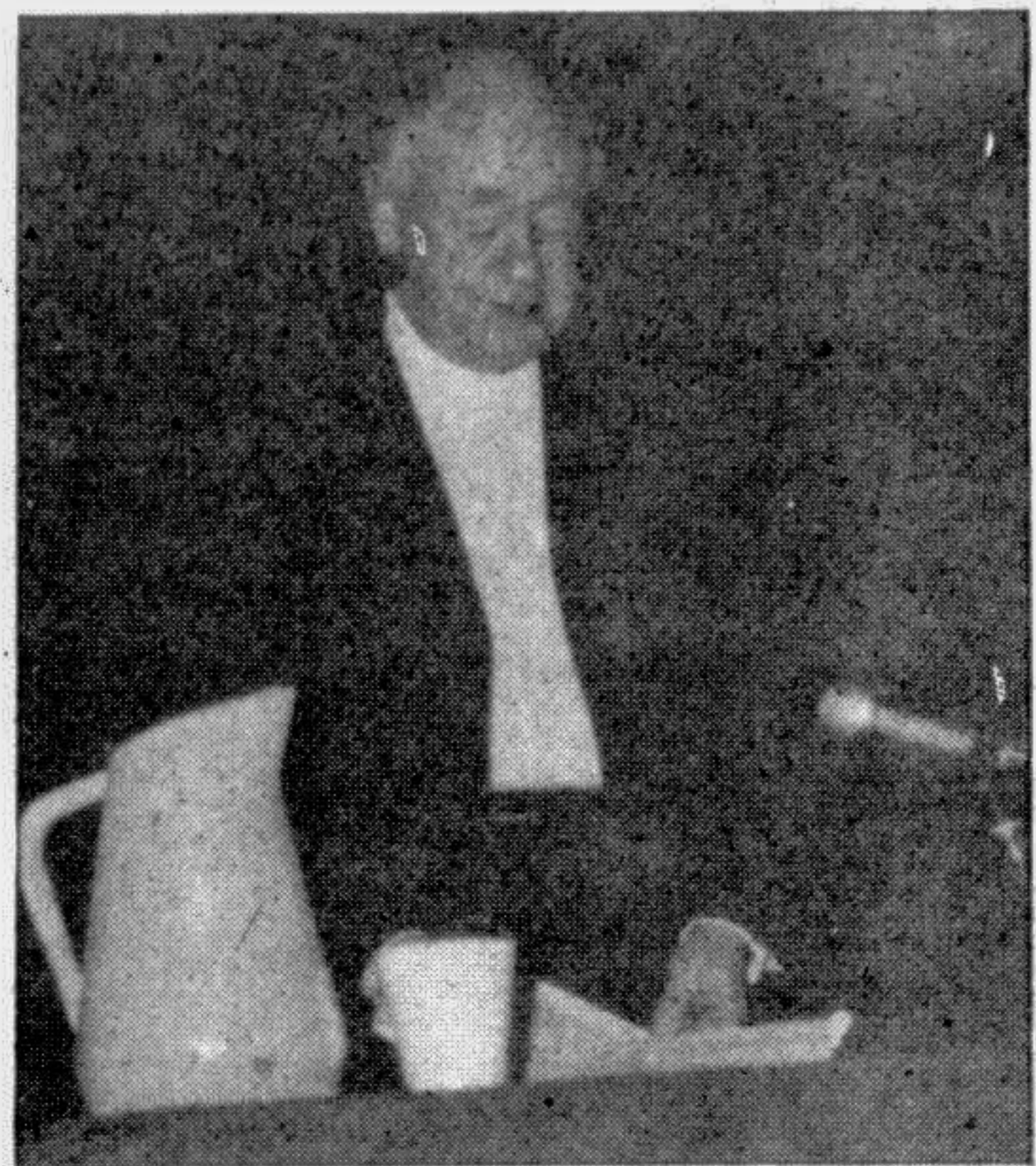


Encounter with a Giant Talking to Eugene Ionesco

by Sayeed Ahmad



Eugene Ionesco

Ionesco
cantatrice chauve
suivi de La leçon



Ionesco's handwriting — on book cover (left), to the author (right).

entry. Being a Romanian and learning French in difficult conditions, it took a long time before his French was considered as good as others. He wrote unconventional and quixotic plays without counting his admirers. His first play was written in 1950 and it took six years for him to receive some ovation, only after the well-known playwright Jean Anouilh wrote a leading article in the *Le Figaro* stating that he found Ionesco better than Strindberg. This praise put an end to the 44-year old playwright's anonymity. "The Bald Soprano" had been translated into more than 50 languages and played in more countries than that, with one extraordinary exception being the country of Ionesco's birth: Romania. His passion for Romania is evident in the dialogue of Mrs Smith in this play, when she gives details of the supper they had wherein she had excellent yoghurt.

Mrs Smith: Mrs Parker goes to a Romanian grocer called Popsco-Rosenfeld who has just arrived from Constantinople. He's a specialist in yoghurt. He holds a diploma from a school for yoghurt-ricians in Andrinopolis. I think I'll pay him a visit tomorrow and buy a great big pot of home-made Romanian yoghurt. Its not often one gets the chance of finding such things here in the suburbs of London.

At one point Ionesco extolled the national poet of Romania Caragiale as 'probably the greatest unknown dramatist in the world'. But now we know Romania had produced another playwright to shape the theatre of France nay of the world. He asserted that the artist is not a demagogue nor is a pedagogue. Dramatic creativity fulfills a need of the spirit: this need must be sufficient unto itself. A tree is a tree. A tree is not concerned to present itself in more comprehensible form: if it did, it would no longer be a tree. It would be the explanation of a tree. Similarly, the work of art exists on its own right, and he could quite readily conceive a theatre without an audience.



Ionesco was not in a position to move around but his pudgy hands were ever active in explaining the absurd situations in which he was himself placed. He wanted to know about how things are in Bangladesh, do we have freedom of expression etc? Obviously, he did not have any clear picture of the subcontinental happenings nor his physical condition did allow him any substantial reading possible. However, I could feel the inquisitiveness of a Romanian mind trying to bridge with the flowing stream of Bangladesh. I was thankful for his efforts to make me comfortable in his presence. He picked up a book a "collection folio" of his plays "La Contre trice Chauve" and "La Leçon". He pressed a ball point, and then paused for quite a while. He looked at me and then the book of my translation which was lying on the table. There was silence all around. Nicolas wanted to say something but the grand man waved his hand "I need no prompting". He opened the book and started writing, with some difficulty he scribbled a few lines. He handed over the book to the Director asking him to write a few more lines as a remembrance of this event. He especially requested to write down the number of performances on that particular date, that is, fifth of October '91. That night people were going to see his "Bald Soprano" for the 11,208th times. The play was first produced in Paris by Nicolas Bataille at the "Theatre des Noctambules" on 11th May 1950. Later the play was shifted to "Theatre de la Huchette" and had an uninterrupted run of 37 years and more. Mr. Ionesco handed over the book to me with a faint smile. I opened the book and found that he had miss-spelt my first name. I wondered for a few seconds if I should request for a correction. But then I had a feeling that a thing once written is written and it is an absurd idea to change. I left it at that. However, the last letter which I received from him, dated 21 November '91 from 96 Boulevard du Montparnasse had my name spelt correctly (which was perhaps the handwriting of his secretary).

Ionesco was born in Slatina, Romania in 1912. A little over a year later his parents moved to France, where his French-born mother was longing to return. His childhood spent between Paris and a country residence in La Mayene was a very happy one. But after sometime Ionesco's parents separated and his father returned to Romania. His relationship with his school-teacher mother came to an end because of financial and paternal pressures. He and his sister returned to Romania to live with their aristocratic and highly placed bureaucratic father. Ionesco could never take to the regimented life nor to the militaristic upper tones prevailing at that time. He stuck it out in his father's house until his mother's return to work as secretary for a French government agency operating in Bucharest. He lived with her from the age of 17 to 24, that is from 1929 to 1936, she died in 1936, "having done her duty". But before her death, she put him into the hands of another worthy, protectress that is his present wife. They got married three months before she passed away. In 1938, with a fellowship for doctorate studies in France, they moved to Paris for good.

Ionesco entered the world of writing with a number of plays, short stories, a few novels; obviously it was not an easy

man, jou, gou, hou, hou

Heu, heu, gu, gou, gneu.

Ionesco's final aim is much more positive: to create a living vision of "reality" sufficiently broad to encompass rational and irrational, at the same time. And the only source of such reality is the imagination; more specially, one particular manifestation of imaginative experience, which is the "dream". For him total freedom lay in the discovery that 2 + 2 did not necessarily make four: a discovery that was terrifying and ultimately fatal, since it meant abandoning the sweet, imprisoning security of reason for a universe of limitless and intolerable absurdity.

Berenger says: "Seven and one make eight and ... sometimes nine". Mathematics is the keystone of rationality.

Ionesco draws upon the "clownish" techniques of the puppet and marionette theatres, and also of the circus, in order to achieve "his return to the intolerable" to a theatre "which attains to probability by dint of improbability and idiosyncrasy."

In one dialogue the Professor in *The Lesson* says: "In this world of ours, mesdemoiselles, one can never be sure of anything."

I remember him in the winter of 1976 in Washington D.C. He had come at the invitation of the George town University to deliver a lecture titled "Why do I write?" I was associated as guest lecturer at the University's Theatre Department and as such had the privilege of spending a little time together. I must confess those were difficult moments, not knowing whether to listen to him all the time or interject at opportune moment to establish my presence. He enjoyed having his wine with friends and there were a number of admirers and faculty members around him. One moment he would be solemn, the next, he would burst into laughter over

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