

Eugene Ionesco

RHINOCEROS

ARAVIND R NAIR, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR, DEPT. OF ENGLISH, SH COLLEGE, THEVARA

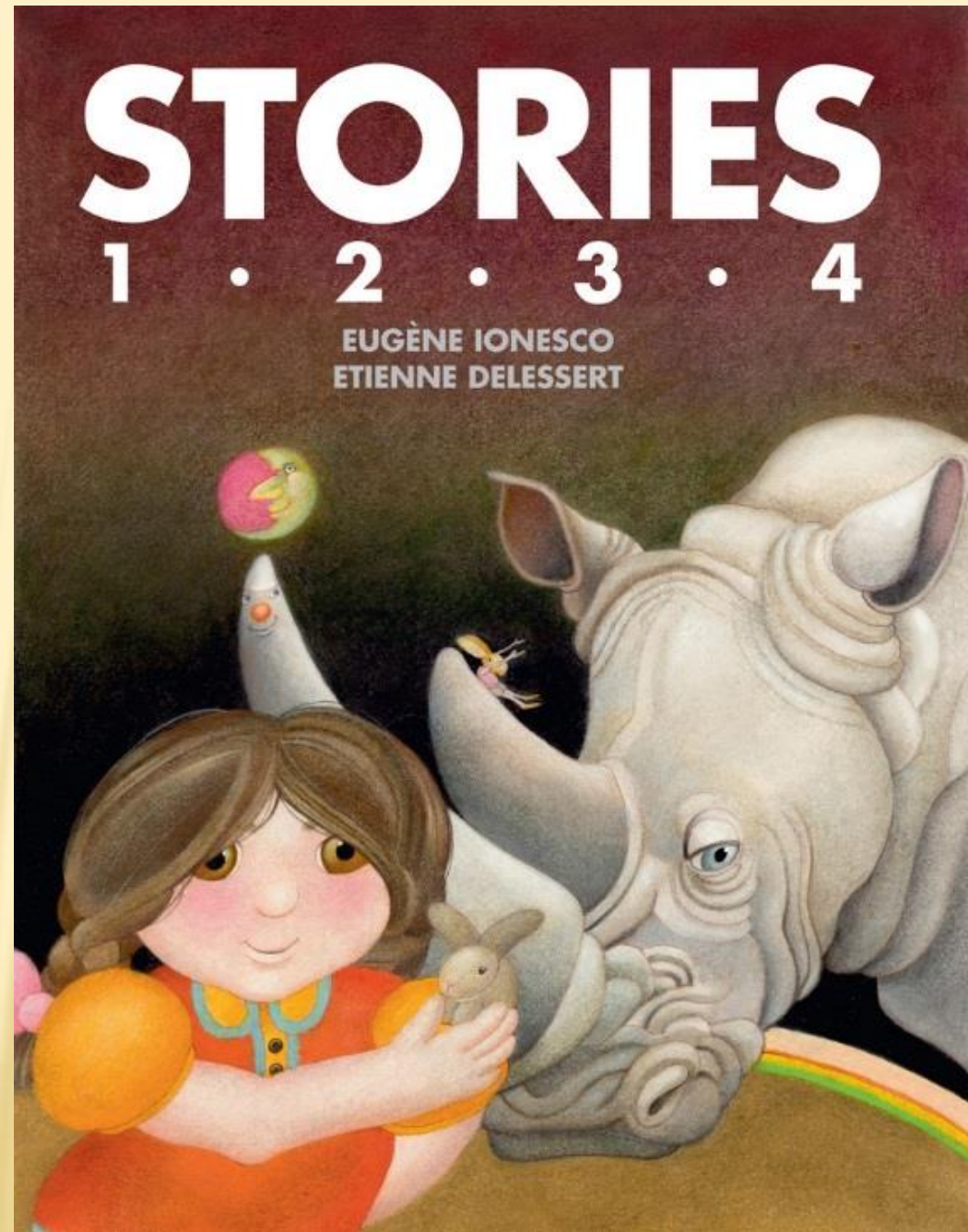


EUGENE IONESCO

26 November 1909 – 28 March 1994

- Romanian, wrote in French
- Part of the French Avant Garde Theatre
- About the insignificance of human existence
- "Walking in summer sunshine in a white-washed provincial village under an intense blue sky, [Ionesco] was profoundly altered by the light."
- An early childhood transcendental experience
- he saw that the real world in comparison was full of decay, corruption and meaningless repetitive action. Death is inevitable.

- Works reveal a disgust for the tangible world
- The feeling that a better world lies just beyond this one.
- Married Rodica Burileanu in 1936.
- Wrote unconventional children's stories for his kids.
- Lived in France during the second world war.
- Awards and recognition:
 - Member of the French Academy, 1970
 - Prix Italia, 1963.
 - Authors Theatre Prize, 1966



LITERARY CAREER

- ✗ Debuted as a critic and poet
- ✗ Wrote satirical works: *The Hugoliade* mocking Victor Hugo
- ✗ First play in 1948: *The Bald Soprano*
 - + One act nonsense play
 - + Based on Ionesco's attempt to learn English
 - + The clichés and truisms of language learning
 - + Was rather unsuccessful until Jean Anouilh and others promoted it

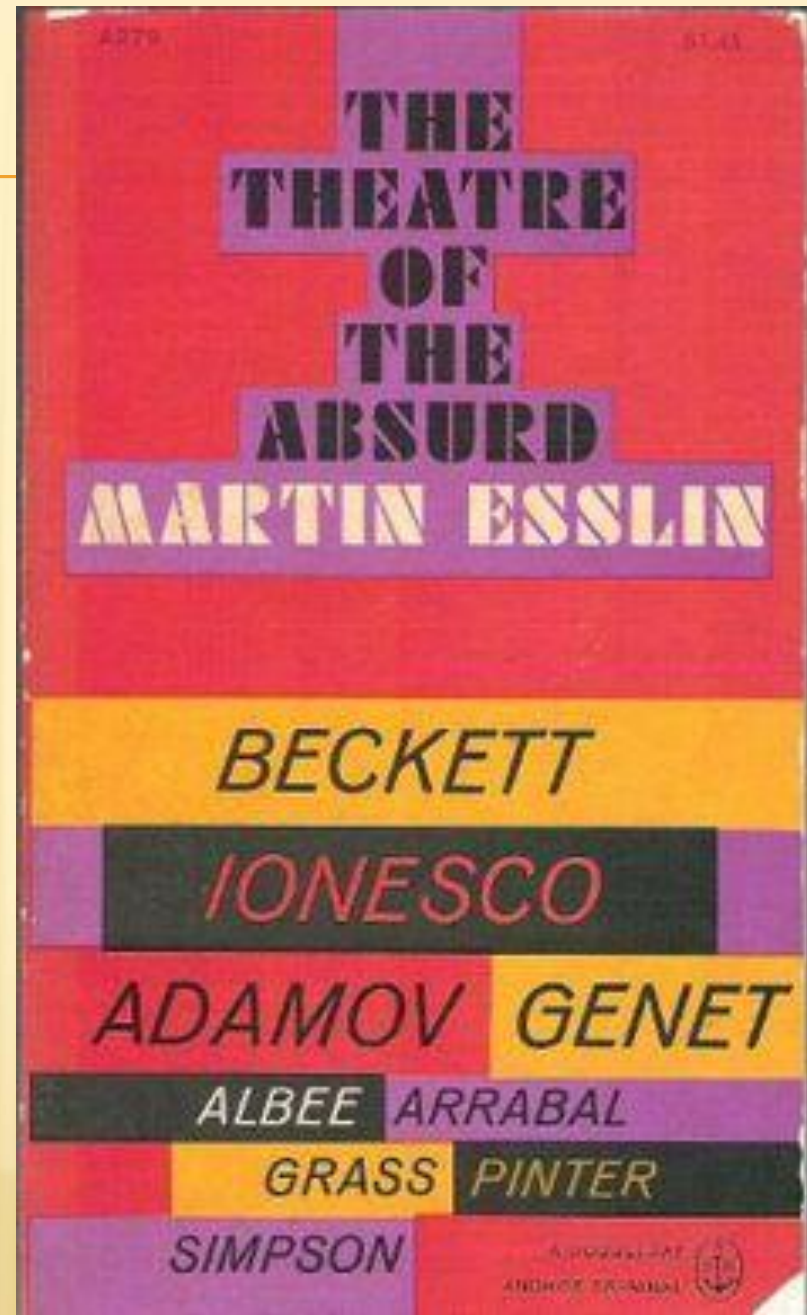
EARLY WORKS

- ✘ Jack or the Submission.1950
- ✘ The Lesson. 1950
- ✘ The Chairs. 1952
- ✘ The New Tenant.1953
- ✘ The Anti-Play: absurdist, alienation, impossibility of communication, against conformism of the bourgeoisie and the theatre.
- ✘ An atmosphere where language breaks down into meaninglessness.

FULL LENGTH PLAYS

- ✗ A Stroll in the Air
- ✗ The Killer. 1959
- ✗ Rhinoceros
- ✗ Exit the King. 1962
- ✗ The character 'Berenger' – an autobiographical figure.
 - + Features in many of Ionesco's plays including Rhinoceros.
 - + Expresses wonder at the strangeness of reality.
 - + Comically naive.

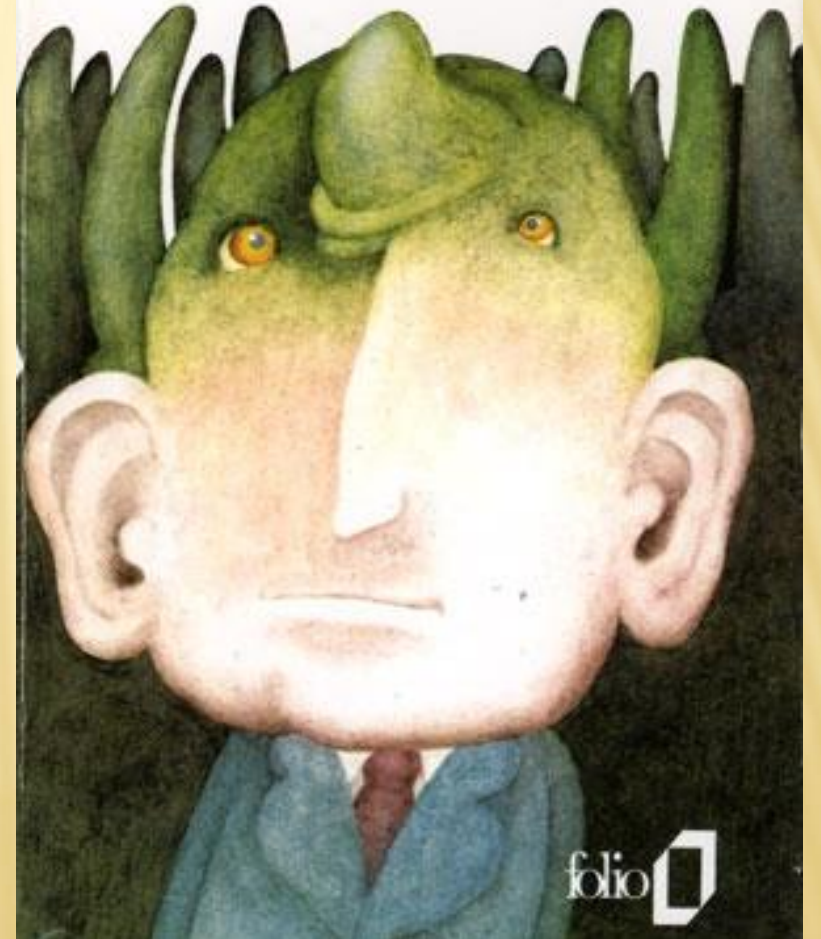
- ✘ Martin Esslin labeled Ionesco as a member of the Theatre of the Absurd along with Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet and Arthur Adamov.
- ✘ Based on Camus' idea of absurdity.
- ✘ Often mislabeled as an existentialist.
- ✘ The Theatre of the Absurd was not an organized movement.
- ✘ On death: "Death is our main problem and all others are less important. It is the wall and the limit. It is the only inescapable alienation; it gives us a sense of our limits. But the ignorance of ourselves and of others to which we are condemned is just as worrying. In the final analysis, we don't know what we're doing. Nevertheless, in all my work there is an element of hope and an appeal to others."



RHINOCEROS, 1959

- ✘ 3 Acts
- ✘ The inhabitants of a small French town turn into rhinoceroses
- ✘ The central figure, Berenger, is the only human left.
- ✘ Berenger is 'everyman'.
- ✘ The play is a response to Communism, Fascism and Nazism during and after WW 2.

Ionesco
Rhinocéros



ACT ONE PART 1

- ✘ Setting: Town square on a Sunday morning.
- ✘ Two friends Jean and Berenger meet at a coffee shop.
- ✘ Berenger is drunk, shy and simplistic.
- ✘ Jean is an intellectual, eloquent, well dressed and proud.
 - + Scolds Berenger on his unkempt appearance.
 - + Calls himself the 'superior man...who fulfills his duty'.
- ✘ Berenger says drinking is an escape from the boredom of life.
- ✘ Other characters present: Grocer, Grocer's wife, waitress, a logician and an old gentleman.

ACT ONE PART 1

- ✘ A rhinoceros running is heard off stage startling everyone.
- ✘ Berenger is drunk and hardly notices.
- ✘ Berenger says that when he is sober, he cannot recognize himself.
- ✘ **Berenger is in love with Daisy but hasn't been able to tell her**
- ✘ The logician makes clumsy attempts to explain syllogisms to the old gentleman.
- ✘ Berenger : 'life is a dream'

ACT ONE PART ONE

- ✘ Nietzsche's idea of will and super man.
- ✘ Against fascism and the brainwashing of free thinking individuals.
- ✘ Universal mentality which corrupts the individual mind.
- ✘ The individual cannot stop certain ideas from taking hold.
- ✘ Alcoholism is escapism.
- ✘ In a world where fascism exists, logic is meaningless.
- ✘ Does existence have meaning? Existentialism. Kierkegaard and Sartre.
- ✘ Existence precedes essence.

-
- ✘ 'Life is a dream' 'I sometimes wonder if I exist myself'
 - ✘ Against Descartes 'I think therefore I am'
 - ✘ Against existentialism which states 'existence precedes essence.'
 - ✘ Parallel dialogue which mirrors each other. Indicative of how the entire society is affected similarly by the advent of a new idea.

ACT ONE PART 2

- ✘ Berenger is worried that Daisy loves Dudard more than him. Jean advises him to take self improvement lessons.
- ✘ Meanwhile the logician tries to teach a problem to the old gentleman.
- ✘ Another rhino appears and crushes a house wife's cat.
- ✘ People start to gather together and debate whether the rhino was African or asiatic.
- ✘ Jean and Berenger argue about the number of horns the rhino had.
- ✘ They argue that the presence of rhinos must not be allowed. Beginning of collective will to do something.

ACT ONE PART 2

- ✘ Ill applied logic is not helpful. The citizens are more concerned with how many horns the rhinos have rather than what caused them to appear
- ✘ Berenger's love for Daisy preserves his humanity while everyone else succumbs to rhinocerositis. Through Daisy, he loves everyone and humanity.
- ✘ J S Mill's the harm principle. Any mentality can be allowed so long as it does not cause any harm. The second rhino causes harm.
- ✘ Breaking the fourth wall with self referential jokes. The play is not a vehicle for escapism but a performed piece which is a part of real life. The rhinos shown are non realistic

ACT TWO PART ONE

- ✘ Berenger's office. Proof reading law proposals. Dreary office life.
- ✘ Botard sceptic. Does not believe in the rhinos.
- ✘ Calls the experience a collective psychosis. Botard and Dudard want to get into the good book of their boss, Papillon.
- ✘ Mrs Boeuf comes in search of her husband who works at the office.
- ✘ A rhino chased her into the office and broke the stairs leading up to it.
- ✘ Mrs Boeuf recognises the rhino as her husband.
- ✘ She goes to join it despite the warnings of the office staff.

ACT TWO PART ONE

- ✘ Botard now claims that he never denied the existence of the rhinos.
- ✘ Says that there is a conspiracy going on. Claims he will solve the riddle of the rhinos.
- ✘ Papillon the Dept head considers Mr Boeuf's transformation as a business expense. He also makes additional plans for tomorrow as the office is inaccessible.
- ✘ Firemen arrive to rescue them. Dudard and Berenger politely argue who should be rescued first. Both climb out the window simultaneously.

ACT TWO PART ONE

- ✘ Questions of morality. Those who joined the rhinos are called traitors. Later those who did not join are called renegades. Morality changes to accommodate any political movement.
- ✘ Unlike Waiting for Godot, Rhinoceros is full of action, movement etc. A departure from the usual trend of the theatre of the absurd.

ACT TWO PART TWO

- ✘ Jean's apartment. Berenger decides to live a more responsible life. He goes to visit Jean who has been sick.
- ✘ He is clearly sick. Both find each other's voice unrecognisable.
- ✘ Berenger apologises for the argument they had last time about rhino horns.
- ✘ Jean seems unable to recall it.
- ✘ Jean slowly transforms. His voice gets hoarser, skin greener and a bump develops on his forehead.
- ✘ Jean justifies Mr Boeuf's transformation in various ways. 'maybe it was pleasurable for him'
- ✘ Berenger advises Jean to see a doctor. Jean says he hates all humans. He wants to trample them. Only trusts veterinarians.

ACT TWO PART TWO

- ✘ He justifies rhinoceroses' right to live, pronounces humanism dead.
- ✘ Jean takes off his clothes and goes into the bathroom. Berenger follows although he is afraid. He cannot leave a friend who might need help.
- ✘ Berenger traps Jean (now a rhino) in the bathroom and alerts the tenants of the building.
- ✘ However all the tenants have turned into rhinos. Herds of rhinos march through the street.
- ✘ Berenger runs through the street yelling Rhinoceros!

ACT TWO PART TWO THEMES

- ✘ Jean tries to justify his transformation as something that he himself chose, even when he seems to have no control over it.
- ✘ Jean tries to convince Berenger that it is he who is changing and not Jean.
- ✘ Ionesco suggests that appearances can be deceptive. Jean, a symbol of self will, and propriety succumbs to a violent transformation.
- ✘ Will Berenger too transform or will he manage to hold on to his humanity?
- ✘ With transformation the place of logic in life is truly lost. Illustration of the underlying absurdity.

ACT THREE PART ONE

- ✘ Berenger's room. Berenger is worried that he might turn into a rhino. He has a nightmare. Outside he can hear rhinos. Compares his cough to a rhinos sound. Drinks.
- ✘ Dudard visits. They discuss Jean 's transformation. Berenger feels guilty because Jean transformed in his presence.
- ✘ Berenger vows never to change. Is afraid of catching the disease
- ✘ Dudard suggests that Jean might have changed because of his excitable nature.
- ✘ Berenger agrees that they might have been temporarily unbalanced in a critical situation.

ACT 3 PART ONE

- ✘ Transformations might be an epidemic. Dudard thinks that it might be temporary and even beneficial.
- ✘ Berenger drinks thinking that alcohol might be a preventive.
- ✘ Dudard asks Berenger to stop drinking if he is to have will power.
- ✘ Is the conscious decision not to think consciously a conscious decision at all? Circular dilemma. Can death be defeated through suicide? One of the central questions of existentialism. Suicide is cowardly and is an escape from recognising the true nature of absurdity. You have to struggle all your life with the possibility of death.
- ✘ Berenger considers himself involved in the epidemic and takes responsibility

ACT 3 PART ONE

- ✘ Dudard says that he is getting used to the fact of the transformations. Recommends walking and sleeping pills. Berenger rejects.
- ✘ Papillon has resigned and turned into a rhino.
- ✘ Berenger thinks that people are involuntarily turned into rhinos. They are talked into it.
- ✘ Dudard says the transformations are natural. Berenger calls them abnormal.
- ✘ Berenger says that he will ask the logician to clarify the matter. They see the logician's hat on one of the rhinos that pass by.
- ✘ Disease as metaphor for fascism.

ACT THREE PART ONE

- ✘ Who is to blame for fascism?
- ✘ Berenger is apathetic because he knows that life is absurd. This lack of will in society is partly responsible for the rise of fascism. But it is the same impulse which makes Berenger a champion of free will.
- ✘ Dudard is a believer of the rational and the scientific but this is indicative of a surrender to forces beyond the individual's control. Berenger is individualistic.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ Daisy arrives at Berenger's apartment. She doesn't seem to care much about the epidemic. Informs them that Botard has turned into a rhino. His last words were, 'we must move with the times!'
- ✘ Berenger is shocked.
- ✘ Dudard thinks Botard was following his boss, Papillon.
- ✘ Both men agree that rhinos are anarchic and that they are in the minority for now.
- ✘ All three discuss the social problems caused by rhinos and how to solve them.
- ✘ Daisy and Dudard say that the best solution is to get used to the rhinos.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ Outside, they hear walls crumbling. The firestation has been destroyed and the firemen have turned into rhinos.
- ✘ Dudard says that he must leave and experience the epidemic first hand.
- ✘ Berenger finds this unbelievable and tries to stop him. Daisy lets him go.
- ✘ The rhino heads outside grow more beautiful and their sound becomes increasingly musical.
- ✘ Berenger professes his love for Daisy and she accepts that she loves him and not Dudard.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ Berenger points out that Dudard would've been an obstacle between them.
- ✘ Both of them fantasize about their life together. Berenger claims that he will defend her.
- ✘ Daisy says they are in no danger. Because they are good people, they are entitled to a good and safe life despite the circumstances.
- ✘ Berenger says, sometimes people do harm by not preventing harm.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ The phone rings and all they can hear on the other end is rhino trumpeting. Daisy is scared.
- ✘ When they switch on the radio, all they can hear is rhinos.
- ✘ They grow terrified and think that they are the last human beings left.
- ✘ Berenger offers some liquor to Daisy to calm her down. She believes they must adapt to the new circumstances. She believes they are the abnormal ones, not the rhinos.
- ✘ Berenger proposes that they are like Adam and Eve and they must repopulate the earth.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ Daisy says she finds the power of the rhinos seductive and human love a 'weakness'. Berenger slaps her, she weeps and he apologizes. He says he will help her till the end.
- ✘ Berenger calls the sound of the rhinos as roars, Daisy says it is singing.
- ✘ He calls her stupid, she breaks up with him and leaves.
- ✘ Alone, Berenger examines himself in the mirror.
- ✘ He finds the human form attractive. He barricades himself in the room, plugs his ears with cotton and vows that the rhinos will never get him.
- ✘ Feels guilty about driving Daisy out. Wonders if rhinos can be converted back to humans.

ACT THREE PART TWO

- ✘ He realizes he cannot understand the rhinos' language. And that they cannot understand him. The concept of language becomes alien to him.
- ✘ He looks at old pictures. He cannot recognize his old friends. They have turned into rhinos.
- ✘ His pictures look unattractive when compared to the rhinos.
- ✘ He starts to envy the rhinos. He tries to imitate being a rhino but he cannot.
- ✘ Finally, he decides that as the last human being, he will not give up. He will fight the rhinos. His last line and the end of the play is, 'I am not capitulating!'

ACT THREE PART TWO THEMES

- ✘ The need to live a guiltless life. Berenger blames himself for the rhinos. Daisy says he shouldn't. Daisy's, Dudard's and Berenger's convictions change rapidly indicating the fickleness of human thinking.
- ✘ Daisy loves Berenger only as an individual but Berenger loves humanity as a whole. Ionesco implies that to love one human is not enough. One must be willing to take responsibility for all humanity.
- ✘ Authority is susceptible to transformation. Papillon, firemen.
- ✘ The end is ambiguous. Maybe Berenger's resolve will break and he will join the rhinos.
- ✘ Berenger's character development points to an awareness of the need for a life of commitment to something, some idea.