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Review Article

Ionesco's "Exit The King" — And An Intriguing Exeunt *

WHEN I saw the British premiere of Eugene Ionesco's *Exit the King* (*Le Roi Se Meurt* in the original), two little old women, their wraps about them, stood up in the middle of the performance and clomped noisily away in their sensible oxfords. In the frightfully stuffy upper-circle of the Theatre Royal in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, many a head turned testily in the direction of the retreating

* Some time in the 1950s eight young Filipinos made it almost their personal duty to force the contemporary theatre on the consciousness of the Manila audience. They called themselves the Drama Octet and studiously shied away from competing with the Manila Theater Guild by refusing to stage anything like the well acted, excellently produced and often utterly forgettable plays in the *théâtre de boulevard* repertoire which the Guild favored. But after a successful though somewhat limited tour of one college and two university halls with T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party* the Octet members were whisked back to their regular jobs which dispersed seven of the members to Europe and America. They had to abandon an experiment more exciting than the staging of Eliot, for they had already begun earnest if abortive plans of trying Eugene Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Soprano* in an American, *The Bald Prima Donna* in a more popular English translation) on the audience they served. *Avant-garde* plays have since been presented by university groups in the Philippines (Sartre at the University of the East, Ionesco himself at the University of the Philippines), but in 1958 the Drama Octet had to await a more propitious occasion. One of the members of the Octet now reports on the latest Ionesco play, which had a preliminary run in Newcastle-upon-Tyne before being entered in the 1963 Edinburgh Festival.

females. But the pair were presumably troubled by something other than ungovernable bladders, for they did not return. And to judge from the chatter of the first-night audience before curtain-time, they were but two of many who had come to see, not the play, but Sir Alec Guinness ("Wasn't he ever so darling in *The Bridge on the River Kwai*?") in the *honi-soit-qui-mal-y-pense* flesh.

I took their flight from the auditorium as, in some way, a reassuring indication that in the often inordinately star-oriented drama of the sixties, it was still possible to say, "The play's the thing!" For indeed even with Sir Alec Guinness and the Australian actress Googie Withers (both turning out superb performances) on the boards, the play was still very much *the thing*: one either enjoyed it, or one did not. And if one were as uncompromisingly practical as little old women are in Britain, one stayed on to the end and "God Save the Queen", or left the theatre accordingly.

This is not to say, however, that the play was in fact un-enjoyable; on the contrary, I found it more immediately engaging (because less out-and-out "absurd") than earlier Ionesco plays. By the same token, some ardent avant-gardist might have been annoyed by what he is welcome to consider as a retreat from the pataphysical to the less disturbing idiom of the symbolist stage: a play about how one approaches the inevitability of dying does not require an excursion beyond metaphysics, surely. At any rate, there is something to be said for plays that can be enjoyed without first having to be categorized as to ideology or even as to programme. Ionesco himself, after all, once said that the emotional material that goes into his plays derives not from such sources, but from a mood or an impulse.

The point here is that (again!) "the eye of the beholder" is very much an active requisite to drama of this kind, much more so than it is to the drama of the naturalistic stage—and if little old women walk out, perhaps it is because their eyes have not been opened wide enough, being unaccustomed to this "new light." This, however, is a subject I propose to say more of in a later section of this review.

Ionesco does have a way of forcing his audience to realize the familiar by dangling the unfamiliar before their eyes; in *Exit the King*, for instance, one gets (*enjoys* would hardly be the word for it) a macabre laugh out of the eternal subterfuges and self-delusions with which men at the point of death "delay" the inevitable hour. But the exposition of this familiar enough idea involves the presentation of a most unfamiliar man: he is a king, he is some hundreds of years old, he has two queens ("one first in time, the other first in affection"), and he commands suns to shine, clouds to bring rain, plants to sprout out of the ground. What is more, he has a very strange kingdom, shrunk now to little more than his castle and a garden plot but once upon a time almost limitless. His subjects, once numerous, have dwindled down to a few old and decrepit ministers-of-state and some imbeciles (why this juxtaposition, one wonders?) who presently drown while fishing in a shallow garden stream. His most loyal supporters—a bodyguard and a scullery maid (or lady-in-waiting, or nurse, it is never clear what exactly)—disappear from under his dimming gaze even as they protest eternal allegiance. Decay is everywhere: the castle walls shed their plaster, and the king himself, before everyone's eyes, undergoes a metamorphosis which culminates in his annihilation. In unregal pyjamas, he is first seen running cross-stage from wing to wing—aging, yes, but still full of the kind of "vigah" that makes him still a believable head of state. By the time he again appears, the audience understands at least this much: he has to realize that he is going to die—"by the end," as one person announces, "of this show." This is the first element of the conflict, for the king is in no frame of mind to listen to such nonsense. It slowly dawns upon the audience onward from this point that the entire play is an acting out of the death agony, the shrinking of the king's sensory domain being signalized as much (in this production) by a Guinness who little by little becomes a sort of collapsed Alastair Sim, as by the inventiveness of the playwright who causes characters and props to disappear one by one from the stage with the extinction of each avenue of consciousness heretofore possessed by the king.

In the end, of course, the king accepts the fact of his mortality, and his acceptance grows from the second element in the conflict: the queen "first in time" decides, with the support of an apocalyptic court physician, that the king must first be made to face reality so that he can learn to die with dignity; the queen "first in affection," thinking this to be unbearably cruel, and sometimes being abetted by the tears of the maid-nurse-lady-in-waiting, pleads that the king should not die, but that if he must, he should be kept in ignorance of his doom. She proposes, by her love, to buoy him up to the very end.

One critic has suggested that the two queens are Martha and Mary figures, but this must be dismissed as a caprice in view of the nihilistic and therefore un-Christian ending of the play: soon after slightly more than half the drama is over, the king no longer has any consciousness of love—a state of mind externalized on the stage by the abrupt disappearance of the queen "first in affection." If the queens are at all symbols (and I use the word advisedly) they would seem to me more like Death and Life figures. This reading is, I think, defensible because somewhere in the play Ionesco puts across the idea that Death, or at least the seed of death, is present from the moment of conception, even before the moment of birth; and so the queen "first in time," if she were indeed a Death figure, appears as something of a nagger whom, let him do what he might, the king will never, and indeed does not, shake off until he himself disappears—when Death is annihilated by his own annihilation. But even if this hangs together nicely with the obvious infatuation which the king would, and does, exhibit for Life ("first in affection"), the whole construct is suspiciously pat, and we know that Ionesco is not as simple-minded as all that.

We know from Ionesco's other writing (see *Cahiers des Quatre Saisons*, No. 1, 1955) that apart from his preoccupation with the theme of death, he has all his plays proceed from what he considers to be two fundamental states of consciousness: the awareness of (a) evanescence, and (b) solidity—"of the unreal transparency of the world and its opacity, of

light and of thick darkness." One state may well promise escape, and the other bring us enslavement, but in Ionesco's view (so we are told by his translator, Donald Watson), both experiences testify to the unreality of our "real" world. Ionesco's communication of these experiences on stage (the vehicle with which he has chosen to examine the extremes of our "reality") involves a technique not altogether dissimilar from that employed, in painting, by the London modern, Francis Bacon, who starts work on a reasonably recognizable representation of, say, the Crucifixion, and then proceeds to reduce this in stages to perhaps something that looks more like Mussolini hanging upside down in death, and finally to the even more animal suggestion of a flayed Rembrandt ox dangling heavily in the shadows of a butcher's shop. The shock of discovering so much congruity between items our habitual thought and preconceptions present to us as incongruous to the point of blasphemy registers with tremendous force, and the impression it makes on the spectator is indelible. In the same way, even though Ionesco begins his plays with scenes deceptively "real," the stage soon becomes an arena for all manner of illogic; and this very convertibility of the logical with the illogical, of the familiar with the unfamiliar, underscores for us Ionesco's private vision of life—or death. Might he not perhaps, in this latest of his plays—written last year when he thought he was dying—have been expressing the dichotomy of his vision in the persons of the two queens? Both, we remember, eventually disappear. In essence, the unbudgable solidity of one is just as illusory as the other's promise of euphoria. He would then seem to be saying that the only thing that really matters is the knowledge of one's existence, "the joy and wonder at being alive"—and "the whole history of the world," to use his own words, "is useless, senseless, impossible."

Within this context, Ionesco might well believe that in King Berenger I, he has a spokesman eminently suited for broadcasting his ideas: the use of the name Berenger recalls the heroes, bearing the same name, of *Rhinoceros* and *Le Piéton de l'Air* (both written in the last three years). The

three Berengers—or possibly the same Ionesco—have in common an awareness of their own existence and of the meta-physical isolation born of a conviction that everything which people ordinarily accept as "reality" is essentially irrelevant. Everything, that is, apart from the existing self. The assertion of these cognitions leads Berenger, in *Rhinoceros*, to cry out against all forms of brutishness, whether it is expressed in the mindless totalitarianism of the Herd, or in the equally mindless animalism of his own natural drives. It brings Berenger, in *Le Piéton de l'Air*, sailing weightlessly into the fourth dimension where he gets a peep into a new world beyond our drab, illusory, restricted world of only three dimensions, but he returns disabused of any hopes of finding "release" there: the fourth dimension is just one more irrelevance.

Having tested the extreme of solidity in *Rhinoceros*, and the extreme of evanescence in *Le Piéton de l'Air*, Ionesco strikes at both anti-polarities in *Exit the King*. As theatre no less than as statement of vision, the result is the same: in spite of their comic elements, the plays are heavily introspective, even claustrophobic. *Exit the King*, as a charade of the death agony, engages the whole stage—characters, props, lights, sound effects, music, everything—in a sort of psychical strip-tease by baring, with admirable inventiveness, the final introspections and awarenesses of Berenger who, while he yet has existence, is physically present at stage-centre. This is a very compelling *symbol*, but also because of its very pre-occupation with the inward look, it nevertheless fails to make allowances for the existence of other beings who have a reality of their own, never mind how irrelevant they may seem to the central character (the only character) at the moment of an "exit," and during the moments immediately preceding.

It may be argued that this is to quarrel with Ionesco the philosopher rather than Ionesco the playwright; still, it need not stop us from saying that when people draw a comparison between Berenger and Everyman, it will be found that where one has affinities with Sartre (and therefore with the contemporary world?), the other identifies with mediaeval Christianity (and therefore with universal man?) Considered in

itself, this may seem like asserting the obvious, but the point I wish to bring out is that the humanity which Berenger is supposed to represent is a poor and shrunken version of the hopeful though indeed just as anxious humanity figured in Everyman. If Berenger is a later-day Everyman, he is an existentialist Everyman—an Everyman who goes not really to his death but to his annihilation, and quite, quite alone—without the consoling company of Good Deeds. This is why in *Exit the King*, there is nothing on the stage just before the end—only the haunting intensity of a lone spotlight on an unbearably desolate chair (it had been majestic as a throne), and even that is at last consumed by complete darkness. The void is all. And the curtain falls.

And now, to return to the two little old women and their exeunt. Their leaving the play is, I think, as good an occasion as any for raising some aesthetic and critical questions about the *avant-garde* theatre. (I do not use the term “occasion” idly, because the action of this hapless but honest pair was, for me, exactly that: an *occasion* for some thought; and the questions which have arisen in my mind as a result have no necessary connection with my review of the play itself, nor with my own appreciation of a playwright who can simultaneously please and irritate. Although references will be made to Ionesco in the following, therefore, it must be remembered that what is under discussion now is a more general subject: the contemporary theatre).

As surely as some people in that premiere-night audience gave understanding applause to the production and the play, there were others who must have stayed through the performance with the distinct feeling of having missed out on a few things. There had been the usual rush for souvenir-programmes before the show, but these had been of no help—just a six-penny jumble of tasteless advertisements framing some spare credit lines and the names of the cast. Nevertheless, the reflex reaching for these worthless booklets had made one thing very clear: theatre-goers in general appear quite willing to accept anything put before them (initially, anyway) toward “elucidat-

ing" an unfamiliar play, especially when the unfamiliarity is compounded by the idiom or tradition in which it is written.

This puts the *real* critic—I do not say just any writer of programme notes—into a position of indispensability: a businesslike audience, who remember quite well that they have paid good money for tickets, rely on him to "rationalize and set in order the fragments of inspiration or quasi-inspiration which the artist [in this case, the playwright] provides." Thus, the little old ladies might not have left the theatre if someone had warned them that the first avowed intention of Ionesco's drama is, as Richard N. Coe avers, to sort out the confusion between "reality" and "realism." They might have been prevailed upon to stay if someone had called their attention to Ionesco's own words:

I have always thought that the truth of fiction is more profound, more charged with meaning than everyday reality. Realism...falls short of reality. It shrinks it, attenuates it, falsifies it; it does not take into account our basic truths and our fundamental obsessions: love, death, astonishment. It presents man in a reduced and estranged perspective. Truth is in our dreams, in the imagination....

Having noted this, our little old ladies might have derived some pleasure in seeing this shrinking, this attenuating, and this falsifying of reality as it took place on the stage when the "realistic" Queen presided over the graduated contraction of Berenger's own real world: his very existence. And this, surely, could not have come as vividly to them in the more familiar, more conventional, naturalistic stage.

Once some critic provides a few pertinent premises, the seemingly illogical assumes a logic all its own. Once the spectator realizes that Ionesco is trying to extend the limits of the possible, he begins docilely to see how valid it can be for the playwright—whose craft is illusion turned to the service of truth, after all—to say that it is "a monstrous waste of time and energy," as well as "a shabby piece of trickery," to cheat an audience into believing that the only theatre possible is the realistic theatre, as if realism and reality were two sides of an equation. What is, in this light, the Aristotelian pyramid with its neatly compartmented starting points, rising

actions, climaxes, falling actions, denouements, and conclusions, but a theatrical tautology?

At this point, however, another question must be asked; or, to be more accurate, a series of questions. When an artist cuts himself from a tradition to challenge the unknown, should it be his task or the critic's to make the known understandable not only to himself but also to his public? Must the work of necessity be a joint effort? Supposing that the critic did undertake the elucidation of a play's obscurities and implications, would he not run the risk of "glorifying" an artifact (not all works with pretensions to the name *avant-garde* are worth even the paper they are written on), or of apotheosizing one who is merely an artist in need of an intellectual crutch?

If I may be permitted to cross over to the plastic arts, there is the recent critical flurry over Pop Art to illustrate the problem. Because of the growing reliance of the public on "tinned" critical judgments (souvenir-programmes, the backs of record jackets, etc.), some critics and some otherwise sober magazines have thought it necessary to explain the obviously poor copies of comic cartoons that have lately found their way into art galleries as a new and "honest" movement in artistic expression: sections of a newspaper page are copied on canvas, or simply the speech balloons from a strip like *Steve Canyon*. Movement this may be, but hardly at a level—if honest means what it used to mean—that can be termed artistic except in the broadest, anthropological sense!

While it is quite validly the work of the critic to relate the artifact (painting or play or whatever) to its purpose and its environment, in order to provide the intellectual framework for making enjoyment of the work possible, it seems to me that the sudden culture-consciousness of any group can create a difficulty for many critics who, in our day, may find themselves stopping short of finishing their tasks. Thus, they have articulate answers for "what is the artist trying to do." They produce ingenious forms of persuasiveness in demonstrating "how well has the artist done what he has set out to do," and never mind the intentional fallacy. But they say precious little in the "tinned"

critiques about "was it worth doing." All output is reduced to a common denominator: the familiar humanist's plea that anything which bears the touch of Man has value. No wonder that so many execrable mediocrities have been foisted upon people in the much-abused name of *avant-garde* art: for the unwary, the indiscriminate grouping of fads with genuine art movements has only resulted in sticky confusion. For (not to throw the baby away with the bath water) experimentation in the arts is necessary, no less than is a stricter measure for justifying this experimentaion.

Who knows, such a measure properly applied might yet win all the little old women of the world over to the idea that a thing worth creating is a thing worth staying for—until the final curtain, anyway...when the clomp of "sensible" oxfords can be drowned by loud, prolonged, and honest applause.

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