

Ionesco

La
Cantatrice
chauve

La
Leçon

ited by Lillian Bulwa and Tamar Marcel

EUGÈNE IONESCO

La Cantatrice chauve

La Leçon

EDITED BY

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HOLT, RINEHART AND WINSTON

New York San Francisco Toronto London

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Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Ionesco, Eugène.

La Cantatrice chauve; *La Leçon*.

Bibliography: p.

I. Ionesco, Eugène. *La Leçon*. 1975.

II. Bulwa, Lillian, ed.

III. March, Tamar, ed.

IV. Title: *La Cantatrice chauve*.

PQ2617. O6C3 1975 448'.6'421 74-20585

ISBN 0-03-013396-3

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5643 Paradise Drive

Corte Madera, California 94925

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

5 6 7 8 9 090 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Avant-propos

La Cantatrice chauve and *La Leçon*, two of the most popular of Ionesco's works for the theater, have proved as successful in the classroom as on stage. They offer provocative contemporary themes in a manner that renders the Theater of the Absurd accessible, entertaining, and intellectually stimulating. Language, communication, and teaching itself—three of the topics explored in these plays—are facilitated by the witty use of idiomatic, conversational French and a current vocabulary.

An introductory essay discusses the meaning of the Theater of the Absurd, as well as Ionesco's role in it. To further the understanding and appreciation of the plays, we have also provided a vocabulary of theater terms, numerous study questions and, for more advanced students, a detailed explication in French of the final scene of *La Cantatrice chauve*. A brief bibliography is included for students who wish to pursue their interest in Ionesco and his theater.

The texts themselves are accompanied by translations of idiomatic expressions, difficult vocabulary items, and *faux amis*, together with helpful synonyms in French. (The *faux amis* are indicated by a symbol † preceding the glossed item.) The end vocabulary gives the common definitions of the glossed items as well as definitions appropriate to the context of the plays. Idioms that recur identically in both works are glossed in the pages facing *La Cantatrice chauve* and in the end vocabulary. Since these explanations are not given elsewhere, despite their reappearance in both plays, their number of course declines with successive pages. Advanced students will not have to refer to them frequently.

The intent of this edition is to appeal to sophisticated readers

of French literature as well as to beginning intermediate students, unaccustomed to dealing with a full-length contemporary text. Vocabulary and discussion aids therefore range from the most literary to the most basic, with an occasional explication serving to introduce stylistic analysis to the venture-some. The teacher and reader are urged to choose from the deliberately abundant factual and theoretical questions (*questions su le texte, sujets de discussion*), as time and degree of competence in reading and speaking French allow. Although the level of questions for *La Leçon* is somewhat more advanced than for *La Cantatrice chauve*, it should be noted that the sequence of all factual questions follows the text of each play rather than any special order of difficulty.

Some of the suggested written assignments (*sujets de composition*) may be used for oral French practice. The suggested composition and discussion topics often go considerably beyond the immediate text; they will encourage the student to investigate other readings or to call upon personal experience and the imagination. The purpose of this is twofold: first, to provide material that is "relevant," (to use a cliché worthy of abuse in either play) and second, to stimulate the student's appreciation of literature while enhancing language skills. Classroom or group performance of these plays is, of course, one of the most valuable pedagogical devices. It is also very likely that, in the course of the discussions, a single question may take up an entire class session, or that several answers may be found for even the most "factual" of questions. These are altogether fitting conditions for experiencing the Theater of the Absurd.

The editors wish to express their profound gratitude to François Burési, Raya Dreben, Lenore Gouyet, Edith Hancock, Anne Minor, and Norman Shapiro for their invaluable comments and assistance.

L.B.
T.M.

Introduction

A New Kind of Theater

On February 25, 1971, Eugène Ionesco, whose plays have been in the vanguard of French theater for over two decades, was admitted to that bastion of cultural and literary conservatism known as the *Académie française*. This was an astonishing event to those who knew his name as virtually synonymous with the Theater of the Absurd. To be aware of what *théâtre d'avant-garde* and *théâtre de l'absurde* mean is basic to an appreciation of Ionesco's theater. If we understand these terms, we can see the distance travelled from avant-gardism to the highly respectable position of member of the French Academy.

The *avant-garde*¹ is defined by the dictionary as an advance group which aims to revolutionize the arts (such as music, painting, and literature). It sets itself up as the critical spirit of the present, in order to break free from the past and thereby radically alter the shape of the future. However, the transitory nature of this kind of group is obvious: if a movement is successful in instituting the desired changes, it eventually becomes the established norm. In the constant flow of cultural events, it is the inevitable and ironic fate of any successful *avant-garde* movement to ultimately comprise the *arrière-garde*; that is, to represent the established, accepted form of expression.

In accordance with their critical or radical spirit, such a group of artists often uses experimental, unorthodox, even shocking methods. The fact that Ionesco, the author of so-called *avant-*

¹ For Ionesco's own definition of the term, see his "Discours sur l'avant-garde," in *Notes et contre-notes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), pp. 75-91.

garde plays, has now been welcomed to the venerable French Academy illustrates the ephemeral quality of the very notion of avant-gardism. For the term must always be studied in the context of its own time. Rabelais, Molière, and Voltaire once led the vanguard; today their works are considered the classics of French literature. In the early 19th century, Victor Hugo, Théophile Gautier, and Alfred de Musset were included among the *avant-garde*. The notes they first sounded, as heralds of a new era, were discordant to many of their staid contemporaries, and provoked anger and scorn. They were the radicals of their age, personifying all that was abhorrent to their society; but even before the century drew to a close, their cause, known as the Romantic Movement, had already become so fossilized that it figured in every grammar school reader in France. Today, these poets are revered as symbolic of their generation.

The *avant-garde* of the early 20th century included such poets as André Breton, Louis Aragon, and Paul Eluard. To them fell the dubious glory of being denounced as charlatans, imposters, and pranksters by an outraged public. Now they are honored as leaders of the Surrealist Movement, and have assumed their rightful place in the textbooks on literature. (The word *surréalisme* itself, in fact, was coined by an earlier avant-gardist, the poet and playwright Guillaume Apollinaire.)

Just as Pablo Picasso, Max Ernst, and Joán Miró have permanently altered modern views of "reality," so have Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Edward Albee irrevocably changed present social and philosophical attitudes. The vanguard has become the rear guard because another artistic revolution has been accomplished. In short, ostracism as a first reaction, gradually transformed into acceptance by the Establishment, is a pattern that repeats itself continually.

In the 1950s, the so-called *avant-garde* primarily referred to playwrights whom critics classed under the rubric of *théâtre de l'absurde*. In what way was this theater *avant-garde*, that is to say revolutionary? The plays being produced at that time in Paris,

usually in small, inconspicuous theaters on the Left Bank, shared certain underlying ideas. These works expressed for the most part a nihilistic attitude that has come to be known as the “philosophy of the absurd.” Their purpose was to shock a public fettered by its own intellectual and emotional lethargy back into thinking and feeling anew. Audiences were often enraged because they were uncertain of the authors’ intentions. Were they being mocked by a theater in which essentially nothing seemed to happen, or was there something going on that was so subtle that it was beyond them? Today the pendulum has swung fully in the other direction: the plays of Ionesco, Beckett and Jean Genêt are performed by the most esteemed theater groups. Ionesco’s *Rhinocéros* opened in the *Théâtre de France*, and *La Leçon* is now in the repertory of the *Comédie-Française*. Repartee from *La Cantatrice chauve* enlivens standard social banter in French. What caused such a reversal of the public’s reaction? How did scornful rejection turn into enthusiastic acceptance? To understand the change, we must look back one generation to existentialist thought, as it emerged from the disastrous experience of World War II.

The term “absurd,” which ordinarily connotes something laughable or ridiculous, also means “inconsistent with what is judged as reasonable.” Commenting on this second meaning, Albert Camus reflects that since man is endowed with *reason*, he is the only animal in creation to question his destiny, that is, his mortality.² In other words, man is the only animal who knows he is going to die. When this rational animal confronts the world, into which he has been thrust involuntarily and in which he feels himself—by virtue of his uniqueness—to be a “stranger,” essentially alienated, he suddenly comprehends the reality of his predicament. He cannot expect any *rational* answers to his *rational* queries, because there is no logic or reason inherent in the universe. His own need for logic has made him superimpose a ra-

² Albert Camus (1913-1960), essayist, philosopher, novelist, playwright. His essay, “Le Mythe de Sisyphe” (1943), had a profound influence on many French writers of subsequent decades.

tional structure on a chaotic universe. The universe, in its limitless, timeless, boundless presence, instead of humbling man and compelling him to turn to God (the only alternative for believers such as Pascal), leads man to a crushing feeling of *absurdity*. The consciousness of his finiteness, as opposed to the infinity of the universe, is coupled with his yearning for immortality. Man is forever frustrated by the juxtaposition of his inevitable death and the spectacle of an eternal universe. It is this confrontation between sentient, rational man and an impassive universe that Camus calls *l'absurde*:

À ce point de son effort, l'homme se trouve devant l'irrationnel. Il sent en lui son désir de bonheur et de raison. L'absurde naît de cette confrontation entre l'appel humain et le silence déraisonnable du monde. . . . L'irrationnel, la nostalgie humaine et l'absurde qui surgit de leur tête-à-tête, voilà les trois personnages du drame qui doit nécessairement finir avec toute la logique dont une existence est capable.³

At this point in his struggle, man finds himself face to face with the irrational. He feels in himself a need for happiness and reason. The absurd is born from this confrontation between the human plea and the unreasonable silence of the universe . . . The irrational, the human nostalgia [for the rational], and the absurd which emerges from their encounter are the three characters in a drama which must necessarily end with all the logic of which one life is capable.

Existential theater expresses the feeling of anxiety that arises from the painful grasp of the absurd, but does so using traditional language and conventional techniques. Plays such as *Caligula* and *Le Malentendu* by Camus, or *Les Mouches* and *Électre* by Sartre, are chiefly graphic representations of their authors' philosophies, rather than new creations for the stage. Plots are generally bor-

³ Camus, "Le Mythe de Sisyphe," *Essais* (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), pp. 117-118.

rowed from antiquity or based upon anecdotes from contemporary life. Characters lack psychological complexity or emotional depth; they serve as mouthpieces for their creators' points of view. Action is largely reduced to the ultimate act of death, usually through a murder, thus vividly presenting the idea that life is rendered meaningless by the fact of death.

Since there is little action or character development on stage (as in the classical theater of Racine, for example, where the protagonist reaches a state of self-knowledge), something else must engage the audience. It is the power of the word itself. And in existentialist theater characters do indeed discourse brilliantly with one another on the vicissitudes of the absurd. It is this discursive element, which presumes to offer the *irrational* in *rational* terms, that was challenged by the plays of the early 1950s known today as the Theater of the Absurd.

The Theater of the Absurd, as represented by writers such as Genêt, Beckett, Adamov and Ionesco, challenges the earlier notion that the feeling and the concept of an absurd existence can be shown by means of traditional theatrical conventions. Language is the major convention challenged by the new theater. Camus points out that the routine of our daily habits is a thick veil shrouding the reality of a hopeless universe.⁴ One important message transmitted by this kind of theater is that language is also such a veil, for it frequently prevents true communication and awareness. The reason for this is that the words we use have been outworn by custom, mercilessly overused and abused.

Not until he attempted to learn English did Ionesco become aware of the extent to which we rely on mechanical phrases. So mechanical are they, in fact, that platitudes, mere comforting sounds, often pass for dialogue. Trite sayings, void of any real content, blanket the threatening reality of man's solitude.

Le plus souvent mes personnages disent des choses
très plates parce que la banalité est le symptôme de la

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

non-communication. Derrière les clichés, l'homme se cache.⁵

My characters frequently say very flat things because banality is the symptom of non-communication. Man hides behind clichés.

Only a slight shift was needed to tip the balance of stagnant words. By dislocating a word here, inflecting a reply there, Ionesco managed to alert his audience to the startling number of ready-made expressions in our daily speech. Once the alarm had been sounded, there could be no turning back to the security of conventions, verbal or theatrical. One could no longer hide, behind empty words, the fundamental anxiety which a questioning, thinking being must necessarily feel.

Authors such as Ionesco and Beckett justify the savagery of their attack on language by the fact that, for them, everyday language is dying if not already dead. The overwhelming majority of the words, expressions and sentences we use are enfeebled at best and at worst have no relation to the feeling or thought intended. A language deprived of meaning builds a system of thought deprived of meaning. And this system becomes the framework of a structure of clichés based on such abstractions as "nation," "democracy," "God," "socialism." History has shown that for the sake of words like these, millions of lives have been lost. By making us aware of the vacuousness of stale remnants of communication, the new theater proclaims their flagrant absurdity. The characters before us seem banal, ineffectual, lost, that is, we see modern man in his "essential" form. In short, the Theater of the Absurd reveals us to our anxiety-ridden selves. It identifies the fundamental human condition, what Ionesco calls *la réalité humaine*, and, as he says, it testifies to the intellectual and moral crisis resulting from false slogans, clichés, and other abuses of language. "Notre théâtre témoigne peut-être de cette crise . . .

⁵ Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), p. 309.

universelle de la pensée. . . .”⁶ (“Perhaps our theater bears witness to this universal crisis of thought. . . .”)

The revolution of the Theater of the Absurd, which occurs largely on the verbal level, creates a feeling of anguish that emerges in the midst of laughter. We witness “absurd” man expressing, through his “absurd” inarticulateness and inaction, the stark, bleak quality of life at its lowest ebb—life without the protective opiate of religion or science. It is the tension between what is said and what is meant, between the word and the gesture, that causes these plays to create the strange effect of hilarious discomfort. The concept of the *absurd*, absurdly depicted, gives rise to a malaise which cannot be easily ignored or dismissed.

Since the chief impact of the Theater of the Absurd is verbal, the psychological plane must necessarily be affected: without language man cannot reflect on his existence. Only through the use of words can he come to understand the metaphysical implications of his life. To underscore the importance of words, this new theater has radically attacked the function of language. It hopes to awaken civilization to the frightful awareness that this basic tool is obsolete and no longer performs the function for which it was invented: to help man conquer himself, tame his world, and comprehend the relation between himself and his world.

The new theater strives to achieve a unity between subject and form, between the theme of the absurd and its expression. Its underlying theme is of course similar to its existential antecedent. It, too, is haunted by the horror of death, which shapes the common bond between all human beings:

La condition essentielle de l'homme n'est pas sa condition de citoyen, mais sa condition de mortel. Lorsque je parle de la mort, tout le monde me comprend. La mort n'est ni bourgeoise, ni socialiste. Ce

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 335.

qui vient du plus profond de moi-même, mon angoisse la plus profonde, est la chose la plus populaire.⁷

The fundamental condition of man is not his condition as a citizen, but his condition as a mortal. When I speak of death, everyone understands me. Death is neither middle-class nor socialist. What comes from the deepest recesses within myself, my most profound anguish, is the most widespread condition.

But unlike its predecessor, existentialism, the Theater of the Absurd presents to its audience, in absurd language, the very sight of the absurd rather than just dealing with it abstractly. It therefore goes further than existentialist theater in producing an identification between the metaphysical problems raised and the spectator himself. For example, the concrete image of two tramps dragging out an existence denuded of everything except the vaguest of hopes that a man called Godot⁸ will show up is so striking, so vivid, and so poignant that it leads the spectator to contemplate his own life, his own dreams and ambitions. In other words, he is made to think about the “Godot” he himself has invented in order to give meaning to an otherwise vacant life.

The Theater of the Absurd does not, therefore, limit itself to revolutionizing verbal expression; it also proceeds to create drama by laying bare the irrationality of other conventions long held sacred in western civilization. Absurdist plays do not have the predictable form of a beginning, middle, and end, as dictated by traditional Aristotelian logic. They are often circular in structure (*La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon*), or they rise to a self-destructive intensity (*Les Chaises* or *Le Nouveau Locataire*, two other popular plays by Ionesco). Theatrical conventions such as plot, action, and character development are frequently disregarded. The treatment of the human condition is divested of the contingencies

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 311.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *En attendant Godot* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1952).

of time, place, and social context. The old couple in *Les Chaises*, pathetic in their desire to deliver a message to an invisible audience, or the wife in Beckett's *Oh les beaux jours*, equally pathetic, vainly reminiscing over the highlights of a lamentable existence, could live anywhere, in any country, at any stage of history, in any social class. The couple in *Les Chaises*, for instance, dwells in an isolated tower on an isolated island. Beckett's play (*Oh les beaux jours*) takes place in an undefined sandy area. In the opening stage directions of *Jeux de massacre*, Ionesco indicates that the city is neither modern nor old, that it lacks any distinctive characteristic.

Yet when it comes to the "absurd" figures in Ionesco plays, there is a recognizable trait they possess in common or, more accurately, that they do not possess at all. Unlike ordinary men and women, they do not have a life of accumulated experiences. Their past lives do not unfold, allowing us to surmise what the future may contain. They have, in fact, no past, no future, only the immediate present. Each moment seems unrelated to the next. Because of the lack of an emotional continuum, these characters have no psychological credibility. Bereft of individual personalities, they behave more like puppets than like people. In the aforementioned *Jeux de massacre*, for example, we see a man appear at a window, soon joined by a policeman who clubs him. The man falls and abruptly disappears, leaving us with the memory of the Punch and Judy shows of our childhood.

The characters are frequently interchangeable, further illustrating their lack of distinctiveness; the two sisters in Genêt's *Les Bonnes*, Vladimir and Estragon in *En attendant Godot*, the Smiths and the Martins in *La Cantatrice chauve*. Conventional psychology has little to do with the characters in absurdist works, for they tend to embody the gradual death of language. Some are inarticulate (*Godot*); others use words solely to deceive rather than to perceive (*Le Balcon*, by Genêt); still others have become petrified in their own lifeless phrases (*La Cantatrice chauve*).

Absurdist plays open more often than not on a stage that is

virtually bare, with only a minimum of props to set the stark mood.⁹ With few distractions from the central theme, the “absurd” message is conveyed directly and concretely. The characters themselves do not appear to understand what they are communicating. In somewhat parallel fashion, audiences are impelled to react on a level that is neither intellectual nor consciously emotional. It is rather a “gut” reaction, almost pre-linguistic, just within the shadow of our awareness. Language, traditionally used to serve drama, becomes instead the drama itself. It is elevated to a primary function, while character is subordinated. This shift of position, naturally, is in itself absurd, for language has no *a priori* existence. Through the disintegration of their language, the disintegration of the characters inevitably follows.

These, then, are the dimensions of a theater frequently referred to as “anti-theater”: timelessness, absence of heroes, absence of scenery, absence of conventional emotion. All these “absences” amount to a critique, the negative statement that this kind of theater represents. The *théâtre de l’absurde* endeavours to present the human condition with all its contradictions. It does not presume to offer a resolution, since the human condition itself is one of unresolved ambiguities.

Ionesco’s Anti-Theater

L’oeuvre d’art n’est pas le reflet, l’image du monde,
mais elle est à l’image du monde.¹⁰

⁹ An important aspect of the Theater of the Absurd is the small budget involved. At the outset, the plays were usually produced in small theaters, with few actors and virtually no props. This resulted in a double benefit: not only could works by young, generally impecunious producers be presented at low cost, but also the limitations of staging guaranteed that the human condition would be presented in the starkest manner possible, stripped of social, economic, and cultural masks.

¹⁰ Ionesco, *Notes et contre-notes*, p. 309.