



Rhinoceros Synopsis

Rhinoceros is an absurd tale that has been adapted for Foothill College by director Bruce McLeod. Set in an unspecified American town, when the play opens, we meet a few of the townsfolk in a café: a housewife meanders through with her precious kitty cat, a logician and a gentleman discuss logic, albeit illogically, and Berenger sits down with her buddy, John, who berates her for her sloppiness and takes her to task for drinking. Suddenly, they notice a rhinoceros charging down the street. Not long after, another rhino tears down the road. Is it a second rhino or the same one?

The next day at the office, Berenger and her coworkers talk about the rhino sightings. Mrs. Boeuf arrives to apologize for her husband's unexplained absence, saying that a rhino chased her to the office. Unexpectedly, a rhinoceros appears downstairs and destroys the stairway trapping everyone inside. Mrs. Boeuf, sees characteristics of her husband in the rhino, and insists it is him. She jumps off the staircase landing, alighting on his back and they take off.

Because of the rhino, the office is closed and Berenger goes to visit John who is sick at home in his apartment. John's voice is "croaky," there is a bump on his forehead, and he is even grouzier than normal. He refuses Berenger's pleas to see a doctor and acts stranger and stranger. Finally, Berenger goes home and plans a future with her coworker Corey, but things keep getting weirder...



William Sabatier, Jean Louis Barrault and Simone Velere in a production of *Rhinoceros* by the Compagnie Renaud-Barrault at Theatre de France Odeon, Paris, January 1960.

Director's Note

Bruce McLeod

We are of course shaped by the events of our lives and the immediate world around us. My father was a physicist who found that he loved teaching more than smashing atoms. My mother gave up teaching elementary school to raise a family but was a dedicated singer and community theatre performer all her life. Perhaps not that surprisingly, I ended up in both teaching and theatre.

What I discovered early in my theatre career was that I am drawn to plays that center on principled characters struggling to comprehend forces beyond their control. *Richard II*, *A Man for all Seasons*, *The Crucible*, *The Great White Hope*, *Rags*, and many others.

Mostly tragedies, but all prodding us to hold onto our moral values in the face of overwhelming pressures.

My play choices here at Foothill include *Angels in America*, *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*, *Antigone*, and *It Can't Happen Here*. That last play, performed as the 2016 election played out, led me to this year's *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco's powerful piece illuminating the incremental erosion of a society, in his case an allegory for the fascism that Nazi Germany perpetuated before and during WWII.

Written in 1959, Ionesco's play sets the action in "today," this reminder that while the story is a historical accounting of his world in the 1930's, it could, and will, happen anywhere.

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The Playwright — Eugene Ionesco

Eugene Ionesco was born in Romania on Nov. 13, 1909 to a Romanian father and a French mother. His family moved to France in 1910, but his father deserted the family in 1916 and returned to Romania. Ionesco went back to Romania to live with his father and stepmother at age 13. He despised his father for divorcing his mother and developed an anti-authority attitude that lasted his entire life. He left to live with his aunt when he was 17.

Ionesco began writing at an early age. He was only 13 years old when he wrote his first play and began writing poetry in high school. He published a book of poetry at 22 and a book of essays three years later attacking and then praising many highly regarded contemporary Romanian writers to demonstrate how inconsistent and baseless literary critiques can be. It received the Romanian Royal Foundation's First Book Award.

In 1933, he graduated from the University of Bucharest with a degree in French language and literature. Then, he became a high-school French teacher and returned to France with his wife, although they later moved to Romania due to their fear of Germany occupying France. They regretted their decision and returned to France when he became a cultural secretary at the Romanian consulate in Vichy. They never returned to Romania.

According to Ionesco, in *Notes & Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, he began writing plays because he hated them. He enjoyed them as a child, particularly *Punch & Judy*, but by age 15, "a theatrical performance had no magic for me. Everything seemed rather ridiculous, rather painful." He thought that having characters physically present on stage "destroyed the imaginative illusion," and that most playwrights used barefaced gimmicks. What's more, he believed what

the actors were doing was worthy of reproach. That they would allow themselves to be someone else was something he simply could not fathom... Watching a play made him feel ill, and he did his best to avoid going to the theatre.

Despite this, Ionesco did write a play, *The Bald Soprano*, and in 1950, it was produced. He "was absolutely amazed, during the rehearsals of my first play, when I suddenly saw moving on the stage... characters who owed their life to me... And so it was only when I had written something for the theatre, quite by chance and with the intention of holding it up to ridicule, that I began to love it, to rediscover it in myself... I knew what I had to do." Ionesco decided that theatre needed to be exaggerated to the maximum extent. He wanted "a theatre of violence: violently comic, violently dramatic. Drama lies in the extreme exaggeration of the feelings..." Moreover, he believed that "we need to be virtually bludgeoned into detachment from our daily lives, our habits, and mental laziness..."

So, he developed the idea that a somber play should be joined onto something written as a comedy and treated as frivolity. The tragic feeling of a drama can be accentuated by farce. That led to him writing dramas that he called "pseudo-dramas" or "tragic farces" and comedies that he refers to as "anti-plays" or "comic dramas." However, the tragic and comic nature of his plays "do not coalesce, they coexist... and, thanks to their opposition, thus succeed dynamically in maintaining a balance and creating tension."

Ionesco quickly became one of the preeminent avant-garde playwrights of the early 1950s. He is regarded as an influencer in the Theater of the Absurd and was a proponent for audiences not identifying with characters, what he refers to as his "avoidance of drama of participation." Writing rapidly, he created a play every season. Four of the plays had protagonists



named Berenger, although they are not the same character. The second of these plays was *Rhinoceros*, written in 1958 and produced in 1959 in Dusseldorf, Germany, receiving 58 curtain calls.

Rhinoceros, according to Ionesco, was written to show the "Nazification of a country" and the "confusion of a man who, naturally immune to the disease, witnesses the mental metamorphosis of the community in which he lives." Rhinocerositis is a metaphor for fascism. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that he said, "I first thought of the rhinoceros image during the war (World War II), as I watched Romanian statesmen and politicians and later French intellectuals accommodate themselves to Hitler's way of thinking," Ionesco said in a 1985 interview. "They might say something like, 'Well, of course the Nazis are terrible, terrible people, but you know, you must credit them with their good points.' ... they looked upon you as an alarmist, then a nuisance, finally an enemy to be run down. They looked like they wanted to lower their heads and charge."

Ionesco continued to write plays. He also published a novel, nonfiction books, drawings, essays, and reviews. Many awards, literary prizes, and honorary degrees were bestowed on him, including several nominations for a Nobel Prize in literature, although he never received the award. Ionesco died in 1994 of bronchitis.

What is Theatre of the Absurd?

“Theatre of the Absurd” refers to a specific kind of play which first became popular during the 1950s and 1960s. The expression was created by Martin Esslin in his 1962 book *Theatre of the Absurd*, and it refers to the avant garde plays that surfaced in Europe beginning in the 1940s and 1950s. These plays highlighted the absurdity of human circumstance. While most people are inclined to think “absurd” means “ridiculous,” Esslin was referring to a different meaning of the word. One of the definitions of absurd in *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* is “having no rational or orderly relationship to human life: meaningless.”

Theatre of the Absurd playwrights were unaware they belonged to a trend while writing their plays, yet they did have an underlying similarity. Their experiences during World War II impacted their writing as they attempted to understand new disconnected reality. Another influence was French philosopher Albert Camus’ 1942 essay, “The Myth of Sisyphus,” which described the human state of being as fundamentally pointless. Absurdist playwrights abandoned traditional storytelling, in favor of plays that created a definitely unreal experience. Jessica Ellis on [Language Humanities](#) says, “Characters are not meant to mimic real

people, but instead are often metaphorical or archetypal. The guiding principle of this movement is to look at the world without any assumption of purpose.” She also states, “Esslin suggests that without a fixed belief system or guiding principle, all actions become useless and absurd; therefore, anything that happens is permissible.”

As such, Eugene Ionesco, a prominent Absurdist playwright, called his plays “anti-plays” or “anti-theatre.” The genre gained momentum thanks to the grim postwar mood of the period, which led to disenchantment with conventional principles and thinking.

Absurdist plays share a few characteristics. According to Robin Reynolds on [Backstage](#), these are:

Absurdism: This style isn’t about making sense, but rather poking fun at the irrationality of life itself.

Alienation: Characters often feel isolated and estranged from a world that’s wholly indifferent to their existence.

Disorientation: This type of theater shuns linear timelines, conventional plots, and relatable characters, creating a pervasive feeling of uncertainty.

Failure to communicate: Disjointed dialogue and nonsensical language often leads to a total breakdown in understanding among a play’s characters.

Existentialism: Theater of the Absurd invites viewers to question what it means to be human in a world that feels like it’s spinning out of control.

The most notable examples of these plays are Eugene Ionesco’s *The Bald Soprano* and *Rhinoceros*, Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, Jean Genet’s *The Balcony*, and Harold Pinter’s *The Birthday Party*.

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Director’s Note *continued*

As I was drawn to this play, a January 2025 article in the *Hollywood Progressive* titled “A Play for Our Time: Ionesco’s *Rhinoceros*,” sealed the choice. The author, Andrea Mazzarino, cites Ionesco’s statement “We will never understand totalitarianism if we do not understand that people rarely have the strength to be uncommon,” and concludes, “...we will never understand genuine democracy unless we understand the unseen possibilities of becoming uncommon, and the way that some artists can help goad us toward that end.”

I think the author acts as an excellent goad, using absurdism to show us the choices people are faced with when societal values undergo radical shifts. As the arts and artists in America come under siege, and civil liberties that we have taken for granted are being rescinded, it feels urgent to look at what happens when the status quo takes a sharp turn, and everyday people are required to join the herd or find the courage to resist.

