



# *the* PARIS REVIEW

## THE ART OF THEATER NO. 6 EUGÈNE IONESCO

The last few years have been exceptionally busy for Eugène Ionesco. His seventieth birthday was celebrated in 1982 with a series of events, publications, and productions of his work, not only in France but worldwide. *Hugoliades*, Ionesco's satirical portrait of Victor Hugo, which he wrote at the age of twenty, was newly published by Gallimard. In Lyons, Roger Planchon, the director of the Théâtre Nationale Populaire, staged *Journey Among the Dead*, a collage of Ionesco's dreams, autobiographical writings, and extracts from his latest play, *The Man with Suitcases*. The show, which toured France to both critical and popular acclaim, was due to be staged at the Comédie Française in Paris. Recently, the casts of Ionesco's two early plays *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* gave a birthday party for the playwright, which also celebrated both plays' twenty-fifth year of uninterrupted runs at the Théâtre de la Huchette in Paris.

Over the past thirty years, Ionesco has been called a tragic clown, the Shakespeare of the Absurd, the *Enfant Terrible* of the Avant-Garde, and the Inventor of the Metaphysical Farce—epithets that point to his evolution from a young playwright at a tiny Left Bank theater to an esteemed member of the Académie

Française. For the past forty-five years, Ionesco has been married to Rodika, his Romanian wife. They live in an exotic top-floor apartment on the Boulevard Montparnasse above La Coupole, surrounded by a collection of books and pictures by some of Ionesco's oldest friends and colleagues, including Hemingway, Picasso, Sartre, and Henry Miller. Our interview took place in the drawing room, where Miró's portraits, Max Ernst's drawing of Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, and a selection of Romanian and Greek icons adorn the walls.

Ionesco, a small, bald man with sad, gentle eyes, seems quite fragile at first glance—an impression that is immediately belied by his mischievous sense of humor and his passionate speech. Beside him Rodika, also slight, with dark slanted eyes and an ivory complexion, looks like a placid Oriental doll. During the course of the interview she brought us tea and frequently asked how we were getting on. The Ionescos' steady exchange of endearments and their courtesy with one another reminded me of some of the wonderful old couples portrayed by Ionesco in many of his plays.

—*Shusha Guppy, 1984*

## INTERVIEWER

You once wrote, "The story of my life is the story of a wandering." Where and when did the wandering start?

## EUGÈNE IONESCO

At the age of one. I was born near Bucharest, but my parents came to France a year later. We moved back to Romania when I was thirteen, and my world was shattered. I hated Bucharest, its society, and its mores—its anti-Semitism for example. I was not Jewish, but I pronounced my r's as the French do and was often taken for a Jew, for which I was ruthlessly bullied. I worked hard to change my r's and to sound Bourguignon! It was the time of the

rise of Nazism and everyone was becoming pro-Nazi—writers, teachers, biologists, historians . . . Everyone read Chamberlain's *The Origins of the Twentieth Century* and books by rightists like Charles Maurras and Léon Daudet. It was a plague! They despised France and England because they were yiddified and racially impure. On top of everything, my father remarried and his new wife's family was very right-wing. I remember one day there was a military parade. A lieutenant was marching in front of the palace guards. I can still see him carrying the flag. I was standing beside a peasant with a big fur hat who was watching the parade, absolutely wide-eyed. Suddenly the lieutenant broke rank, rushed toward us, and slapped the peasant, saying, Take off your hat when you see the flag! I was horrified. My thoughts were not yet organized or coherent at that age, but I had feelings, a certain nascent humanism, and I found these things inadmissible. The worst thing of all, for an adolescent, was to be different from everyone else. Could I be right and the whole country wrong? Perhaps there were people like that in France—at the time of the Dreyfus trials, when Paul Déroulède, the chief of the anti-Dreyfussards, wrote “En Avant Soldat!”—but I had never known it. The France I knew was my childhood paradise. I had lost it, and I was inconsolable. So I planned to go back as soon as I could. But first, I had to get through school and university, and then get a grant.

#### INTERVIEWER

When did you become aware of your vocation as a writer?

#### IONESCO

I always had been. When I was nine, the teacher asked us to write a piece about our village fete. He read mine in class. I was encouraged and continued. I even wanted to write my memoirs at the age of ten. At twelve I wrote poetry, mostly about friendship—“Ode to Friendship.” Then my class wanted to make a film, and one little boy suggested that I write the script. It was a story about some children who invite some other children to a party, and they

end up throwing all the furniture and the parents out of the window. Then I wrote a patriotic play, “Pro Patria.” You see how I went for the grand titles!

INTERVIEWER

After these valiant childhood efforts you began to write in earnest. You wrote *Hugoliades* while you were still at university. What made you take on poor Hugo?

IONESCO

It was quite fashionable to poke fun at Hugo. You remember Gide’s “Victor Hugo is the greatest French poet, alas!” or Cocteau’s “Victor Hugo was a madman who thought he was Victor Hugo.” Anyway, I hated rhetoric and eloquence. I agreed with Verlaine, who said, “You have to get hold of eloquence and twist its neck off!” Nonetheless, it took some courage. Nowadays it is common to debunk great men, but it wasn’t then.

INTERVIEWER

French poetry is rhetorical, except for a few exceptions like Villon, Louise Labé, and Baudelaire.

IONESCO

Ronsard isn’t. Nor are Gérard de Nerval and Rimbaud. But even Baudelaire sinks into rhetoric: “Je suis belle, O Mortelle . . .” And then when you see the actual statue he’s referring to, it’s a pompous one! Or, “Mon enfant, ma soeur, songe à la douceur, d’aller là-bas vivre ensemble . . .” It could be used for a brochure on exotic cruises for American millionaires.

INTERVIEWER

Come on! There were no *American* millionaires in those days.

IONESCO

Ah, but there *were!* I agree with Albert Béguin, a famous critic in the thirties [author of *Dreams and the Romantics*], who said that Hugo, Lamartine, Musset, etcetera . . . were *not* romantics, and that French romantic poetry really started with Nerval and Rimbaud. You see, the former produced versified rhetoric; they talked about death, even monologued on death. But from Nerval on, death became visceral and poetic. They didn't speak of death, they *died* of death. That's the difference.

INTERVIEWER

Baudelaire died of death, did he not?

IONESCO

All right then, you can have your Baudelaire. In the theater, the same thing happened with us—Beckett, Adamov, and myself. We were not far from Sartre and Camus—the Sartre of *La Nausée*, the Camus of *L'Étranger*—but they were thinkers who demonstrated their ideas. Whereas with us, especially Beckett, death becomes a living evidence—like Giacometti, whose sculptures are walking skeletons. Beckett shows death; his people are in dustbins or waiting for God. (Beckett will be cross with me for mentioning God, but never mind.) Similarly, in my play *The New Tenant*, there is no speech, or rather, the speeches are given to the Janitor. The Tenant just suffocates beneath proliferating furniture and objects—which is a symbol of death. There were no longer words being spoken, but images being visualized. We achieved it above all by the dislocation of language. Do you remember the monologue in *Waiting for Godot* and the dialogue in *The Bald Soprano*? Beckett destroys language with silence. I do it with too much language, with characters talking at random, and by inventing words.

INTERVIEWER

Apart from the central theme of death and the black humor that you share with the other two dramatists, there is an important

oneiric, or dreamlike, element in your work. Does this suggest the influences of surrealism and psychoanalysis?

IONESCO

None of us would have written as we do without surrealism and dadaism. By liberating the language, those movements paved the way for us. But Beckett's work, especially his prose, was influenced above all by Joyce and the Irish Circus people. Whereas my theater was born in Bucharest. We had a French teacher who read us a poem by Tristan Tzara one day that started, "Sur une ride du soleil," to demonstrate how ridiculous it was and what rubbish modern French poets were writing. It had the opposite effect. I was bowled over and immediately went and bought the book. Then I read all the other surrealists—André Breton, Robert Desnos . . . I loved the black humor. I met Tzara at the very end of his life. He, who had refused to speak Romanian all his life, suddenly started talking to me in that language, reminiscing about his childhood, his youth, and his loves. But you see, the most implacable enemies of culture—Rimbaud, Lautréamont, dadaism, surrealism—end up being assimilated and absorbed by it. They all wanted to destroy culture, at least organized culture, and now they're part of our heritage. It's culture, and not the bourgeoisie, as has been alleged, that is capable of absorbing everything for its own nourishment. As for the oneiric element, that is due partly to surrealism, but to a larger extent due to personal taste and to Romanian folklore—werewolves and magical practices. For example, when someone is dying, women surround him and chant, Be careful! Don't tarry on the way! Don't be afraid of the wolf; it is not a real wolf!—exactly as in *Exit the King*. They do that so the dead man won't stay in infernal regions. The same thing can be found in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, which had a great impact on me too. However, my deepest anxieties were awakened, or reactivated, through Kafka.

INTERVIEWER

Especially the Kafka of *Metamorphosis*?

IONESCO

Yes, and of *Amerika*. Remember how his character, Karl Rossmann, goes from cabin to cabin and can't find his way? It is very oneiric. And Dostoyevsky interested me because of the way he deals with the conflict between good and evil. But all this already had happened by the time I left Bucharest.

INTERVIEWER

How did you manage to return to Paris—I believe at the age of twenty-six—and stay for good?

IONESCO

I had a degree in French literature and the French government gave me a grant to come and do a doctorate. In the meantime, I had married and was working as a teacher. My wife, Rodika, was one of the few people who thought the same as I did. Perhaps it's because she comes from that part of Romania that is very Asiatic—the people are small and have slit eyes. Now I'm becoming a racialist! Anyway, I was going to write a thesis on "The Theme of Death and Sin in French Poetry." There's the grand title again.

INTERVIEWER

Did you write it?

IONESCO

Oh no! As I researched, I noticed that the French—Pascal, Péguy, et cetera—had problems of faith, but they had no feeling for death and they *certainly* never felt guilty. What they had plenty of was the feeling of age, of physical deterioration and decay. From Ronsard's famous sonnet about aging, "Quand tu seras vieille . . ." to Baudelaire's *La Charogne* [*The Carrion*], to Zola's *Thérèse Raquin* and *Nana*—it's all degradation, decomposition, and rot. But not death. Never. The feeling of death is more metaphysical. So I didn't write it.

INTERVIEWER

Is that why you also gave up dramatizing Proust, because his preoccupation with time is different from yours?

IONESCO

Precisely. Also, *Remembrance of Things Past* is too long and difficult, and what is interesting is the seventh volume, *Time Regained*. Otherwise, Proust's work is concerned with irony, social criticism, worldliness, and the passage of time—which are not my preoccupations.

INTERVIEWER

When you settled in Paris, did you try to meet the authors whose works you had read, and get into the literary world?

IONESCO

I did research at the National Library and met other students. Later, I met Breton, who came to see my play *Amédée* in 1954. I continued seeing him until his death in 1966. But he had been dropped by the literary establishment because—unlike Aragon, Eluard, and Picasso—he refused to join the Communist Party, and so he wasn't fashionable anymore.

INTERVIEWER

You also got involved with the Collège de Pataphysique. Could you tell me about it?

IONESCO

Quite by chance I met a man named Sainmont, who was a professor of philosophy and the founder, or Le Providateur Général, of the Collège de Pataphysique. Later I met Raymond Queneau and Boris Vian, who were the most important and active members. The collège was an enterprise dedicated to nihilism and irony, which in my view corresponded to Zen. Its chief occupation was to devise commissions, whose job it was to create subcommissions,

formée à ce conflit simple, - il n'y aurait rien eu ~~de~~  
de nouveau, de vrai, de profond, - mais une  
réalité grossière et schématisée. Nous nous apercevons  
que tout est bien plus complexe. Et dans cette  
prison, un homme doit ~~même~~ être exécuté. On  
ne voit pas ce condamné sur la scène. Il est pourtant  
présent à notre conscience, infiniment obsédant. C'est  
le héros de la pièce. Ou plutôt : c'est la mort  
qui est ce héros. Gardien et prisonniers ~~ensemble~~  
~~cette mort~~ ~~la scène~~ ensemble, vivent cette mort,  
sauf le bourreau et le vieux prisonnier : il n'y a  
que ces derniers qui sont déshumanisés. À part eux,  
l'humanité profonde de cette œuvre est de dans la  
commission ~~mais~~ ~~est~~ terrible de cette haute, de  
cette souffrance qui est celle de tous. Une union,  
au-delà de la désunion ; une fraternité, presque  
inconsciente mais dont l'auteur nous fait prendre  
conscience, s'est créée en se défilant. Il est  
d'ailleurs que cette souffrance est propre à nous tous.  
Les gardiens, les prisonniers sont <sup>les</sup> les uns et les  
autres, des mortels que hautement le fait essentiel  
qu'ils sont des mortels, - et la pièce touche  
à <sup>à l'un des</sup> <sup>aux</sup> problèmes essentiels des hommes qui fait que  
les hommes sont des hommes. Voilà un théâtre  
populaire, - celui de la communion dans la  
même souffrance. Impopulaire, aussi, - car  
à Paris, du moins, le Châli du matin n'a pas eu

which in turn did nothing. There was one commission that was preparing a thesis on the history of latrines from the beginning of civilization to our time. The members were students of Dr. Faustrol, who was an invented character and the prophet of Alfred Jarry. So the purpose of the collège was the demolition of culture, even of surrealism, which they considered too organized. But make no mistake, these people were graduates of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and highly cultured. Their method was based on puns and practical jokes—*le canular*. There is a great tradition of puns in Anglo-Saxon literature—Shakespeare, *Alice in Wonderland*—but not in French. So they adopted it. They believed that the science of sciences is the *pataphysique* and its dogma, *le canular*.

#### INTERVIEWER

How was the collège organized, and how did one join it?

#### IONESCO

It was organized with great precision: there was a hierarchy, grades, a pastiche of Freemasonry. Anybody could join, and the first grade was that of Auditeur Amphitéote. After that, you became a Regent, and finally a Satrap. The satrap was entitled to be addressed as Votre Transcendence, and when you left his presence you had to walk backwards. Our principal activity was to write pamphlets and to make absurd statements, such as Jean Paulhan does not exist! Our meetings took place in a little café-restaurant in the Latin Quarter, and we discussed nothing, because we believed—and I still do—that there is no reason for anything, that everything is meaningless.

#### INTERVIEWER

Is that not contradictory to your religious conversion?

#### IONESCO

No, because we exist on several different planes, and when we said nothing had any reason we were referring to the psychologi-

cal and social plane. Our God was Alfred Jarry and, apart from our meetings, we made pilgrimages to his grave near Paris. As you know, Jarry had written *Ubu roi*, which was a parody of *Macbeth*. Much later I wrote a play based on *Macbeth* too. Anyway, the collège gave decorations, the most important of which was La Gidouille, which was a large turd to be pinned on your lapel.

INTERVIEWER

How did you acquire the honor of becoming a Satrap?

IONESCO

By writing *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, since the plays made fun of everything. They both had a conventional format—scenes, dialogue, characters—but no psychology.

INTERVIEWER

Did those at the Collège ever play a practical joke on you?

IONESCO

Yes. At the premiere of *The Bald Soprano*, twenty to thirty of them turned up wearing their gidouilles on their lapels. The audience was shocked at the sight of so many big turds, and thought they were members of a secret cult. I didn't produce many puns, but I did contribute to the *Cahiers de Pataphysique*, the collège's quarterly magazine, with letters in Italian, Spanish, and German—all the languages I don't speak. The letters just sounded Italian, Spanish, and German. I wish I had kept some, but I haven't. The chief makers of puns and *canulars* were Sainmont and Queneau. They invented a poet named Julien Torma, who of course never existed, and they published his works in the *Cahiers*. They even invented a biography for him, complete with a tragic death in the mountains.

INTERVIEWER

When did the collège cease to exist?

IONESCO

When the founders and guiding spirits—Vian, Sainmont, and finally Queneau—began to die. There was an honorary president, a certain Baron Mollet, who was not a baron at all, but a madman who had once been Guillaume Apollinaire's valet. But the Pataphysique is not dead. It lives on in the minds of certain men, even if they are not aware of it. It has gone into "occultation," as we say, and will come back again one day.

INTERVIEWER

To get back to your work: After you dropped your thesis in favor of your own writing, why did you choose the theater and not another literary form?

IONESCO

The theater chose me. As I said, I started with poetry, and I also wrote criticism and dialogue. But I realized that I was most successful at dialogue. Perhaps I abandoned criticism because I am full of contradictions, and when you write an essay you are not supposed to contradict yourself. But in the theater, by inventing various characters, you can. My characters are contradictory not only in their language, but in their behavior as well.

INTERVIEWER

So in 1950 you appeared, or should I say erupted, on the French stage with *The Bald Soprano*. Adamov's plays were staged almost simultaneously, and two years later there was Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*—three avant-garde playwrights who, though very different in personality and output, had a great deal in common thematically and formally, and who later became known as the chief exponents of the "theater of the absurd." Do you agree with this appellation?

IONESCO

Yes and no. I think it was Martin Esslin who wrote a book

with that title about us. At first I rejected it, because I thought that everything was absurd, and that the notion of the absurd had become prominent only because of existentialism, because of Sartre and Camus. But then I found ancestors, like Shakespeare, who said, in *Macbeth*, that the world is full of sound and fury, a tale told by an idiot, *signifying nothing*. Macbeth is a victim of fate. So is Oedipus. But what happens to them is not absurd in the eyes of destiny, because destiny, or fate, has its own norms, its own morality, its own laws, which cannot be flouted with impunity. Oedipus sleeps with his mummy, kills his daddy, and breaks the laws of fate. He must pay for it by suffering. It is tragic and absurd, but at the same time it's reassuring and comforting, since the idea is that if we don't break destiny's laws, we should be all right. Not so with our characters. 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. Their situation is not tragic, since it has no relation to a higher order. Instead, it's ridiculous, laughable, and derisory.

#### INTERVIEWER

After the success of *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson* you became suddenly and controversially famous. Were you lionized? Did you start frequenting literary salons and gatherings?

#### IONESCO

Yes, I did. Literary salons don't exist any longer in Paris, but in those days there were two. The first was the salon of Madame Dézenas—a rich lady who liked literature and the arts. All sorts of celebrities came there: Stravinsky, Etiemble, young Michel Butor, Henri Michaux . . . The second salon was La Vicomtesse de Noailles's. I went there once and met Jean-Louis Barrault. I remember how a ripple of excitement, a frisson, ran through the gathering when Aragon and Elsa Triolet were announced. Here come the communists! they all said. Aragon was in a dinner jacket and Elsa was covered in jewelry.

But *I* went there to drink whiskey and to meet friends, not out of worldliness.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think worldly distractions, social life and parties, dissipate a writer's concentration and damage his work?

IONESCO

Yes, to a certain extent. But there have been great writers who have been great party goers at the same time, such as Valéry, Claudel, and Henry James. Valéry used to get up at five in the morning, work until nine, then spend the rest of the day having fun in one way or another.

INTERVIEWER

Do you think success can be damaging for a writer, not only as a distraction but because it could make him seek out easy options and compromises?

IONESCO

It depends on how you use it. I detest and despise success, yet I cannot do without it. I am like a drug addict—if nobody talks about me for a couple of months I have withdrawal symptoms. It is stupid to be hooked on fame, because it is like being hooked on corpses. After all, the people who come to see my plays, who create my fame, are going to die. But you can stay in society and be alone, as long as you can be detached from the world. This is why I don't think I have ever gone for the easy option or done things that were expected of me. I have the vanity to think that every play I have written is different from the previous ones. Yet, even though they are written in a different way, they all deal with the same themes, the same preoccupations. *Exit the King* is also *The Bald Soprano*.

INTERVIEWER

You also wrote a play called *Macbett*, which is very different from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. What made you go for a remake of the Bard?

IONESCO

My *Macbett* is not a victim of fate, but of politics. I agree with Jan Kott, the Polish author of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, who gives the following explanation: A bad king is on the throne, a noble prince kills him to free the country of tyranny, but ipso facto he becomes a criminal and has to be killed in turn by someone else—and on it goes. The same thing has happened in recent history: the French Revolution liberated people from the power of the aristocrats. But the bourgeoisie that took over represented the exploitation of man by man and had to be destroyed—as in the Russian Revolution, which then degenerated into totalitarianism, Stalinism, and genocide. The more you make revolutions, the worse it gets. Man is driven by evil instincts that are often stronger than moral laws.

INTERVIEWER

This sounds very pessimistic and hopeless and seems at variance with your mystical and religious tendencies.

IONESCO

Well, there is a higher order, but man can separate himself from it because he is free—which is what we have done. We have lost the sense of this higher order, and things will get worse and worse, culminating perhaps in a nuclear holocaust—the destruction predicted in the apocalyptic texts. Only our apocalypse will be absurd and ridiculous because it will not be related to any transcendence. Modern man is a puppet, a jumping jack. You know, the Cathars [a Christian sect of the later Middle Ages] believed that the world was not created by God but by a demon who had stolen a few technological secrets from Him and made this

world—which is why it doesn't work. I don't share this heresy. I'm too afraid! But I put it in a play called *This Extraordinary Brothel*, in which the protagonist doesn't talk at all. There is a revolution, everybody kills everybody else, and he doesn't understand. But at the very end, he speaks for the first time. He points his finger towards the sky and shakes it at God, saying, "You rogue! You little rogue!" and he bursts out laughing. He understands that the world is an enormous farce, a *canular* played by God against man, and that he has to play God's game and laugh about it. That is why I prefer the phrase "theater of derision," which Emmanuel Jacquart used for the title of his book on Beckett, Adamov, and myself, to "theater of the absurd."

#### INTERVIEWER

I think Esslin was dealing with the first period of your work—*The Bald Soprano*, *The Lesson*, *Jacques*, and *The Chairs*. With the introduction of your central character, Béranger, the plays seem to change somewhat. The dislocation of language, the black humor, and the element of farce are all still there, but not to the same degree. Instead, you develop new elements of both plot and character. How did you come to choose the name Béranger, and did the creation of this character help with the transition?

#### IONESCO

I wanted a very common name. Several came to my mind and I finally chose Béranger. I don't think the name means anything, but it is very ordinary and innocuous. In the first plays the characters were puppets and spoke in the third person as *one*, not as *I* or as *you*. The impersonal *one*, as in "one should take an umbrella when it is raining." They lived in what Heidegger calls "the world of one." Afterwards, the characters acquired a certain volume, or weight. They have become more individualized, psychologized. Béranger represents the modern man. He is a victim of totalitarianism—of both kinds of totalitarianism, of the right and of the left. When *Rhinoceros* was produced in Germany, it had fifty cur-

tain calls. The next day the papers wrote, Ionesco shows us how we became Nazis. But in Moscow, they wanted me to rewrite it and make sure that it dealt with Nazism and not with their kind of totalitarianism. In Buenos Aires, the military government thought it was an attack on Perónism. And in England they accused me of being a petit bourgeois. Even in the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica* they call me a reactionary. You see, when it comes to misunderstanding, I have had my full share. Yet I have never been to the right, nor have I been a communist, because I have experienced, personally, both forms of totalitarianism. It is those who have never lived under tyranny who call me petit bourgeois.

#### INTERVIEWER

The misunderstanding of your work in England and the fact that your plays have not been widely produced there or in America dates back to your quarrel with the late critic Kenneth Tynan in the early sixties.

#### IONESCO

That's right. I didn't much care for the angry young men whose work Tynan was backing. I thought *them* very petit bourgeois and insignificant. I found their revolutionary zeal unconvincing, their anger small and personal, and their work of little interest.

#### INTERVIEWER

Also, Brecht was enjoying a vogue at the time, and you were definitely not Brechtian.

#### IONESCO

I think that Brecht was a good producer, but not really a poet or a dramatist, except in his early plays—*Threepenny Opera*, *Baal*, and a couple of others. But his committed plays don't work. I believe that, as Nabokov said, an author should not have to deliver a message, because he is not a postman.

#### INTERVIEWER

Sam Goldwyn said the same thing about films, “Leave the messages to Western Union.”

#### IONESCO

Did he say that? I quite agree. In France everybody was Brechtian—Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes—and they wanted to rule the theater. Later, Tynan asked me to write something for his erotic revue, *Oh! Calcutta!*, which I did. Then he said: You have so much talent, you could be Europe’s first dramatist. So I said, What should I do? and he said, Become Brechtian. I said, But then I would be the second, not the first.

#### INTERVIEWER

Now we seem to have come full circle. A Brechtian, Roger Planchon, has just produced *Journey Among the Dead*, your autobiographical play, and you are considered one of the greatest dramatists of our time. You have been sitting in the French Academy since 1970, next to some of the people who rejected your plays at first. I understand that the process of election to the Academy involves writing letters and calling on each member personally, pleading your case and asking to be elected. There are many famous rejections, like Baudelaire’s heartbreaking letters to the members of the Academy, begging them to vote for him. And Zola. It seems a humiliating process. Yet you, a rebel, why did you go through with it?

#### IONESCO

I didn’t. There were people who wanted me there, like René Clair, Jean Delay, and others; and I said I would apply on the condition that I would not have to call on people and write letters. I simply presented my letter of candidacy and I was elected by seventeen votes against sixteen.

INTERVIEWER

How do the meetings of the Academy compare with those of the Collège de Pataphysique in the old days?

IONESCO

All the members of the Academy are pataphysicians, whether consciously, like the late René Clair, or unconsciously. Anyway, I don't go there that often, only a couple of times a year for the elections of new members, and I always vote against them!

INTERVIEWER

Against whom?

IONESCO

Against everybody! Unfortunately, I'm such a poor intriguer that I have not succeeded in keeping out certain undesirable persons, and there are people I would like to see as members who have not yet been elected. But the elections are fun. Claudel used to say that they were so amusing that there should be one every week. You see, the French Academy is an association of solitaires: Jean Delay, the inventor of modern postpsychoanalytic psychiatry; Lévi-Strauss, the creator of modern anthropology and structuralism; Louis de Broglie, one of the founders of modern physics; and George Dumézil, a great specialist in religions. These are the most cultured men in France, truly liberated minds and free spirits. I assure you, only third-rate journalists denigrate the French Academy, the petit bourgeois who think they are intellectuals and who would not dream of mocking the Soviet Academy—where the members must accept all manner of indignity, pay allegiance to the Communist Party, and be censured constantly.

INTERVIEWER

You said that you didn't care much for the angry young men of the theater. What about those, like Pinter and Albee, whose works were clearly influenced by Beckett's and yours?

## IONESCO

Pinter's first play, *The Caretaker*, was derived from Beckett and was very good. Since then, he seems to be doing what I call *du boulevard intelligent*—which is to say, he is writing clever, well-made commercial plays. In truth, these playwrights were influenced only by our language, not really by our spirit. Stoppard's play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* was admirable. I also liked Albee's *The Zoo Story*, but I haven't read anything in the same vein since. Several French playwrights, Dubillard and a few others, tried their hands, but it didn't really go anywhere. What we tried to do was to put man on the stage to face himself. That is why our theater was called metaphysical. In England, where people like Edward Bond write plays in which terrible things happen, it is still on the political level. The sacred and the ritual are missing. Did I tell you that I recently went to Taiwan? It is a nice American place, and everybody speaks English. But they seem to have lost touch completely with their own traditions, their own sages, and I, not a particularly erudite amateur, had to tell them about Confucius, Buddha, Zen. In the West, also, people have lost the feeling for the sacred, *le sentiment du sacré*. We tried to bring it back by going to our sources, to the theater of antiquity. In Racine, adultery is considered a very important crime, punishable by death. In the theater of the nineteenth century, adultery is a *divertissement*, an entertainment—the *only* entertainment! So although we are considered modern, too modern, even avant-garde, *we* are the real classicists, not the writers of the nineteenth century.

## INTERVIEWER

After four plays—*Amédée*, *The Killer*, *Exit the King*, and *Rhinoceros*—you dropped Béranger. Did you think you had said enough about him?

## IONESCO

I changed his name because I thought people might get bored. I called him Jean, or The Character.

## INTERVIEWER

In your new play, which is a kind of oneiric biography, he is called Jean again. In the opening scene, there are two coffins, Sartre's and Adamov's, and you are standing behind them. Why did you choose those two from among all the people you have known?

## IONESCO

Adamov was a great friend of mine for years, until my plays really caught on; then he turned against me. I resented him for giving in to pressure and becoming "committed," Brechtian, and pro-Communist, although he never actually joined the party. We finally broke up over some silly literary dispute. I think I accused him of stealing my dreams! With Sartre it was different. It was a case of a missed appointment, *un rendez-vous manqué*, as one journalist put it. I had loved *La Nausée*, which had influenced my only novel, *Le Solitaire* [*The Hermit*], but he annoyed me with his constant ideological changes. He was given solid proof of concentration camps in Russia, yet he did not publicize it because he feared it would disillusion the workers and strengthen the bourgeoisie. Towards the end, when the New Philosophers arrived on the scene, people like Foucault and Glucksmann, he told them that he was no longer a Marxist. He always had to be aligned with *le dernier cri*, the latest ideological fashion. I would have preferred him to be more obdurate, even if in error. He was called "The Conscience of Our Time"; I feel he was rather the *unconscience* of our time—*l'inconscience*.

But he was always nice and courteous to me, and my plays were the only ones he allowed to be put on a double bill with his, so I am sad that I didn't get close to him. I had a dream about him recently: I am on a stage in front of a huge, empty auditorium, and I say, That's it, nobody comes to see my plays anymore. Then a little man walks onstage, and I recognize him as Sartre. He says, Not true, look there, up in the gallery, it's full of young people. And I say to him, Ah, Monsieur Sartre, how I would like to talk to you,

at last. And he replies, Too late . . . Too late. So you see, it was a missed appointment.

INTERVIEWER

This play, *Journey Among the Dead*, has been a great success with the public as well as with the critics. It's coming to the Comédie Française in the spring. With that out of the way, have you started work on something else?

IONESCO

It's a play about the life and martyrdom of a modern saint, who has just been canonized by the Church—or is it beatified? Which comes first? I'm not sure. Anyway, his name was Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Pole, and he died in Auschwitz. They were going to send some prisoners to a mine, where they would die of hunger and thirst. Father Kolbe offered to go instead of a man who had a wife and children and didn't want to die. That man is still alive.

INTERVIEWER

Does it matter to you if the Church canonizes him or not? And what about the recent allegations of anti-Semitism regarding him?

IONESCO

Oh dear! It won't matter to me at all whether the Church canonizes him or not. The important thing is that such a man existed. As for his anti-Semitism, I have not heard anything. People always try to find base motives behind every good action. We are afraid of pure goodness and of pure evil. I very much doubt that such a man could have been remotely anti-Semitic.

INTERVIEWER

For this play, you already had a clear idea of the character and the plot. Do you always start with an idea?

IONESCO

It depends. Some plays start with a plan. For example, *Macbett* was a conscious parody of Shakespeare. I already had the idea for *Rhinoceros*. But I had no idea at all where plays like *The Chairs*, *The Lesson*, and *The Bald Soprano* would lead. I had the idea of the corpse for *Amédée*, but the rest came bit by bit.

INTERVIEWER

How do you work?

IONESCO

I work in the morning. I sit comfortably in an armchair, opposite my secretary. Luckily, although she's intelligent, she knows nothing about literature and can't judge whether what I write is good or worthless. I speak slowly, as I'm talking to you, and she takes it down. I let characters and symbols emerge from me, as if I were dreaming. I always use what remains of my dreams of the night before. Dreams are reality at its most profound, and what you invent is truth because invention, by its nature, can't be a lie. Writers who try to prove something are unattractive to me, because there is nothing to prove and everything to imagine. So I let words and images emerge from within. If you do that, you might prove something in the process. As for dictating the text to my secretary, for twenty-five years I wrote by hand. But now it is impossible for me; my hands shake and I am too nervous. Indeed, I am so nervous that I kill my characters immediately. By dictating, I give them the chance to live and grow.

INTERVIEWER

Do you correct what she has written afterward?

IONESCO

Hardly. But to get back to my new play, I tried to change the incoherent language of the previous plays into the language of dreams. I think it works, more or less.

INTERVIEWER

Do you have a favorite among your plays?

IONESCO

Until recently it was *The Chairs*, because the old man remembers a scene from his childhood, but very vaguely, like the light of a dying candle, and he remembers a garden whose gate is closed. For me that is paradise—the lost paradise. This scene is far more important to me than the end, which is more spectacular.

INTERVIEWER

We have talked about the metaphysical and ritualistic aspects of your work, but there is a comic element as well, which has greatly contributed to your popularity.

IONESCO

Georges Duhamel used to say that “humor is the courtesy of despair.” Humor is therefore very important. At the same time, I can understand people who can’t laugh anymore. How can you, with the carnage that is going on in the world—in the Middle East, in Africa, in South America, everywhere? There is awfully little that is conducive to mirth.

INTERVIEWER

Whatever happens in the future, your place in the literary history of our time is secure. What is your own assessment of your work?

IONESCO

I’ll tell you about a dream I had recently. When I was a school-boy in Bucharest, my father used to come into my room in the evening and check my homework. He would open my drawers and find nothing but bits of poetry, drawings, and papers. He would get very angry and say that I was a lazybones, a good-for-nothing. In my dream, he comes into my room and says, I hear you have

done things in the world, you have written books. Show me what you have done. And I open my drawers and find only singed papers, dust and ashes. He gets very angry and I try to appease him, saying, You are right, Daddy, I've done nothing, nothing.

INTERVIEWER

Yet you go on writing.

IONESCO

Because I can't do anything else. I have always regretted having gotten involved with literature up to my neck. I would have preferred to have been a monk; but, as I said, I was torn between wanting fame and wishing to renounce the world. The basic problem is that if God exists, what is the point of literature? And if He *doesn't* exist, what is the point of literature? Either way, my writing, the only thing I have ever succeeded in doing, is invalidated.

INTERVIEWER

Can literature have any justification?

IONESCO

Oh yes, to entertain people. But that is not important. Yet, to introduce people to a different world, to encounter the miracle of being, that is important. When I write *The train arrives at the station*, it is banal, but at the same time sensational, because it is invented. Literature can also help people. Two of my translators, a Romanian and a German, 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. So you see, I am contradicting myself a little by saying that literature can be significant. People who don't read are brutes. It is better to write than to make war, isn't it?

INTERVIEWER

So, perhaps writing has been a way of exorcising your basic anxiety about death? Or at least learning to live with it?

IONESCO

Perhaps. But my work has been essentially a dialogue with death, asking him, Why? Why? So only death can silence me. Only death can close my lips.

