You have in the past objected to the use of theatre to convey ideologies or to works that have been obviously political in nature. Yet your play *Rhinoceros* has been described as staunchly political. Has your view on the use of theatre changed?*

Yes, *Rhinoceros* is a play that is political but not only political. It is for the defense of the individual to teach people to think alone, in isolation, and even against everyone. To have courage to examine all the ideologies proposed, to learn to accept but especially to refuse. So although it is ideological, it is an ideology against ideology or a call to beware of ideologies that are proposed—the most important and dangerous being Nazism and communism. The play is about having the courage to think alone and not let yourself become in-

fluenced by propaganda. It is a play that is at once political and anti-political. Anti-political because it is really saying "Beware of politics."

Some critics have discussed your work in terms of its wonderment and surprise, emphasizing the element of magic which prevails. Others have seen it as nihilistic. The reaction to your work has been strong. What elements in your plays do you think cause people to react either positively or negatively?

Many things. First, the fact that I never adhered to the Communist Party. Nowadays in Europe, everyone is anti-communist. But when I wrote my first plays, people were really exploring communism. Also, there are those that don't understand the wonderment of the world. I appreciate, very much, the people who can detach themselves from themselves and can look at a chair or a table and say, "How bizarre, how strange. What does all this mean?" I appreciate people who can understand that the world is not only natural but that it is also supernatural. Because the supernatural is within us all. Some just do not understand my amazement with life, with existence. For instance, in *Tales*, there is the little girl Josette. We say to her, "We are going to get up, it's morning. Put on your shoes and dress so we can open the door and go outside." Josette is amazed. For a child, the world is more extraordinary than all of the most fantastic stories. This is what I mean by a feeling of amazement with the world: the child's amazement that the world is unexplainable and marvelous. Unfortunately adults lose that wonderment through the routine of work, through fatigue, and through habit.

Is it possible to get some of that wonderment back?

Yes, through art, plays, theatre. Art makes us closer to the fundamental questions, "What is all this?" "Why are we here?" "What is the significance of life?" A businessman never asks himself these questions, neither does the consumer who wants to buy himself a TV. It is the poor man that asks himself these questions because he asks himself, "Why am I poor? Why is life like this and what is this life I am living?" "What is life's worth" is not a bourgeois question. They don't have time to ask that question. Only the most poor and the disinherited ask, or the philosophers.

*In your latest play, *Ionesco*, you seem to question the power of art. Do you believe it has diminished and if so with what consequences?*

The power of art has diminished. It has been corrupted by the businessmen, by the producers of theatre and cinema, by the buyers of art, by enormous publicity. The businessmen have put their hands on art and they control it. So art has become something mediocre. An artist asks himself whether his work will please people. That should not be what he asks himself. Art is becoming a sort of demagoguery, a type of politics that flatters the masses. So then. There are still great artists but every art has been corrupted by politics and money. The only hope is the little theatres and concert halls which are not yet corrupted. Art isn't dead but it is menaced by money and politics and more so in this country than in Europe. The United States is the country of money. In poorer countries there are different problems but there are also more artistic possibilities and the chance to create something purer. It is only through art that men can recognize themselves and come to terms with themselves. People need to be more concerned with art even if it answers no questions. Artists leave something behind. Brutes who are only interested in making money, do not.

In Ionesco, your character says, "I would like to relearn to live." What, if anything, have you regretted in your life?

On the stage I saw myself the way I wanted to be seen or rather I saw a character that I wanted to see, since it is the way I conceived the part. But it was to show that all of life is errant, a worthless search. I would go back to childhood and attempt to keep it intact. If I had the chance to live differently, I would live a more spiritual life with more religion and art. I feel my art wasn't always essential as I too went with the fashion, went with anti-ideology. Instead of going in search of notoriety, celebrity, well-being and glory, I should have pursued a stronger search for God. I would have had then, a more balanced, more serene and happier life.

You said that Jean Camet, the actor that plays you in Ionesco, showed not only your character, but what is essential in all men. Can you elaborate?

That is to say he is a man lost in the world, like all of us, he tries to grab onto a truth that escapes him. At the end of the play, there is a monologue that explains well his confusion and despair. He speaks in a sort of *language eclate* (bursting forth).

Ian feels bad in the world because there is no love and faith. He expresses also the guilt we all have. He argued in his life and now he goes to the dead relatives and friends and he wants to buy himself back because he feels guilty. He gives them money, but it's

fake money. It means he has not paid his moral debts. These are things that have appeared in my dreams and so are symbolic. This money is to pay for moral debts, to rebuy himself. He quarreled with his parents, and friends and now he wants to make peace and so he does it in his dreams. Because the play in question is made up of dreams. I have four or five^{or} obsessional dreams. I dream of my father with whom I have argued, of my mother whom I have abandoned to go into the world and I look for her. And I look for my father and for my friends with whom I have quarreled. In my dreams, I look for them. I put these dreams on the stage. These dreams are always occurring. In fact, the dream is the truth. We have known it since Freud. And Jung said the dream is a drama where we are at once the author, the spectator, the actor. That's why I try, on one hand, to understand my dreams, and on the other to put them on the stage.

You have said that it is a very dangerous time now. What do you mean?

We have two powerful desires, love and death. If death is stronger than love, then we of course head toward catastrophe. But if love overcomes this death wish, then perhaps catastrophe can be avoided. The struggle is really between the desire to die and the desire to love. There is much craziness in the world so it is difficult to know what will happen. We do know that technology has come to our help in the destruction we plan for one another.

How do you view American theatre and cinema?

The problem is that American theatre tries to be realistic. But reality is not realistic. Realism is a convention, a school. It pretends to discover truth and to express it. But realism is destructive. It does not incorporate imagination. The realism of television is there to reassure people. In fact, reality is misleading. The reality people try to live on a stage is total nonsense. Such reality encompasses wonders we do not understand. Realism, however, believes it understands so it tries to describe and name everything. It is never free of a certain ideological tendency. Imagination is not tendentious. Realism is. Realism lies. Realistic settings are false. They merely imitate reality. Poets who allow imagination to run free do not live the life they invent. It is imagination that is a reflection of the construction of our minds and it is at once freedom.

Ellen Surrey Marsh is a Los Angeles-based freelance writer.