

THREE PLAYS
IONESCO

EDITED BY H. F. BROOKES & C. E. FRAENKEL



EUGÈNE IONESCO

Three Plays

LA CANTATRICE CHAUVE

LA LEÇON

LES CHAISES

Edited with an Introduction and Notes

by H. F. BROOKES, B.A.

and C. E. FRAENKEL, DR. PHIL., L.ÈS.L



HEINEMANN EDUCATIONAL BOOKS
LONDON

Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
LONDON EDINBURGH MELBOURNE AUCKLAND TORONTO
SINGAPORE HONG KONG KUALA LUMPUR
IBADAN NAIROBI JOHANNESBURG
LUSAKA NEW DELHI

ISBN 0 435 37101 0

La Cantatrice Chauve, La Leçon, Les Chaises

Reprinted from *Théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco*

© 1954, Editions Gallimard, Paris

Tous droits réservés

Editorial material © H. F. Brookes and C. E. Fraenkel 1965

First published 1965

Reprinted 1966, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1974

Published by
Heinemann Educational Books Ltd
48 Charles Street, London W1X 8AH
Printed in Great Britain by
Butler & Tanner Ltd, Frome and London

EUGÈNE IONESCO

Three Plays

Contents

Introduction	I
LA CANTATRICE CHAUVE	19
LA LEÇON	59
LES CHAISES	97
Notes	145
Bibliography	157
Vocabulary	159

Note

An asterisk in the margin indicates that the word or passage concerned is the subject of one of the notes at the back of the book (pp. 145 ff.).

Introduction

EUGÈNE IONESCO, like Samuel Beckett, is a writer with roots in two cultures. Beckett, the Irishman, and Ionesco, born in Rumania, both use French as their creative language. Ionesco's mother was French and shortly after his birth in 1912 his parents went to live in Paris, the city of his earliest memories. In an essay entitled 'Expérience du théâtre'¹ he writes, 'je me souviens encore que, dans mon enfance, ma mère ne pouvait m'arracher du guignol au jardin du Luxembourg. J'étais là, je pouvais rester là, envoûté, des journées entières. Je ne riais pas pourtant. Le spectacle du guignol me tenait là, comme stupéfait, par la vision de ces poupées qui parlaient, qui bougeaient, se matraquaient.' Later, he continues, 'jusqu'à quinze ans, n'importe quelle pièce me donnait le sentiment que le monde est insolite, sentiment aux racines si profondes, qu'il ne m'a jamais abandonné'. However revealing this statement may be when considering the drama the mature Ionesco was to write, his juvenilia were conventional. At thirteen years of age he wrote his 'première œuvre, qui n'avait rien d'insolite. C'était une pièce patriotique. L'extrême jeunesse excuse tout' (op. cit., p. 8).

In 1925 Ionesco returned with his family to Rumania. There he went to school and on to the university, finally becoming a teacher of French. In 1936 he married and two years later went back to France where he has been living ever since.

Ionesco did not maintain his early interest in the stage nor his attempt at writing plays. Indeed he appears to have become disillusioned with it and to have given up going to the theatre. The cinema appealed to him more. He writes of the reasons for his lack of enthusiasm at this time and of his attitude to plays and

¹ *Notes et Contre-notes*, Gallimard, 1962, pp. 7-8.

playwrights: 'Les textes me déplaisaient. Pas tous! Car je n'étais pas fermé à Sophocle ou à Eschyle, ni à Shakespeare, ni par la suite à certaines pièces de Kleist ou de Büchner' (op. cit., p. 7). But even as late as 1948 it seems that 'avant d'écrire ma première pièce: *La Cantatrice Chauve*, je ne voulais pas devenir un auteur dramatique'. In a frequently quoted passage he goes on to say: 'J'avais tout simplement l'ambition de connaître l'anglais. L'apprentissage de l'anglais ne mène pas nécessairement à la dramaturgie. Au contraire, c'est parce que je n'ai pas réussi à apprendre l'anglais que je suis devenu écrivain de théâtre' (op. cit., *La Cantatrice Chauve*, p. 155). It would seem appropriate that there should be an element of chance in Ionesco's emergence as a playwright, fitting for one who sets his mature plays in a world where anything may happen.

As a result, then, of trying to learn English and of being struck by the peculiar logic and unintended humour of the stilted language of textbooks, Ionesco came to write *La Cantatrice Chauve*. It was first performed in Paris in 1950 but it was not a success with the public. 'There was little money for publicity, so the actors turned themselves into sandwich men and paraded the streets with their boards for about an hour before the performance. But the theatre remained almost empty. More than once, when there were fewer than three people in the theatre, they were given their money back and the actors went home. After about six weeks they gave up.'¹

It was not an auspicious beginning. Yet for Ionesco the experience of watching the reaction of an audience to words he himself had written was a revelation. He was amazed and fascinated by the way in which his intentions were misunderstood—for example, the audience laughed in the wrong places. He was stimulated by watching the actors trying to live the parts they had been assigned. He had for some time been appalled by the antics of actors trying to identify themselves with the characters they were playing. Now he felt he knew what he could do: he could

¹ M. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Eyre & Spottiswoode 1962.

bring shock tactics into the theatre. He would write plays which were so violent and so basic that there would be no question of politely copying everyday life. People were to be shocked into taking notice.

From now on Ionesco's plays began to erupt. In 1950 he wrote *La Leçon* and *Jacques ou la Soumission*, in 1951 *Les Chaises*. His works gradually began to conquer the stage. In 1959 he wrote his first full-length play *Rhinocéros*, followed by *Le Roi se meurt* and *Le Piéton de l'Air* in 1963. His latest play, *La Soif et la Faim*, had its first performance in translation in Düsseldorf in December 1964.

Ionesco soon began to analyse his method of writing for the theatre, though he would probably protest against any suggestion that he had 'une théorie préconçue de l'art dramatique. Cela n'a pas précédé, mais a suivi mon expérience toute personnelle du théâtre. Ces quelques idées sont issues de ma réflexion sur mes propres créations, bonnes ou mauvaises. Elles sont venues après coup. Je n'ai pas d'idées avant d'écrire une pièce.'¹

The picture therefore emerges of a writer whose pen ran away with him, of a play which just 'happened'. Several anecdotes are related of the playwright altering his play to meet the criticisms or suggestions of the actors during rehearsal. Yet this neither means that his work is superficial nor that it has not deep roots in our own time.

Ionesco was flexible but in revolt against the cosy drawing-room comedies of the conventional theatre. It is scarcely surprising, considering the times through which he has lived. His work springs from a period overshadowed by Fascism, revolution, violence, war and the hydrogen bomb. Such a period sharpens the concern of thinking people with the problems of existence, with 'la condition humaine'. Each generation struggles with such questions as 'What is man's place in the universe?', 'Does God exist?', 'What is the nature of reality?' The way in which the questions are answered and the emphasis placed on

¹ *Notes et Contre-notes*, 'Expérience du théâtre', p. 20.

them reveal fundamental differences of experience and of attitude. In seventeenth-century France, for example, in troubled but not such menacing times as our own, Descartes summed up his answer to the inquiry into ultimate reality in his famous phrase: 'Cogito ergo sum'. He had to establish a philosophical basis for his own existence and that of the world perceived by him, before he could go on to further investigation. Having once established his own reality, however, the problem of existence no longer disturbed him. The age in which he lived had scarcely yet begun to be shaken by doubt. The universe was still generally accepted as being governed by reason, by the laws of cause and effect and ultimately by a transcendent God. The history of the gradual break-up of this assured world must be read elsewhere.¹ The change in attitude of man to the universe is chiefly ascribed to the growth of science. Science, pure and applied, has achieved much that man is justifiably proud of; but it has also made him aware of his insignificance, of the unpredictability of events in a world where anything may happen. The laws of cause and effect no longer have universal applicability even in science. And many people find that the concept of a God has lost its meaning.

As a result many feel that life itself is meaningless, that they are overcome by anguish (*Angst, angoisse*) and tortured by anxiety, equally whether facing the prospect of living or dying. Because living and dying are meaningless, life is 'absurd'. Descartes's answer to the question: 'What is ultimate reality?' can no longer be accepted because the instrument of reason is no longer given priority in philosophy. Being is the sole ultimate reality for many today, or, as the Danish nineteenth-century philosopher Kierkegaard put it, 'l'esprit connaissant est un esprit existant'. Because the problem of existence predominates over all other

¹ The effect on literature has been analysed in *The Disinherited Mind—essays in modern German literature and thought* by Erich Heller (1952) and by Stephen Spender in *The Destructive Element: a study of modern writers and beliefs* (1935) and *The Creative Element—a study of Vision, Despair and Orthodoxy among some modern writers* (1953).

philosophical problems, a philosophy called 'existentialism' has emerged. Whether or not a writer explicitly accepts existentialist philosophy he cannot in modern times fail to be influenced by it. He may even be opposed to it but he has to take note of it.

In England two kinds of plays have resulted from the prevailing anxiety and the sense of the absurdity of existence; the one is a theatre of rebellion represented by John Osborne and Arnold Wesker. It may have shocked some audiences but it has not evolved a new form and it publicizes the problems of the under-privileged in much the same way as Ibsen did those of the middle classes at the end of the nineteenth century. The other kind of modern English play is represented by the work of Harold Pinter and N. F. Simpson, in which either language or human behaviour or inanimate stage objects are given a twist which undermines their accepted status. Plays such as *The Caretaker* and *One Way Pendulum* have an affinity with Beckett's and Ionesco's writing but on the whole there is not much evidence that a modern dramatic idiom has been created in the English language.

In France Ionesco's contemporaries, Samuel Beckett, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, have all in their different ways questioned the meaning and reality of existence. Ionesco's way is to develop the theatre of the absurd in which anything may happen and where accepted rules, even of language, break down. In music, painting and sculpture in general the case is different. New forms have emerged from the break up of the old cultural world. Atonal music no longer sounds strange and non-representational painting is accepted. Painters like Picasso, Braque and Modigliani, whose apparently distorted images for many years gave rise to insulting and contemptuous criticism, now provide the status symbols of the rich. Indeed, the new idiom has already come dangerously close to being a conventional style itself. Some modern painting and sculpture may not stand the test of time. It may be merely fashionable, but even fashion is relevant to the time in which we live.

So, too, with the three plays of Ionesco published in this volume. They, too, may not stand the test. However, they appeal to audiences today, especially to intelligent audiences ready to put away preconceived ideas in the theatre and to suspend disbelief about what is taking place on the stage. Ionesco's plays are an exciting experience; they generate great speed, the tension mounts as though a clock were being wound up and the audience were waiting for the spring to snap. As the action on the stage develops in crazy directions, like a Marx Brothers film, the audience becomes aware of various primitive urges being given free rein. There is a certain relief to be had from watching such basic creatures on the stage. Ionesco indicated in the sub-titles of his plays that the audience was going to be faced with something unusual: *La Cantatrice Chauve—Anti-Pièce*, *La Leçon—Drame Comique*, *Les Chaises—Farce Tragique*. But it is not a new device to mix comic and tragic elements. Victor Hugo used it and Molière's greatest comedies have undertones of tragedy. Ionesco dispenses with characterization, plot, suspense but there is nothing new in this. Brecht had already dispensed with a conventional structure in his 'epic theatre' in the 1930's and 1940's.

There is, however, a new element in Ionesco's antitheatre. It is arbitrariness. 'Dans l'absurde,' Richard N. Coe writes, 'l'action est une suite irrationnelle de faits qui ont commencé d'une manière arbitraire, se termineront d'une manière aussi arbitraire, dans un enchaînement hasardeux qui ne progresse dans aucune direction précise.' He continues, quoting Ionesco himself: 'un enchaînement qui n'en est pas un, un enchaînement accidentel d'effets sans causes et de causes sans effets, la succession purement fortuite d'événements inexplicables ou d'états effectifs'.¹ Ionesco takes a more extreme position than any of his contemporaries in his opposition to traditional drama. For Ionesco, Brecht with his belief in rational man is in the bourgeois tradition: Brecht's work and theories are anathema to him. It would be interesting to know what Brecht's reaction to Ionesco's plays might have been:

¹ Richard N. Coe in *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, No. 42, p. 34.

might he not have found them equally in the bourgeois tradition? Anarchic, irrational, emotional and lacking in social purpose?

It has been said that despite the opposition between their conceptions of the drama the two writers both achieve the same effect, the alienation effect. Brecht intended that his audiences should remain personally uninvolved in the action on the stage because he believed that they would then be able 'coldly' to think and criticize. However, the greater his plays, the more involved the audience becomes. The artist triumphs over the theoretician. Ionesco, without explicitly trying to 'distance' the audience from the spectacle, actually achieves the alienation effect. The audience does not become involved but is disturbed and shocked. Yet in spite of being shaken and protesting, it is fascinated; the method succeeds in holding attention. The shocks are administered by the dramatic structure and the revolutionary use of language.

When Ionesco's shorter plays—and the present collection falls within this category—are considered, the first impression of their structure is one of rhythmic movement. Activity alternates with moments of calm, rapid dialogue with silence, bustling stage business with a slowing down of action. Little by little increasing agitation culminates in noise, frenzy and then a sudden silence or a recapitulation after a pause. Ionesco compares the movement of his plays to Feydeau's comedies in which there is 'une sorte d'accélération du mouvement, une progression, une sorte de folie'.¹ A comparison with jazz and modern 'pop' music springs to mind, where the intensification of the beat heightens the emotions and builds up tension.

The rhythmic pattern can be traced in each of the three plays. *La Cantatrice Chauve* begins with Mrs Smith's long slow monologue, followed by a short conversation, still on a relatively calm note, about the qualities and duties of the doctor. Soon the conversation dries up. Then Mrs Smith begins a new topic which leads to an angry exchange of words, yet ends in a kiss and the

¹ *L'Express*, Entretien, 28 janvier 1960, pp. 36-7.

resolve to go off to bed. At this juncture the maid suddenly appears; employers and maid hold a flat conversation in which no one seems concerned with the statements of the others. Next comes the long recognition scene between Mr and Mrs Martin, the guests. When the Smiths and the Martins meet their conversation is like the ebb and flow of the tide; after a slow start it soon leads to an argument, to tension and then to a pause. Tension is renewed during the following argument concerning the presence—or non-presence—of a person at the door when the bell rings. The maid's excited state in Scene IX culminates in the recitation of the poem which ends 'tout prit feu, Prit feu, prit feu'; but Scene X begins with 'Ça m'a donné froid dans le dos...'—the temperature is literally reduced. In the same scene the fireman takes his leave, asking the question, 'A propos, et la cantatrice chauve?' (incidentally the sole reference to the title of the 'anti-pièce'). His question is received with 'silence général, gêne'. The flowing tide has slackened again, only to flow more and more strongly towards the frenzy of the end of the play. Suddenly the stage is plunged into darkness and silence. Then the lights go up again and the play recommences with the rôles of the two couples reversed. Ionesco sometimes appears to have more affinity with the cinema than with the theatre. Here the impression given is 'this is where we came in'. The play might have been re-wound and started again.

There is a more constant build-up of agitation and frenzy in *La Leçon*, 'une sorte de densification des états d'âme, . . . une exaltation progressive' (op. cit., p. 36). A musical analogy¹ may

¹ Compare François Billetdoux, 'Poétique du Décor (Notes pour René Allio)', *Cahiers Renaud-Barrault*, No. 46, Oct. 1964, pp. 21-32; Billetdoux, addressing the stage designer for his play *Il faut passer par les Nuages*, speaks of

'Premier Mouvement — Ouverture allegretto ma non troppo
Deuxième Mouvement — Andantino
Troisième Mouvement — Allegro pathétique
Quatrième Mouvement — Molto vivace
Cinquième Mouvement — Aubade.'

help to indicate the structure of this play. It begins with a movement in a gay major key but is interrupted by the two entries and the warnings of the maid. After the second warning the pupil is still gay and enthusiastic; she claps her hands excitedly only to be vehemently rebuked by the master: 'Silence, que veut dire cela? . . . Silence!' Then he begins his long tirade, gaining momentum. The movement gathers speed. Each interjection by the pupil of her plea, 'J'ai mal aux dents', seems to spur the master on. Eventually a staccato rhythm is set up by the master alternating 'Continuons' with the pupil's complaint 'J'ai mal aux dents' until it no longer matters what words are said by whom—the pupil's 'j'ai mal' is capped by the master saying 'aux dents' and the pupil takes over the beat with 'Continuons'. At the end of the play it is the word 'couteau' which is shouted by both characters until the final blow is struck. Then a new movement begins, played by the master and the maid, leading back to the recapitulation of the first movement in the original major key—the audience is thus prepared for the whole business to begin again.

It is interesting to note that *La Leçon* has been successfully made into a ballet, which perhaps supports the idea of the paramountcy of changing rhythm in Ionesco's play. The dance appears to emphasize the well-defined movements of *La Leçon* and to demonstrate the dramatic structure inherent in the episodes of mounting tension.

Les Chaises might perhaps be described as a theme with variations mostly in a minor key. Pauses succeed sudden flickers of real life as in the two flirtation episodes. Then the arrival of invisible visitors builds up to a crescendo which heralds the two important entries, first, that of the emperor and, second, that of the orator. Everything turns into movement; the two old people almost merge into one person as the old woman repeats only part of her husband's words, like an accompanying instrument. Finally, the crescendo of frantic animation builds up again until the play suddenly reaches the climax—or

anticlimax—of the mute orator, and the action gradually fade away.

The impression of rhythm and movement which Ionesco's plays give is heightened by physical effects on the stage. They punctuate the linguistic happenings and underline the unexpected and the absurd. Clocks suddenly strike loudly, their hands whizz round at high speed or move in an anti-clockwise direction. Bells ring. Fanfares of trumpets are heard. Lights glow and dim. Before the arrival of the emperor in *Les Chaises* the stage directions say: 'Les bruits grandissent, puis la porte du fond s'ouvre toute grande, à grand fracas. . . .' 'Lumière maximum d'intensité . . . , des bruits encore qui cesseront brusquement.'

Although the audience in the theatre alone is subjected to the shock delivered by physical stimuli, both audience and reader alike will suffer shock from Ionesco's use of language. The shock is not of the kind which comes from the naturalistic use of vulgar language. It comes from the way in which language disintegrates as an Ionesco play proceeds. His method of using language has been said to lead to its degradation. It is certainly not made to serve the conventional purpose of imparting information in well-defined segments from person to person on the stage or in the audience. If it is at all a means of formally communicating information, it communicates only in platitudes. They are used very often at the beginning of a play or a scene to establish the characters in terms of the normal real world. Yet the mark of a platitude is that it says nothing: 'La banalité même est le symptôme de la non-communication.'¹ Platitudinous conversation soon tends to disintegrate into language resembling the babbling of a child—hence the suggestion that Ionesco may have been influenced by Dadaism in painting. The language runs free without the restraint of formal logic. It is carried along by the association of sounds, words or phrases. It is linked by alliteration which makes the listener or reader laugh but also makes him dissociate himself from the characters in the play. The ele-

¹ *L'Express*, Entretien, 28 janvier 1960.

ment of nonsense and fun attached to word games makes the reading of Ionesco's plays a very enjoyable experience for people of remarkably diverse intellectual and linguistic attainments, especially if the plays are read aloud. There are innumerable examples of the association of words in lists of nouns. Just as one thinks that language is being treated logically and with proper respect, an irrational associative bomb bursts—at the beginning of *La Cantatrice Chauve*, for instance, 'Le yaourt est excellent pour l'estomac, les reins, l'appendicite et l'apothéose.' In *Les Chaises*, when the old woman questions her husband about the guests invited to hear his message, she asks: 'Les gardiens? les évêques? les chimistes? les chaudronniers? les violinistes? les délégués? les présidents? les policiers? les marchands? les bâtiments? (a warning note here—reality is slipping) les porte-plumes? les chromosomes?' A few lines later alliteration takes over: 'Le pape, les papillons et les papiers?'

Words are not only used in the wrong context, some do not even exist. And at the end of *La Cantatrice Chauve* the language is literally broken up into meaningless sounds. In *Les Chaises* when he plays with the sound 'ri', Ionesco picks it out as part of the verb 'arriver', a form of the verb 'rire' ('on a ri') and a noun, 'une malle pleine de riz'; then he stirs up together the various words with 'ri'—'on a ri. . . . Ah! . . . ri . . . arri . . . au riz arriva.' Another linguistic device which Ionesco uses is to associate semantically ambiguous terms, as he does, for example, in *La Leçon* (p. 82). 'Racines' is used in its philological and mathematical senses. The pupils confuses the two and asks: 'Les racines des mots sont-elles carrées?' She may also have been associating 'carrées' with 'dents carrées' since her own teeth were aching. The master replies: 'Carrées ou cubiques. C'est selon.' At other times Ionesco plays with language by extending an idiomatic expression beyond its ordinary usage; 'claquer des dents' becomes 'claquer des oreilles'.

Word games are devices used by writers in other literary forms. The nonsense rhymes of Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll's

prose and verse in *Alice in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass* can be cited. James Joyce invented his own highly associative and ambiguous vocabulary out of the bits and pieces of many languages. Flaubert was interested in observing the use of clichés and platitudes. More recently Daninos, hoping to become the twentieth-century 'exécuteur testamentaire de Flaubert', made fun of them in *Le Jacassin*.¹ But when Ionesco breaks up language there is often a serious undertone. The audience or reader laughs, but uneasily, experiencing a strange sensation as though the familiar ground was slipping from underneath his feet. Anything seems possible in Ionesco's world. Not only is the language meaningless but factual statements juxtaposed actually contradict each other. In *La Cantatrice Chauve*, for example, there is a long conversation about Bobby Watson which is self-contradictory and makes no sense at all. In the 1920's and 1930's the surrealists amused themselves by playing 'Consequences'. The dialogue of *La Cantatrice Chauve* in particular often recalls the results of this parlour-game with words. At times Ionesco likes to interpolate a nonsense proverb of the kind which the surrealists used to enjoy making up and sending each other: 'Celui qui vend aujourd'hui un bœuf demain aura un œuf' (p. 53).

If the dialogue in these three plays displays a lack of logic, there are some plays by Ionesco in which the very action shocks the reader or spectator by its irrationality. Mushrooms spring up in the living-room, a corpse continues to grow so that it invades a whole apartment, human beings have two or three noses or are changed into rhinoceroses. Ionesco's world is absurd, as absurd as Kafka's in which equally impossible transformations take place, in which a monkey turns into a human being or a commercial traveller wakes up as a horrible beetle. But the two writers do not produce the same reaction to the absurd. In Kafka's stories the absurd is a possibility, even a grim probability, to be endured. Ionesco may find the world a frightening place, full of

¹ Daninos, *Le Jacassin, Nouveau traité des idées reçues, folies bourgeoises et automatismes*, Hachette 1962.