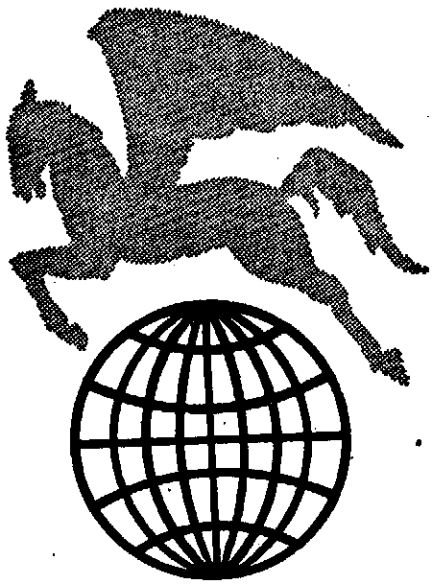
Ionesco

By ALLAN LEWIS

University of Bridgeport



Twayne Publishers, Inc. :: New York

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 75–187630

MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

CHAPTER 3

The Bald Soprano, The Lesson, The Chairs

> "All the committed authors want to rape us."
>
> (*Fragments of a Journal*)

I *The Bald Soprano*—"characters emptied of psychology"

IONESCO'S first play, *The Bald Soprano* (*La Cantatrice Chauve,* 1950), set the tone for an entirely new concept of drama, anti-plays designed not only to indicate the emptiness of middle-class domestic life, which had been a persistent theme of bohemian rebels of the nineteenth century, but also to underscore the uselessness of writing plays. The obvious self-contradiction, a play that is an anti-play, ushered in a decade of language inventiveness, surrealist metaphors, and non-Aristotelian devices, which as satire, travesty, and tongue-in-cheek hoax, upset all the long held notions of the nature of drama.

The Bald Soprano opened at the Théâtre des Noctambules on May 11, 1950 on a rainy Sunday night with the roof of the theatre leaking and an audience of three people. Twenty years later, the play was still being performed in a *théâtre de poche* on the Left Bank of Paris and has been seen in theatres all over the world and been incorporated into the required selections of most repertory companies. When a play, despite an inglorious opening night, can command the attention of an increasingly large audience in the Western World, a play in which the theme of nothingness runs through every scene, it is safe to conclude that it has touched a responsive chord in the conscience of an age and reflects the deep anxieties of a particular moment in history.

In my first play, *The Bald Soprano,* which started off as an attempt to parody the theatre, and hence a certain kind of human behavior, it

was by plunging into banality, by draining the sense from the hollowest clichés of everyday language that I tried to render the strangeness that seems to pervade our whole existence.[1]

The characters are without character, mechanical puppets. Time does not exist and plot is absent, as are suspense and heightened movement. The language is a rising crescendo of platitudes that erupts in the final ritual of embattled couples into a choral chant of nonsense syllables. No order prevails. Nothing is sacred. Communication is expressed in animal grunts. Marital bliss is reduced to a caterwauling of equally empty computerized partners. Yet the audience laughs, which surprised Ionesco, or at least he pretended to be surprised. An exposé of the pettiness and triviality of domestic relations, of the routine responses that deny emotional or imaginative vitality, "of words turned into sounding shells devoid of meaning, characters emptied of psychology,"[2] was intended as a caustic comment on the common experience of all. The bitter joke is that the audience was laughing at its own vacuity.

The scene is a middle-class English interior, completely English. Mr. and Mrs. Smith are seated in the living room after dinner. As he is reading a newspaper she is knitting English socks. After a moment of English silence, "the English clock strikes seventeen English strokes."[3]

The dialogue is a series of non sequiturs and illogicalities, a reduction to absurdity of everyday conversation, as though one had taken a recording of what was said in a bus or suburban train and played it back as a mélange of inconsequential inanities. Mr. Smith reads in the paper that Bobby Watson has just died. Bobby Watson turns out to be the name also of the dead man's widow as well as the name of the children, the uncle, the cousin, and almost everyone else. To the realistic playwright an individual's name is the symbol of his identity. Arthur Miller in *The Crucible* and *A View From The Bridge* has his protagonist go to his death rather than disgrace his name. In Renaissance literature, a man's name implies a duty to uphold its honor. With the breakdown of tradition, Ionesco discards the significance of separate individuality. In the surrealist logic of fancy, names shift and characters merge.

As to Bobby Watson, the surviving wife, Mrs. Smith asks if she is pretty, and Mr. Smith replies, "She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin." [4] Contradiction follows contradiction, for in the absence of objective criteria the opposite of a statement is equally true. "To liberate his obsessions an author has only one duty, to let his fantasies take shape without intervention from any source." [5]

Mr. and Mrs. Martin, the dinner guests, arrive and are attracted to each other. They discover that they live on the same street, in the same house, sleep in the same bed, and have the same child, a bizarre coincidence, since the girl is blonde and has a white eye and a red eye. Mr. Martin ends this interlude in a flat monotonous voice, saying, "Then, dear lady, I believe that there can be no doubt about it, we have seen each other before and you are my own wife . . . Elizabeth I have found you again." [6] Ionesco is not only mocking the standard melodrama of intrigue and romantic adventure and the usual love scenes, but he is also parodying the failure of love, the emptiness of marriage wherein husband and wife are unable to know each other. Love belongs to the world beyond reason and has never been understood by the Smiths and the Martins with their reasoned conformity, which cannot explore the mysterious unknown of the emotions. The two couples sit facing each other. The conversation, replete with silences and accelerated rhythms, is hollow and automatic. Any event, death, or reading from a newspaper is uttered with equal emphasis, and greeted with comparable enthusiasm.

The doorbell rings three times and each time Mrs. Smith goes to the door and finds no one there. The fourth time Mr. Smith answers the bell and the Fire Chief enters. Mrs. Smith, on the basis of experience, maintains that when the doorbell rings no one is there. Mr. Smith on the other hand, a defender of cause-and-effect logic, insists that when the doorbell rings someone is always there. The Fire Chief, who also acts as a confessor, settles the argument by stating that "when the doorbell rings, sometimes there is someone, and other times there is no one," an example of the way in which logic can clarify experience. They then play a game of

storytelling, each recounting an experimental fable of weird geographical and physiological disconnections. Mary, the Maid, who turns out to be the lover of the Fire Chief, recites a poem in his honor which ends with "irrefutable truisms." [7]

> The smoke caught fire
> The fire caught fire
> Everything caught fire
> Caught fire, caught fire.[8]

As the Fire Chief is about to leave, Mrs. Martin thanks him for helping them pass "a truly Cartesian quarter of an hour," to which he replies, "Speaking of that—the bald soprano?" This is the only reference to the title in the play. Years later in *Pedestrian of the Air* Ionesco made up for this omission by introducing a bald soprano who walks across the stage and disappears. He had originally intended to call his first play *English Made Easy* or *The English Hour,* but when the director Nicolas Bataille said that the play might be taken as a satire on English middle-class life, the title was changed for the reason that "no prima donna with or without hair appears in the play," a delightful disregard for logical coherence. Ionesco added later that an actor playing the Fire Chief made a slip of the tongue and instead of saying "*institutrice blonde*" said "*cantatrice chauve,*" and a title was discovered. This, however, seems too logical to be accurate.

The two couples, after the Maid and the Fire Chief have left, engage in a fast-moving interchange of assorted platitudes, aphorisms and non sequiturs, which gather momentum in rapid-fire nonsense syllables such as: "Mice have lice, lice haven't mice," "Don't ruche my broach!" "Don't smooch the brooch!" "Groom the goose, don't goose the broom." The rhythm increases, the letters of the alphabet, vowels and consonants alternating, explode in a final outburst and blackout. When the lights come up, the Smiths or, if the director chooses, the Martins, are in the same position as when the play opened, carrying on the same conversation, and the action starts all over again, indicating the continuing emptiness, the ongoing sameness, the purposeless passions of "people who have no hunger, no conscious desires. They are bored stiff, but

people who are unconsciously alienated don't even know they are bored, they feel it vaguely, hence the final explosion which is quite useless as the characters and situations are both static and interchangeable and everything ends where it started." [9]

The play has no apparent content but "simply theatrical machinery functioning in a void." [10] The people of *The Bald Soprano* can be substituted for one another, since they are all the same person, or nonexistent persons, people with no problems, since they live in a world without "metaphysics, where all social problems have been resolved, . . . the world of tomorrow." [11]

How the play came to be written is an indication of Ionesco's seriocomic attitude. He wanted to learn English and bought an "*English-French Conversational Manual for Beginners.*" He discovered that instead of learning English he was discovering "some very surprising truths, . . . that the floor is below us, the ceiling above us, that there are seven days in the week," which he had known before but which were now seen as "indisputably true." In the textbook, when the Martins in Lesson Five join their friends the Smiths they say, "The country is more peaceful than big cities," "Yes, but cities are more highly populated and there are more shops," a revelatory series of contrasting truths that gave Ionesco the basis of his dialogue.[12]

Even though the non-end to this anti-play represents a cyclical repetition of continuing senselessness, Ionesco had considered other possible endings, including one in which during the final quarrel the audience would invade the stage and the manager and superintendent of police would come on and fire at the audience with live ammunition "to make an example of them," after which the police, guns in hand, would order the theatre cleared.

The Bald Soprano has been interpreted as a criticism of bourgeois society, a parody of realistic drama, a satire on English life, a mock-surrealist farce, an assault on methods of learning foreign languages, a comment on the lack of communication. Ionesco accepted all such interpretations, even contradictory ones, but did admit that the play is "about a kind of universal petite bourgeoisie, the petit bourgeois being a man of fixed ideas and slogans, a ubiquitous conformist, which is revealed in his mechanical language." [13]

The Bald Soprano is a demonstration of life's utter banality, unconscious boredom, and serious nonsense, exposing with "the tragedy of language" the monstrous forms within us deposited by a lifeless morality.

II *The Lesson*

The second short play also has the action start all over again after the curtain has fallen, which according to Ionesco is more realistic than the realistic dramas which end with a resolution of opposing forces or a choice of alternative solutions. Unlike that of *The Bald Soprano,* the title of *The Lesson* (*La Leçon,* 1951) refers to what happens onstage. *The Lesson* is actually about a lesson.

A lively, dynamic young girl of eighteen comes to the Professor for tutorial help in preparation for "the total doctorate." As the Professor, a little old man, age sixty, timid and proper, proceeds with the lesson, the pupil grows increasingly sad, tired, and withdrawn, unable to speak, completely passive. She becomes the paralyzed victim of the Professor, who changes from the mild, polite teacher to a lewd, dominating, aggressive tyrant. His voice grows imperceptively more assured and sonorous as hers grows increasingly inaudible. The lesson ends as the Professor plunges a knife, real or imaginary, into the pupil's body in a symbolic rape and murder. The Maid rebukes the Professor, reminding him that this is his fortieth victim and he soon may run out of pupils. He protests, "She didn't want to learn! She was disobedient!" [14] As the Professor shows signs of fear, the Maid places an armband, preferably with a Nazi insignia on his arm, saying, "Wear this, then you won't have anything more to be afraid of. That's good politics." [15] As the body is removed, the bell rings and the forty-first pupil enters to start the same procedure all over again.

The actual lesson begins with general knowledge, naming the capital of France and listing the four seasons, which the pupil has difficulty doing. They then turn to arithmetic. The pupil shows some skill in addition but cannot subtract three from four. The Professor admonishes her, "You always have a tendency to add. But one must be able to subtract too. It's not enough to integrate, you must also disintegrate. That's the way life is. That's philosophy.