IDEAS ON IONESCO

DESIGNING A SET FOR A CLASSIC PLAY

LAYLA RAINOSEK

EXIT THE KING

EUGENE IONESCO

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract

The theatrical trend known as Theatre of the Absurd originated in the late 1950s and houses many unique playwrights whose works surrounding the nature of the human experience still offer thoughts to consider for modern audiences. The following research surrounding one such work, Eugéne Ionesco's *Exit the King* (1962), examines the playwright, past productions, and the play's various themes, messages, and influences through different lenses, thereby contributing towards a complex and supported view of the play and its context in history. The goal of this work is to create a modern rendition of the play to be produced by LMU's Department of Theatre Arts in the Spring of 2023. Specifically, the objective of the following literature review, script analysis, and series of unique notes is to produce a working scaled model (both digital and physical) of the theatrical set of the show that can be used to build all of the scenic elements. Through the use of research tools, hand sketches, and 3D modeling software, among other practices, this project will exist as both a creative and academic endeavor, representing the culmination of a college education. It will draw upon many different aspects of theatrical research, history, and criticism that have served as a strong base within the Theatre Arts department's educational ideology. This research will act as a reference manual and portfolio of the work done to create the world of *Exit the King* in as much detail as possible.

Ideas on Ionesco: Designing a Set for a Classic Play

The tradition of theatre is rich and diverse, with different trends appearing across time and cultures, occasionally building and drawing from one another and from the world happening around the artists involved. One such theatrical trend that has offered much in the way of analysis is that of the Theatre of the Absurd. Finding its footing throughout the late 1950s and 1960s, one of its leading playwrights was Eugéne Ionesco, French-Rumanian writer who crashed into the theatrical world more by chance than by choice (Esslin, 2001). Ionesco would go on to write many noteworthy plays, including *Exit the King* in 1962, that would help create the term "absurdism," and earn him a place in classic theatre history.

The following work aims to engage in both the scholarly conversations surrounding the larger trend of the Theatre of the Absurd and the more specific nuances of Ionesco's particular play. Interspersed throughout this discussion of the published analysis will be more personal interpretations and thoughts that helped spark the design process, with notes that will attempt to clarify and expand on the connection between the scenic elements and the message of the play itself. This project will then have a firm basis in research with an emphasis on technical design and creative collaboration—these integral skills will continue to be refined over the course of the actual development of the set and further, beyond the educational setting and potentially into a professional one.

Literature Review

There are several interesting lines of thought that scholars have picked up on in Ionesco's work, often at odds with one another (a strangely befitting finding). Ionesco spoke at length about the importance of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *Tibetan Yoga and Secret Doctrines*, along with the *Upanishads* to the structure and symbolism of *Exit the King*, with many points of

the play's resolution finding home in these concepts (Barranger, 1975; Runde, 2007). Ideas such as the alleviation of a person from the weights of the world, participation in worldly life cycles, and reality as an illusion are more akin to Eastern mysticism, and through this lens audiences may find a more hopeful interpretation of the work. Barranger argues that Ionesco realized through Tibetan influences found in the script that the suffering humans experience at the thought of dying comes from their awareness that their place in the cycle of life is inevitable, but that hope can be found in the same process—both through rebirth and the possibility of being free from the cycle and achieving Enlightenment (1975). Runde also discusses the interpretation of the play through the lens of Zen Buddhism, explaining that typical Western logic fails when it comes into contact with Zen teachings, as its basis in dualistic thinking is what Zen seeks to reject (2007). The same article also discusses the characters as representations of *skandhas*, or elements that make up the material world, and are therefore the cause of human suffering—the Guard represents form/connection to the physical world, Queen Marie is sensation/physical pleasures, the Doctor is thought/perception/logic, Juliette is predispositions/habits, and Queen Marguerite is consciousness/awareness (though at the end of the play she transforms into the higher version of intuition). As the characters begin to disappear towards the end of the work, so too does the King eventually fade into the void and embrace the nothingness that is humanity's true nature.

In an article written by Wright (1971), death is seen as a theme and a non-occurrence—the play itself has no plot, seeking instead to showcase death as an event and the process of dying without actually showing the dying onstage. It doesn't offer any kind of concrete guidance or opinions on death, and the ending is just as ambiguous as everything else in the play. In doing this, Ionesco showcases the inner and interpersonal struggles the king deals

with as he comes to terms with the fact that he will die at the end of the play, thereby making the main action the fear of death and what it inspires a person to do. Wright also discusses how the King is largely a metaphorical figure, saying at times he is so abstracted that his death doesn't inspire much emotional reaction from audiences (1971). Indeed, the author goes so far as to argue that *Exit the King* was not fully developed or mature, citing also the apparent lack of possibility in something greater than the world as it is known in the play that could lie beyond death. Coupling this article with Barranger's (1975) analysis gives a fuller and deeper understanding to the intricacies of the play, and highlights the ability for the work to stand for both interpretations in equal validity.

Additionally, all of the articles thus mentioned seem to be in agreement that the death of the King is seen overall as a good thing—it befits a king, it is done in the proper way, and it can be interpreted as fading into the world/void. It can be triumphant, as there is a possibility of the King reaching Nirvana, but it can be just as equally nihilistic if the interpretation ends with the King simply becoming nothing at all, with nothing to show for the end of his life. The ambiguity of the ending leaves the audience to think, and Ionesco hoped to leave the interpretation open instead of trying to create a message out of his works.

Script Analysis

This section will detail the various backgrounds, influences, themes, and circumstances that contribute to the meaning of *Exit the King*. Through the compilation of information on the playwright, given circumstances of the play, Theatre of the Absurd, and various themes and ideas that come up, the resulting analysis should give an in-depth and holistic view of the work, from which a design of the set can find a firm basis.

Playwright

Playwright Eugéne Ionesco was a key figure in 20th century theatre, particularly in the genre of Theatrical Absurdism, as one of his early one-act plays, *La Cantatrice Chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*) written in 1949 introduced many new techniques that would then be used by various successors (Britannica, 2022). This initial work was inspired by Ionesco's English textbooks that he studied when learning the language, and the seemingly nonsensical phrases that appear throughout his works highlight communication issues and feelings of isolation that are a staple of the human experience. As Ionesco continued to develop this style, many of his works started to introduce the fear of death, of which *Exit the King* (1962) is most notably known for. Due, in thought, partly to his own illness and confrontation with mortality, many of Ionesco's plays explore the meaning of death and of society. His most popular work remains to be *Le Rhinocéros* (1959; Rhinoceros), the second installment of four plays known as the *Bérenger Cycle* of which *Exit the King* is the third.

There have been several renditions of *Exit the King* that are noteworthy—the play was originally performed in London at the Royal Court Theatre in 1963 and came to Broadway at the Lyceum Theatre in 1968. (MORE) It was revived on Broadway in 2009 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre and there have been several international renditions that received wide acclaim. In 2016 the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey produced the show to positive reviews (MORE). In addition to all of this, there have been a couple of filmed versions of the play as well in 1978 and 2006 that were produced for television.

Theatre of the Absurd

As early as 1961, theatre critics began establishing lines around the theatrical trend that they called the Theatre of the Absurd. In a book written by Esslin (2001), the author calls out

four primary playwrights of the time who exemplified this new trend, naming Samuel Beckett, Eugéne Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet as some of the primary founders of the style. Each of these playwrights had their own approaches to theatre, and Esslin writes that though they might have many similarities, "it is because their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western world" (2001, p. 22). Ionesco contributed greatly to this school of theatrical thought, producing many of the early works that engaged with this style.

Much of Theatre of the Absurd (and more specifically Ionesco's branch of it) deals with the limitations of communication and words to describe the human experience, which in and of itself is incommunicable to begin with. A main idea of this philosophy is that life is absurd, it is purposeless and senseless, and humanity attempts to cope with this notion by creating meaning through social systems and giving it importance and meaning—ultimately, this meaning is still based on something that is nonsensical, thereby making it effectively useless (Esslin, 2001). Ionesco took this further, arguing that theatre in particular was disturbing and grotesque since people put on a spectacle of themselves in attempting to replicate senseless social formalities that they didn't feel, and would even speak about his embarrassment on behalf of the actors he would watch onstage due to the incongruous nature of the theatre; he then used this feeling and sought to amplify it in his own works, making it a major component instead of a side effect. He attempted to create something "truer than truth" by distorting and heighting the reality of the world of his works; he would write dialogue that was devoid of deep meaning in an effort to demonstrate how words are meaningless by themselves since each person's own associations gave them different connotations, and would instead convey meaning and action through visual methods. In pushing audiences to abandon the conditioned norms and formalities they were

comfortable with, Ionesco hoped people would understand the underlying absurdity of life he was trying to convey (Esslin, 2001).

Interestingly, a related, though somewhat distinct, style of theatre was also gaining popularity in France at the same time as Absurdism—called poetic avant-garde theatre, this trend had many overlaps with the theatre of the absurd, deviating primarily in mood; the poetic avant-garde presented a softer alternative to the harsh and sometimes grotesque nature of absurdism (Esslin, 2001). Ionesco's earlier works were rather firmly established within the realm of the absurd, but with *Exit the King*, he begins to include elements of the more lyrical trend that give the piece its distinctive quality within his repertoire.

Given Circumstances

Physical World

The world of this play is that of one that is full of contradictions. It is vast but shrunken, grand but dinky, lively but dying. It's on these juxtapositions that this play finds its meaning, as there is much to unpack in a dialectical world that would otherwise not be found in a more traditional piece of theatre. The world as the King knows it is in the active process of collapsing throughout the course of the play (which eventually leads to a complete dissolution of the set onstage), and it is due to his fading and increasing obsolescence that this happens. Everything from the Earth's crust, to the population, to the universe is starting to fall into a dilapidated state in time with the King's own ailments. This becomes prominent in many aspects of the physical world, with the set pieces slowly disappearing as the play comes to a close, eventually leaving the King and Marguerite alone onstage together—somewhat reminiscent of everyman-style shows, commenting on what one takes with them into death.

The time period of the show is slightly ambiguous. Informed by gothic style, the throne room has acquired a vaguely dilapidated appearance, most likely from the centuries of use by the King. The geographic setting of the play is just as ambiguous, but establishing the bounds for both of these for a specific production will help solidify the physical aspects of this play a little bit more—whether there is a specific time and location, or whether they're meant to be abstracted and more universal, both will make statements about the play that seem to be up to each individual production instead of being specified by the playwright.

Social World

The social world of this play is distinctly more abstract than our own—the King of the immediate world of the play is several hundred years old, and the life of the kingdom is directly tied to his own health and importance. The subjects of this kingdom are few, most having died or left for other communities due to war and loss of faith. The ones who remain behind are old and/or ill, not contributing towards the strength of the kingdom in any way. The characters seen in the play are interesting reflections of the King's personality as a whole, each representing a part of himself that slowly disappears as he begins to die. An additional social theme that is an offshoot of the larger theme of dialectics that can be observed throughout the play is the duality of the characters themselves—whether as powerful and pathetic, or caring and clueless, each character in the play possess qualities in tandem that can also counteract each other in specific scenes. The way this comes across to the audience is through the seemingly nonsensical dialogue and caricature-like personalities/attributes of the named characters, further adding to the idea that the way most people see reality is too rooted in formalities to allow them to explore the deeper meaning of life itself.

Themes and Ideas

Many of the themes found in Absurdist works deal with the meaninglessness of the human condition, and how humanity attempts to create meaning out of social conventions, which are ultimately useless. "The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin, 2001, p. 24). As such, there are many of these hallmark themes to be found in *Exit the King*, along with a few unique others.

Nihilism and Existentialism

Meaninglessness of conventions, big fuss about nothing, how this philosophy can actually be comforting and terrifying at once, it deals with the active process of trying to come to terms with one's own mortality and how at the end it turns out that nothing really mattered since you can't take anything with you (salt into water quote).

Cycles

Much of Ionesco's work deals with the cyclical nature of life in an effort to discuss the absurdity of the human experience—the end result is the same as the starting point, and in doing this he creates a "zero point from which the preceding action is seen to be futile, so that it would have made no difference if it had never happened" (Esslin, 2001, p. 189). This piece also plays into this idea over the course of the show, though in a slightly different way than many of Ionesco's other works—at the end, when the king also disappears, it is left open as to whether the King dies and, according to some interpretations, enters Nirvana or stays in the cycle of rebirth. Another way to look at the theme of cycles in *Exit the King* is to apply the universality of this show to different periods of time. The story of a dying tyrant gets played over and over throughout history, and the King cycles to other stages of life in an attempt to come to terms (or

avoid doing so) with his impending death. The cycle of life is embedded in every aspect of this play, and is an integral part of the human experience.

Dialectics

An idea that is inherently present throughout the show is how contradictions can exist simultaneously and the subsequent attempt to rationalize them together creates dissonance that then clouds reality. Ionesco promoted the idea that one can hold two opposing viewpoints (Esslin, 2001), and this idea is indicative of *Exit the King* and the underlying meaning the playwright is trying to get audiences to understand—the more one clings to conventions and traditional logic, the less sense this play will make. It is only when you let go of strict adherence to formalities and comfortable social norms that this play becomes understandable and universal. The truth of the work is found in the pressure between two magnets that refuse to meet. It is interesting to note that Zen Buddhism similarly promotes this idea, and the acceptance and balance of two contradictions is a key concept within this field of thought. If Zen thought was an influence on the creation of this play, then its subsequent themes may give deeper understanding to the work as a whole.

Title of the Play

The title of the show is an important marker of many themes and ideas that are to be represented over the course of the play. For *Exit the King*, the title could possibly be about how nobility/conventions of society in the past are no longer meaningful or have become pointless in modern contexts. The fall of the monarch would be quite indicative of the end of an era, which coincides with the time period in which the play was written—France at the end of WWII saw major technological advancements that subsequently led to restructuring of society (Britannica reference probably). During this time, new philosophies and movements were taking place and

originating in France (i.e. existentialism and structuralism), which, coupled with the experiences

of Ionesco himself, would have influenced the piece. The actual French title, *Le Roi se meurt*,

means The King is Dying, which offers a more concrete message than its English counterpart,

furthering the play's commentary on the progression of society and therefore the death and

dissolution of what came before.

Design Process

Concept Meeting

Following a concept meeting with LMU's director for the production of *Exit the King*,

Neno Pervan, the following notes were used to influence the design (following all initial ideas).

- The show deals with the power of power, reminiscent of world leaders whose time in the

  position is coming to a close/ruthless tyrants sensing their own ends.

- Ideally would be a more abstracted design, not rooted so strongly in literalism (think of

  the idea of Guns N' Roses' Appetite for Destruction album for the underlying mood).

- Set in a universal time, focuses on the cyclical nature of civilizations—looks at the

  end/collapse of an age as it breaks down at the personal level. A good idea has gone into

  effect and doesn't mesh well with reality.

- Have a dilapidated main throne that incorporates doctor elements (i.e. gallows/gas

  chamber/electric chair kind of deal). Play with levels and have the "thrones" be set up

  olympic stand style.

- The doors can exist as frames, with the sizes taken to extremes (really big and incredibly

  small).

- Work on scepter ideas, it is a ridiculous thing made to extend masculine power that has

  been added onto periodically throughout the years.

- The color scheme should be more monochromatic, sticking to grays and dark reds, think rusted gold, a feeling of decay.

- Overall, the stage should be wide open, it has a disappearing magic feel rather than a literal feel.

Concept Boards

Initial Influences

The first rendition of the concept boards (see Figure 3) for the set drew heavily from the gothic time period and the architecture of major buildings (notably cathedrals). A component that is consistent throughout many of the structures is the use of stone bricks in the walls, which will likely make its way into the design. Early color scheme choices are on the cooler side of deep muted reds and neutral tones, ultimately staying in a rather monochromatic scheme—this is likely to change through discussion and collaboration with the director and design team. This rendition of the concept boards also includes a paint textures section; the walls could have a mixture of crumbling/peeling façade over stone brick, along with a sprayed distressing to give it age/water damage.

Another influence that helped shape some of the ideas came from a phrase by Ionesco (as quoted by Esslin, 2001) "It is thus not only permitted, but advisable, to make the properties join in the action, to make objects live, to animate the decor, to make symbols concrete" (p. 191).

Hand Sketches

Initial SketchUp Rendering

<div align="center">

Feedback & Revisions

</div>

Finalized Design

<div align="center">

Safety Requirements

Budgeting

Acknowledgements

Notes

</div>

Journal Entries

May 16, 2022:

Today is the start of the SURP 2022 program, and my goal is to have the literature search, script analysis, and concept boards done by the end of this week. I have done my first full official read through and am starting to generate some thoughts on what can be done with the set, and have some interesting avenues to begin research on. I want to look more into gothic styles as I feel that would be a rich source to draw from for the concept boards. I'd also like to look into some of the script references too to get a clear picture of what Ionesco had been thinking (listening to King's Levee, a style maybe of song from the 17th century; look up the Punch and Judy show, etc.). One of the things that really intrigues me most is the dissolution of the set every night. I think there are really neat things that can be done with this, and I want to look into theatrical disappearance tricks to see what I could feasibly be working with. I'll schedule a meeting with Professor Murillo to discuss this more as well and hear his thoughts on it.

One of my initial thoughts would be to play around with lighting and sand to give the illusion of having the windows and walls crumble. I think this could be done by having a second

set of walls for the set (aside from the Barnelle walls) and putting the windows as inserts into the wall and having shutters come out that can be timed with shuttering lights (I'd need to ask the lighting designer about this) and having sand fall from the ceiling or as an additional shutter at the top of the wall. I also think that the walls could have projections for the cracks so that they can grow throughout the course of the play. It would also be neat to have projections for the texture so that at the end they can be blank, but that is an area that I'm completely unfamiliar with (and it wouldn't give the paint classes anything to do). However, I think that playing around with maximalism/minimalism would give a full scenic experience, and I want to try to juxtapose the beginning and the end as much as I can. I need to try to meet with the director though as soon as possible to see if there are any major deviations that are being made for this production in terms of style or setting, as I can see areas where things may be adapted and modernized that I should address before getting too much further.

May 17, 2022

Today was a literature search day, though mostly I've been focusing on the playwright and trying to delve into the style of absurdism to see if that helps make sense of what's going on in the play. I also, rather by accident, stumbled on some great concept images that are helping inspire a lot of ideas. There is an app that has been trending online recently that generates AI art based on key words and an art style, and I was able to use it to create the opening page of this document. In playing around with it more though, and feeding in key words from the play that resonated with me, I may have an idea for the throne that I might run past the director depending on what his concept for the show is.

During my class on directing in the Spring 2022 semester, my professor talked about a pendulum of moods that a play can have and I've found it quite useful for this piece (Figure 1).

On this pendulum/circle, you have comedy on one end, and tragedy on the other. You can swing infinitely between these two points and have a normal range of theatrical pieces. If you apply enough momentum and swing above either starting point, you get absurdism and the grotesque. I think that these two can go hand in hand quite well, and can definitely make their way into the design if they're wanted. The idea that I had based off of this and a reference image was to have the throne/invalid chair be like those moving stair elevator chairs (if it could operate on a motor that would be great, but a pulley would work just as well) and there's a point towards the end of the script I think where Berenger is trying to get up the stairs to the throne but can't do it. It could turn grotesquely funny to have him reach for the invalid chair while it's moving but be unable to get into it. This may be too much depending on the directorial concept, but I'll think about it more and try to develop it.

May 25, 2022

Today was the first day I started hand sketches and really got into the concept boards and looked through the art and architecture. It was a fun and exciting process that I've been looking forward to the most! I'm happy with where my sketches are so far (see Figure 2 in appendix), and I am thinking of more things to add and try, which I think will be good to play around with. The "issue" I'm now running into is how exactly to incorporate my analysis thus far into the actual design. I think I'm leaning too heavily on gothic style as it is right now, and I'm stuck in the rut of literality that I want to try to escape. I might try returning to the AI art generator and see what comes up for me with new key words. I am also relying pretty heavily at this point on the concept meeting with the director that I'm hoping will clear up the exact direction the production will be going in.

My direction from here will be to really solidify the script analysis and go back through and take extensive notes on the script itself so that I have a deep source to draw from as I sketch. I'm realizing how much I am referencing my notes and the allusions of the show, so by having a really firm base I think I'll set myself up for success more.

References

Barranger, M. S. (1975). Death as initiation in "Exit the King." *Educational Theatre Journal*, *27*(4), 504–507. https://doi.org/10.2307/3206384

Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia (2022, March 24). Eugène Ionesco. *Encyclopedia Britannica*. https://www.britannica.com/biography/Eugene-Ionesco

Esslin, M. (2001). *The theatre of the absurd*. Methuen Publishing Limited.

Runde, J. (2007). Ionesco beyond absurdism. *Consciousness, Literature and the Arts, 8*(1).

Wright, E. G. (1971). The vision of death in Ionesco's "Exit the King." *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *54*(4), 435–449.

Zarhy-Levo, Y. (2011). Dramatists under a label: Martin Esslin's The Theatre of the Absurd and Aleks Sierz' In-Yer-Face Theatre. *Studies in Theatre & Performance*, *31*(3), 315–326. https://doi.org/10.1386/stp.31.3.315_1
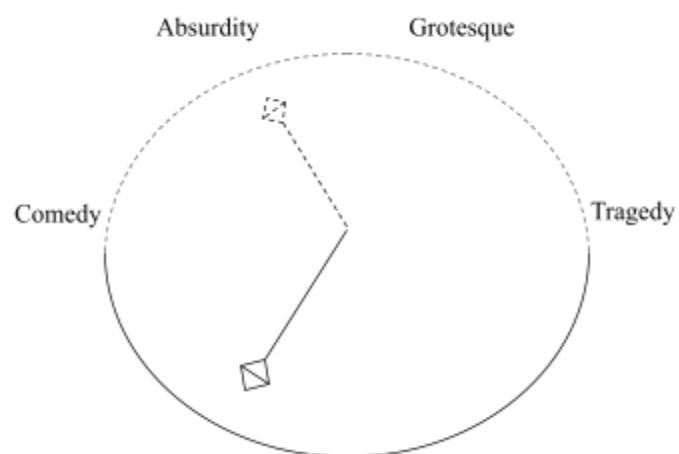
Appendix

Figure 1

The Theatrical Mood Pendulum

Figure 2

Initial Hand Sketches from May 25, 2022

Figure 3

Initial Concept Boards