FROM THE REAL TO THE SURREAL: JACQUES NOEL'S STAGING OF IONESCO'S

RHINOCEROS

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By

Chloé G. Desmoulins

Thesis Committee:
Kathryn A. Hoffmann, Chairperson
Lurana O’Malley
Nathalie Ségeral

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Abstract

Theater is not just text; it is a performance. It is literature balanced between the written word and the visual accent. It is alive, rooted from the author's consciousness flourishing on the stage.

The project of this thesis is to read Ionesco's *Rhinocéros*, and simultaneously to study the set designs created by Jacques Noël for the 1960 performance at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. The thesis will aim to bridge the boundaries of image and text by treating images (set designs) and the play as one readable “text” that can create meaning together.
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Chapter 1:

Bridging Text and Stage

Performances do not signify by citing texts. A performance creates a sense of 'proximity' (to the text to something else) as part of its rhetorical deployment of contemporary conventions of performance, as a way of claiming 'something we value'.

---W.B. Worthen “Drama, Performativity, and Performance”

The text of a play is fundamental in a theater piece; however, it is not the only element for a successful performance. Theater is not just text; it is a performance, balanced between the written word and the visual accent. It is alive, rooted from the author's consciousness flourishing on the stage. The project of this thesis is to read Ionesco's *Rhinocéros*, and to study simultaneously the set designs created by Jacques Noël for the 1960 performance at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. The thesis will aim to bridge the boundaries of image and text by treating images (set designs) and the play as one readable “text” that can create meaning together. While discussing *Rhinocéros*, other Ionesco plays, such as *La Cantatrice chauve* (*The Bald Soprano*), *La Leçon* (*The Lesson*), *Le Roi se meurt* (*Exit the King*) and *Le Piéton de l'air* (*A Stroll in the Air*) will be mentioned.

Critical works on Ionesco's theater are numerous and have examined many aspects of his work, including the imagination and the structural anthropology behind the imagination of Ionesco by Gilbert Durand, the presence of space and its frightening elements by Alain Schirtres, the isolation of characters and the proliferation of objects examined by both Simone Benmussa and Michel Liour, imagination and Ionesco's place within theater characterized as “post war” “avant garde” or “absurd” by Martin Esslin, techniques of irony, dialogue, the nostalgic and utopic, etc.1 No work has been done on the emergence of the surreal within the banal, which was

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1 Worthen 1100

2 In 1980, an index entitled “Bibliographie et index thématique des etudes sur Eugène Ionesco” listed 1,667 works analyzing Ionesco's theater. This total was calculated in 1980. Since, many more have been published.
made visible in actual stage sets and decors, sketches, paintings, and pastel drawings done by the 
principal set designer during Ionesco's lifetime, Jacques Noël. Despite Noël and Ionesco's 
constant partnership, very little research has been done on Jacques Noël.\(^3\) Ionesco's stage 
directions are also one of the least studied aspects of his work. Mel Gussow describes Ionesco as 
“an imaginative iconoclast who would create the most bizarre imagery” (303). This bizarre 
imagery helped establish Ionesco's theater; however, what is often overlooked is this bizarre 
imagery was given a visual reality on stage through the set designs produced by Jacques Noël. 
As Ionesco painted his theatrical universe through words, Noël transformed them into tangible 
images giving visual reality to Ionesco's fictionalized world.

Reading Ionesco along with Jacques Noël's sketches and models will permit the 
exploration of the opulent visual world Ionesco put forth through words.\(^4\) Ionesco tied great 
importance to the power of images in his theater which explains the intricate and detailed scenic 
directions found in his text. As Ionesco said he did not write literature, but theater, where stage 
directions were of the utmost importance:

> Je ne fais pas de littérature. Je fais du théâtre. Je veux dire que mon texte n'est 
pas seulement un dialogue mais il est aussi “indication scéniques”. Ces 
indications scéniques sont à respecter aussi bien que le texte, elles sont 
nécessaires, elles sont aussi suffisantes. (Ionesco, Notes 289)

I am not writing literature. I am doing something quite different: I am writing 
drama. I mean that my text is not just dialogue, but also “stage directions.” These 
should be respected as much as the text, they are essential, they are also sufficient. 
(Ionesco, Notes 208)\(^5\)

The text and set design are both important simultaneously and both need to be maintained as they

\(^3\) Here is a short list of critical works on Ionesco: *Theater of the Absurd* by Martin Esslin; *Eugene Ionesco: A Study of his Works* by Richard Coe; *Ionesco's Imperative: The Politics of Culture* by Rosette Lamon; *Ionesco, Dramaturge, ou, l'artisan et le démon* by Jean-Hervé Donnard; *The Existential and Its Exits* by Livio Dobrez; *Eugène Ionesco ou à la recherche du paradis perdu* by Tobi Saint; *La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco* by Paul Vernois; *Eugène Ionesco: The Absurd as Warning in the Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* by George Wellwarth.

\(^4\) I have used the term sketch/es for all of Jacques Noël's preparatory drawings which are in various media.

\(^5\) All *Notes and Counter Notes* citations have been translated by Donald Watson unless noted otherwise. In all 
references below, when two page numbers follow a translation, the first refers to the French edition, the second 
to Watson's English translation.
have the shared role of transforming the text into a live performance. Many scholarly works study the text, the action of the performance, but the least studied is the stage's set design in a performance that functions as visual semiotics. This thesis will bridge the disciplines by interpreting the plays using textual and visual elements at the same time.

In his summary on contemporary textual scholarship on textual authority in “Drama, Performativity, and Performance”, W.B Worthen summarized ways textual authority has been interrogated: “Texts in the theater are always more like the phone book than like Hamlet: they are transformed by the performative environment of the theater into something else, a performance” (Worthen 1100). A performance is not brought to life solely by the text; it relies on its performative environment (i.e the theater, the set design, the costumes, the lighting etc.). The set design is not an accessory in terms of being understood as secondary or dispensable. It is an important element in the performative environment as it is part of the creation of meaning.

The theoretical approaches that this thesis will include are Roland Barthes's work on visual semiotics, Michel Butor's notion of “textamorphose” and Eugène Ionesco's own notes in his book Découvertes. Using theoretical approaches to visual studies by Barthes, Butor and Ionesco, the thesis will follow the paths where Noël's set designs and Ionesco's text worked together to create meanings that were simultaneously audible and visual--the creation of a visualized text.

By looking through the sketches Noël created, one is able to get a glimpse of the author's world resulting in a different manner of discovering the author’s theater. I will discuss the guignol-like characteristics, the childhood memories, the fairy tale world, and vivid imagination which inspired Ionesco's works. However, one can also read Noël's sets as a visual metamorphosis of Ionesco's text. Theater is not just text; it is performance, a creation from the written words to visual accents. Written words by Ionesco metamorphosed into images; that offer another form of reading a text. While examining Noël's sketches and models while reading Ionesco, one is able to synchronize the two producing a “textamorphose”. “Textamorphose” is a

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6 Worthen mentions works by McGann; Bornstein and Williams; Shillingsburg; Grigely; Matsen. Worthen highlights the essential relation between textual enactment in theater which becomes performance.

7 Much of the scholarship on Ionesco relied on his own works: Présent passé passé présent, Découvertes, Notes et contre notes.
term coined by Michel Butor. As Butor poetically puts it: “Changer non seulement d'oreille mais de tympan: 'tympaniser', recommande Derrida, les textes les uns par les autres en les maintenant sous tension poétique comme la peau tendue d'un tambourin” (“To change not only your ear but your drum: 'to drum', recommends Derrida, the texts one against the other by keeping them in poetic tension, like the stretched skin of a tambourine”; Butor 13). In the sense of Butor, this research is a textamorphosis, which will drum the text of Ionesco against the set designs of Noël creating a harmonized reading of both Ionesco and Noël.

As Noël tried to remain a decorator who could pass through the author's ideas visually, he sometimes went beyond what the author envisioned. In chapter 8, I will explore Noël's own visual interpretation of the ending scenes of Rhinocéros in his sketches, interpretations which Ionesco chose not to adapt in the 1960 performance at the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Noël's attempts to display more than what Ionesco envisioned were not always realized but his attempts proved that it is not just text (in the literal sense) that has authority.

An approach to reading stage sets alone can be drawn from recent works on reading “things” such as the book by Lorraine Daston Things That Talk.8 Also, in Kathryn Hoffmann's article “Vertebrae on Which a Seraph Might Make Music”, she explores messages revealed within objects. These objects, or more precisely skeletons whom had endured osteomalacia, revealed messages of their past by drawing in the gaze of the observer. Hoffmann says: “The skeletons revealed some of the complex structures of any medical-museum-display. They were message-bearing. The osteomalacia display was one of the few in the pathological section to have a printed text explaining the medical condition. They were producing, carrying with them a history of real human physical pain that wrenched my gut but whose degree I could only guess at. […] Their curves and bends invited poetry in the making of fantastic imaginaries” (Hoffmann 153). Objects speak to us, just as words do. By looking at Noël's sets, the interpreter can decode the text beyond Ionesco's words and read it through the set designs produced by Noël.

Noël had a valuable role in theater in the twentieth century; unfortunately he has been the subject of little research. Only two books have been dedicated to Noël's work. Jacques Noël: Théâtre, is an interview conducted by Christian Giudicelli, along with reproductions of some of

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8 Lorraine Daston in her book “Things that Talk” seeks to understand how objects become saturated with significance.
Noël's sketches and paintings. The interview discusses his life, his various theatrical collaborations, and his career in theater design. The second book was done by Nancy Hutson, Genevieve Latour and Victor Haim titled *Jacques Noël, Décors et dessins de théâtre*. This book presents his sketches, paintings and sketches, and three dimensional models but has little writing on him. It includes a DVD, a twenty-minute feature on Jacques Noël containing interviews with Jacques Mauclair, Eugène Ionesco, Marcel Marceau and Jacques Noël himself. Many of the original sketches Jacques Noël created are in the process of being archived and cataloged at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris.9

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9 The sketches in the archive at the Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris have not yet been cataloged.
Chapter 2:

Jacques Noël: Theater Portraitist

Jacques Noël was born in 1924 in Ivry-sur-seine, France, and passed away July 18, 2011. Jacques Noël created more than three hundred set designs in his lifetime and was one of the first set designers to sign his sketches: “..je fus, à ma connaissance, l'un des premiers à avoir signé un décor, parce qu'auparavant, comme au cinéma, c'était un chef-décorateur qui signait...” (“I was, to my knowledge, one of the first to have signed a set design, because in the past, just as in films, it was the head-decorator who signed...”; Noël 127).” Jacques Noël’s lifework started at a young age when he discovered he had a taste for drawing. Like his drawing, Jacques Noël’s love for theater also started at the young age of thirteen:


I was thirteen years old. I lived near La Porte D'Italie, close to the Centre Kellerman, an annex for theater crafts at the 37 Exposition. Plays were being rehearsed and performed there under the direction of Léon Chancerel, leader of the Comédiens Routiers. I was thus able to see the first shows of the company Grenier-Hussenot.

Noël loved the theatrical universe but knew his talent did not lie in acting. He confirms this in an interview with Christian Giudicelli: “C.G.: Vous avez pensé que vous alliez entrer dans cet univers (univers théâtral)? J.N.: Je ne savais pas très bien...peut être comme acteur...mais je ne me croyais pas vraiment doué ” (“C. G.: You thought that you would enter this universe [theatrical universe]? J.N.: I did not quite know...maybe as an actor...but I did not believe that I had the talent”; Noël 7). With his love for theater and talent for drawing, Noël was able to bring

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10 The 37 Exposition which Jacques Noël mentioned was an international exhibition named “Exposition internationale des arts et techniques dans la vie moderne”. This exhibition took place from May 25th until November 25th 1937. The Musée de l'Homme and the Palais de Tokyo, which now houses the Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, were created for this exhibition.

11 All translations of Noël mine unless noted otherwise.
together two poetical universes into one: set design.

Jacques Noël was encouraged by his father to pursue a career in scenic design: “Sur les conseils de mon père, qui était professeur de menuiserie, je me suis inscrit à l'Ecole Boulle pour devenir décorateur de théâtre” (“On the advice of my father, a carpentry teacher, I enrolled at l'Ecole Boulle to become a theater set designer”; Noël 8). At l'Ecole Boulle, Noël enjoyed creating sketches for plays by Shakespeare and Maeterlink: “…je m'amusais à concevoir des maquettes pour des œuvres de Maeterlinck et de Shakespeare” (“I enjoyed creating models for the works of Maeterlinck and Shakespeare”; Noël 8).12 His first year at l'Ecole Boulle was in 1939. Noël attended a class on metal construction; however, it led to a loss of passion and almost detoured his career. It was not until his fourth year at school when he met an engraving teacher, Monsieur Dangeon, that his enthusiasm for engraving was renewed: “Il m'a fallu attendre la quatrième année pour travailler avec M. Dangeon qui a renforcé mon enthousiasme pour ce mode d'expression” (“I had to wait for Mr. Dangeon who reinforced my enthusiasm for this mode of expression”; Noël 5). Jacques Noël realized the artistic side of set design was more enjoyable to him than the physical labor.

After attending l'Ecole Boulle, Noël continued his studies at l'Ecole des Arts Decoratifs and finished his scholastic career in his early 20's.13 The first scenic design he created was for a play written by Geneviève Serreau, _Le Marchand d'étoiles_, in 1946 at the Théâtre des Bouffes du Nord. Geneviève Serreau was the wife of theater director Jean-Marie Serreau. Noël met Jean-Marie Sereau and showed him his sketches:

I met Jean-Marie Serreau at the Work and Culture Association. I showed him my drawings which interested him. At that time he was starting his

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12 *Ecole Boulle, also known as Ecole Supérieure des Arts Appliqués, de l'architecture intérieure et du design, was founded in 1886. This school is located in Paris in the 12 arrondissement.*

13 *“The École Nationale Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (E.N.S.A.D.), founded in 1766, is a public university of Art and Design and is located in Paris in the Latin Quarter.*
career as well by putting on small traveling shows. And then he started working for the Compagnie des Dix (Company of Ten) which put on plays in factories. An approach similar to that of the Groupe Octobre, before the war.

These plays by the Compagnie des Dix were put on with a limited budget which resulted in the use of simple materials for expression, such as folded screens painted on both sides:


C.G.: Who were the ten? J.N.: Young actors: Tamiz, Yves Robert, Pierre Latour, Dufilho, Mouloudji, Francois Darbon, Chauffard who put on shows with its simplest material means: such as folded screens painted double sided.

With a small budget, Noël was obliged to be creative using his strongest force: his imagination. The power of the imagination is, in fact, what drew Jacques Noël to Jean-Marie Serreau:

“Lorsqu’il abordait un texte, il envisageait toutes les possibilités, rien ne le freinait et il entraînait les autres à sa suite. Avec lui, on pratiquait ce qu'on appelle maintenant le brainstorming”

(“When he would take a script, he envisioned all the possibilities, nothing stopped him and he trained others to do as he did. With him, we practiced what is now called brainstorming”; Noël 15). It was through Jean-Marie Serreau that Jacques Noël's theatrical career began and where he learned to listen to his imagination as inspiration, and there was no limit.

Jacques Noël created multiple set designs for many plays written by twentieth century dramatists such as: Jean Anouilh, Jean Cocteau, Samuel Beckett, Roland Dubillard, Bertolt Brecht, and Marguerite Duras just to name just a few.14 He also collaborated with prestigious

14 Jacques Noël created the set design for Jean Anouilh's plays: La Petite Molière in 1959 performed at the Théâtre de l’Odéon; La Sauvage in 1965 performed at the Théâtre Ohel; Tu étais si gentil quand tu étais petit in 1972 performed at the Théâtre Antoine (costumes); and L’Hurluberu in 1987 performed at the Théâtre du Palais-Royal. Noël also created the set design for Jean Cocteau's play Orphée in 1963. He created the set designs for two of Samuel Beckett's plays: Fin de partie and Acte sans parole both performed in 1957 at the Royal Court of London and Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Noël created the set design for numerous plays by Roland Dubillard: Naives hirondelles in 1961 performed at the Théâtre de Poche; Le Jardin aux betraves in 1969 performed at the Théâtre Lutece; Le Bain de vapeur in 1977 at the Théâtre de l’Atelier; and La Culotte d'une jeune femme pauvre in 1981. In 1955, Noël created the set design for Bertold Brecht's play: Homme pour homme at the Théâtre de
directors, such as Jacques Mauclair, Nicolas Bataille, Roger Blin, Jean-Marie Serreau, Jean le Poulain, Stephane Meldegg, Marcel Cuvelier, Jean-Louis Barrault, André Barsacq, Marcel Marceau, Raymond Devos, Pierre Franck, Claude Régy, and Gerard Caillaud among others. As Noël worked with different directors and text, his set designs would vary. He did not have just one style as he did not have just one collaboration: “On me dit qu'on reconnaît mon style. Moi personnellement je ne pense pas, je veux dire que ça me fait plaisir mais personnellement c'est presque le contraire de ce que je recherche: être différent à chaque fois” (“I was told that my style was recognizable. Personally I do not think so, I mean it is meant as a compliment but personally it is actually the contrary of what I am looking for: to be different each time”; Jacques Noël: Décors). Noël enacted visually what the authors saw through their text, which resulted in different aesthetic visions and images of the production. Noël was the man who created the magical surrounding; he had the task of transporting the spectators from their seats to an imagined world of another.

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Jacques Noël played a significant role in Ionesco’s theatrical career as he was Ionesco's principal stage decorator for the majority of his plays staged in France. Jacques Noël designed sets for all but three of his plays in their premieres in France. Ionesco expressed his great admiration of a Jacques Noël scenic design, as follows:

15 Jacques Noël had a great admiration for André Barsacq along with Jean-Denis Macles and Christian Bérard “J'admiraïs Jean-Denis Macles--j'admire toujours--, Christian Bérard, évidemment,... André Barsacq...” (“I admired Jean-Denis Macles--I still admire him--, Christian Bérard, of course,... André Barsacq...”; Noël 12).

16 Jacques Noël also played an important role in Marcel Marceau's theater creating set designs for 12 of his plays. Jacques Noël in an interview with Christian Giudicelli reminisced on the first encounter he had with Marceau: “Je lui ai tenu un discours du genre: 'Je trouve merveilleux ce que vous faites, la seule chose qui m’ennuie et me semble dommage, c'est le décor ainsi que les costumes, ils pourraient être infiniment plus efficaces!' Il m'a répondu: 'Ils sont de moi!'” (“I told him something like this: 'I find what you do wonderful, the only thing that bothers me and seems to be a pity is the set design and the costumes, they could be infinitely more effective!' He replied: 'They are by me!'”; Noël 108) Despite their first verbal exchange they became partners and collaborated together throughout their careers.

Il comprend admirablement, infailliblement, les pièces dont on lui propose de faire les décors et voit tout de suite ce qui convient: ceux-ci sont la traduction visuelle, le commentaire exact, l’amplification matérielle la plus juste de celles-là. De cette façon tout décor de Jacques Noël suggère, oriente la mise en scène. Il peut sauver un spectacle. (Régie Théâtrale)\textsuperscript{18}

He understands admirably, unfailingly the plays for which we ask him to do the decor and he sees immediately what suits the plays: (his decors) are the visual translation, the exact commentary, the most fitting material amplification of the play. In this manner, all the decors of Jacques Noël suggest, orient the staging. He can save a show.\textsuperscript{19}

Ionesco’s word choices are revealing: translation, commentary, amplification, suggestion, orientation; Jacques Noël embodied all those traits by creating the dramatist's tangible poetic universe, translating words into images: “J'ai à traduire, sur le plan visuel, ce que raconte une pièce...” ("I have to translate, on the visual level, what the play is saying..."); Noël 24). He was able to read the visual component between the words; he was a portraitist of plays.\textsuperscript{20}

Noël's and Ionesco’s very first collaboration was the play \textit{Les Chaises} in 1952 at the Théâtre de Lancry. It was by pure coincidence that Ionesco would build a group of friends who would partake in his theatrical adventure throughout his career. Ionesco explains this in an interview:

... je dois vous dire que, au début et pendant pas mal d'années, c'était fait et ça se faisait au petit bonheur. C'est à dire qu'on avait le théâtre qu'on pouvait avoir, on avait les comédiens qui voulaient bien se risquer dans l'aventure, et ce n'est que petit à petit que s'est constitué une sorte de groupe d'amis qui avons fait le théâtre ensemble. Ça s'est sélectionné, ça s'est trié au fur et à mesure des années, alors maintenant, il y a évidemment des comédiens avec lesquels je travaille de préférence. C'est Mauclair, c'est Tsilla Chelton, c'est Quaglio... (Vaïs 251)\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{18} Many of Jacques Noël’s sketches for set and costume designs can be viewed online at \url{http://art.asso.free.fr/jacques-noel/theatre/eugene-ionesco.php}. This has been made possible by the REGIE Théâtrale.

\textsuperscript{19} The original “il” can mean “it” (the “décor” or “he” (Noël). I have opted for the “he”.


\textsuperscript{21} Tsilla Chelton acted in many of Ionesco's plays. She won the Molière award in 1994 for \textit{Les Chaises}. Tsilla Chelton and Jacques Noël were married and had four children.
... I must say that, at the very beginning and for more than a few years afterward, it was done haphazardly. In other words we had whatever theater we could get, we had the actors who were willing to risk themselves in the adventure, and it was little by little that a group of friends formed and created theater together. The group formed and members sifted out over the years so that now, there are obviously actors with whom I prefer to work. They are Mauclair, Tsilla Chelton, Quaglio...

Noël, who had not yet been introduced to Ionesco, was asked by director Sylvain Dhomme to be the scenic designer for Les Chaises. Jacques Noël recalled being immediately seduced by the play during his first reading of the script: “C.G.: Vous vous souvenez de votre réaction lorsque vous avez lu Les Chaises pour la première fois? J.N.: J'ai été extrêmement séduit...” (“C.G.: Do you remember your reaction when you read The Chairs for the first time? J.N.: I was terribly fascinated by it...”; Noël 15). This partnership marked the beginning of a great adventure. Noël understood Ionesco's plays to the point that he said: “J'ai souvent répété à Ionesco par la suite que si j'avais eu le talent d’écrire, j'aurais eu envie d’écrire ses pieces” (“I often told Ionesco that if I had had the talent to write, I would have wanted to write his plays”; Noël 16). Jacques Noël saw Ionesco's theater; and having instead the talent to paint, he transformed them into three dimensional paintings.

Les Chaises was the third play that Ionesco had written prior to the performances of La Cantatrice chauve (The Bald Soprano) in 1950 directed by Nicolas Bataille at the Théâtre de Noctanbule and La Leçon (The Lesson) in 1951 directed by Marcel Cuvellier at the Théâtre de Poche. The first performances of La Cantatrice chauve and La Leçon were not well received and were judged harshly by critics, resulting in little success for Ionesco. It was not until 1952 with the play Les Chaises at the studio of the Champs-Elysées, the first collaboration between Ionesco and Noël, that Ionesco's name began to be recognized.22

In 1957 La Cantatrice chauve and La Leçon at the Théâtre de la Huchette were scheduled

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22 “C'est en 1952, avec Les Chaises, que les choses commencèrent à prendre de l'ampleur: huit personnes mécontentes, assistaient tous les soirs au spectacle mais le bruit que faisait cette pièce était déjà entendu par un nombre bien plus grand de gens, à Paris, en France, jusqu'aux frontières allemandes” (“It was in 1952, with The Chairs, that things really began to gain notice: eight disgruntled persons, attended the performance every night, but the noise that this play was making was heard by a greater number of persons, in Paris, in France, all the way to Germany's frontier”; Ionesco, Fragment d'une lettre, 1957, qtd. in Benmussa pg. 131).
to be performed again. This time the sets for both plays were designed by Jacques Noël. Noël was also the costume designer. Unlike the critics who had attended the 1950 and 1951 performances, the critics this time loved the plays, and the plays were an enormous success. *La Leçon* and *La Cantatrice chauve* have been playing continuously since 1957 at Théâtre de la Huchette, ranking them among the longest running plays in the world. In an interview with the original cast of the Théâtre de la Huchette of 1957, Nicolas Bataille who worked in both *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon*, said: “Du coup tout le monde est venu, les maisons de Figaro, les intellectuels de gauche et puis on s'est dit qu'on va peut-être tenir debout deux mois, puis après c'était 3 mois etc. etc.” (“All of a sudden everyone came: the publishing house of Figaro, the intellectuals of the left and then we told ourselves that it might keep going for another two months, then it was 3 months etc. etc.”; *Les Cinquante Ans*).\(^{23}\) Since 1957, the actors have changed many times, the directors have changed, but there is a magical element, aside from Ionesco's text, that has not changed since 1957: the set designed by Jacques Noël.

What could be termed the “imaginative brainstorm” between Noël and Ionesco involved adapting plays to variously-sized theaters and stages. Noël and Ionesco's work traveled to several theaters, from small ones such as Théâtre de la Huchette to renowned theaters such as the Théâtre de l'Odéon. Different theaters offered different stage dimensions. Noël knew how to manipulate dimensions, his only concern was showing the playwright's vision: “Un décor doit toujours être en adéquation avec un lieu. Pour résoudre les problèmes de proportions, on utilise des moyens différents mais qui ne modifient en rien ce qu'on a à illustrer: la vision d'un auteur” (“A set design must always be in harmony with a place. To resolve the problems of proportion, one uses means that differ but that do not change in any way what has to be illustrated: the vision of the author”; Noël 20). If the author wanted a rhinoceros in his play there would be one, if he wanted his characters to fly onstage, they would fly; Noël made it fantastic, visual, real and representable.

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Like most of Ionesco's plays, *Le Piéton de l'air* was said by Noël to have come from a

\(^{23}\) It was also said that Edith Piaf went to the theater de La Huchette two times to watch these plays “Edith Piaf est venue deux fois pour voir le spectacle” (“Edith Piaf came two times to see the show”; *Les Cinquante Ans*). Edith Piaf being among the spectators in these two plays shows that the play was “in”, in the sense of popular.
dream of Ionesco's: “Comme pas mal de ses écrits, *Le Piéton de l'air* lui a été presque dictée par un rêve, un rêve assez fréquent chez tout le monde, le rêve du vol” (“Like a number of his works, *Le Piéton de l'air* was dictated to him from a dream, a dream rather common in everyone, the dream of flying”; Noël 24). Ionesco confirms this by saying in his interview with Claude Bonnefoy: “Mais *Le Piéton de l'air*, je l'ai écrit à partir de rêves, du rêve de l'envol...” (“But I wrote *Le Piéton de l'air* (*The Stroller in the Air*) inspired by what came from a dream, the dream of flying”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 32). Ionesco dreamed the play and wanted to write it but he was concerned about being able to perform because it required the art of flying. Noël, in an interview, recalled the time when Ionesco had asked him if it was possible to have an actor appear to fly. Noël recalled the conversation: “Il m’interrogeait: Était-il possible de faire voler quelqu'un au théâtre? Je l'engageai à composer sa pièce sans se soucier de ces détails. Je me débrouillerais avec ce qu'il m'apporterait” (“He asked me: was it possible to have someone fly in the theater? I encouraged him to write his play without concerning himself with these details. I would manage with what he brought me”; Noël 24). Noël did as he promised Ionesco and took care of it. In 1963, Jacques Noël's imagination aptly transformed Ionesco's written words into staging. Below, Noël explains that he used a lever instead of ropes to have Berenger fly:

Le système reposait sur un levier que manœuvrait un machiniste. Gainé de velours noir pour qu’il s’estompât sur le fond du décor, revêtu du même tissu, ce levier, à un instant précis, s’accrochait à l’espèce de corset orthopédique porté par Jean-Louis Barrault qui se voyait ainsi, lui et son Béranger [sic], propulsé dans les airs sans le secours habituel de fils tombés des cintres. Sa liberté de mouvement augmentait sensiblement. (Noël 24)

The system relied upon a lever that was maneuvered by a technician. Enveloped in black velvet so it would blend to the background of the set, covered by the same material, this lever, in a precise instant, attached itself to a sort of orthopedic corset worn by Jean-Louis Barrault who saw himself, and Béranger [sic], propelled into the air without the usual assistance of strings dangling from the flies. His freedom in movement was markedly augmented.
Through innovative machinery, Noël produced the possibilities of Ionesco's fantastic on stage. As Ionesco said, technical means at times can help create the fantastic or humor: “Quelquefois la machinerie est utile, peut être même indispensable, quelquesfois non. Lorsqu'on emploie ces moyens techniques, ce n'est pas du rêve qu'on crée, on crée plutôt du fantastique ou de l'humour” (“Sometimes machinery is useful, it can even be indispensable, other times no. When these technical means are employed, they do not create dreams, but rather the fantastic or humor”; Ionesco, Entre la vie 100).

Jacques Noël translated Ionesco's visions into sets with the help of clues (scenic directions). Noël’s humbleness enabled him to become a sort of empty vessel. As he said himself, he did not want to put his mark on the plays for which he designed sets, but rather to metamorphose the author's text to a tangible and visual world on stage. Noël expresses this notion saying:

Moi, je n'ai rien envie de dire, si j'ai envie de dire en faisant passer à travers moi. J'ai envie de dire ce que me raconte l'auteur, ce qui me plaît dans l'auteur. C'est pour ça que j'ai eu un grand plaisir, j'en aurai toujours de travailler avec des gens comme Ionesco ou Marceau. (Jacques Noël: Décors)²⁴

I personally, do not have any desire to say something, well yes I do wish to say

²⁴ Quotes from Jacques Noël: Décors are from the DVD transcription.
something but by being a zone of passage. I want to say what the author is telling me, what draws me to the author. That is why it was and will always be, such a great pleasure for me to work with people like Ionesco and Marceau.

The visual world that Noël needed to capture in the case of Ionesco was, in part, one that was oneiric. Ionesco's truths, expressed through his writings, stemmed from his vivid imagery which was pulled from his dreams:

Pour en revenir à l'aspect onirique de mon œuvre, puisque vous me posez la question je dois vous dire que lorsque je rêve je n'abandonne pas le sentiment d'abdiquer la pensée. J'ai au contraire l'impression que je vois, en rêvant, des vérités, qui m'apparaissent, des évidences, dans une lumière plus éclatante, avec une acuité plus impitoyable, qu'à l'état de veille, où souvent tout s'adoucit, s'uniformise, s'impersonnalise. C'est pour cela que j'utilise, dans mon théâtre, des images de mes rêves, des réalités rêvées. (Ionesco, Notes 168)

To return to the oneiric aspects of my work; as you ask me the question, I must tell you that when I dream I do not feel I am abdicating thought. On the contrary, I have the impression that as I dream I see evident truths that appear before me brilliantly illuminated, more ruthlessly penetrating than in my waking state, when everything often seems softer, more uniform and impersonal. That is why in my drama I use images drawn from my dreams, realities that have been dreamed. (Ionesco, Notes 111)

By looking at Jacques Noël's sketches, we embark on a voyage into Ionesco's reality, dreams, and nightmares. Understanding his theater visually helps to explain why Ionesco had Jacques Noël do all his set designs:

Jacques Noël a monté les décors pour toutes mes pièces. Ce fut une grande chance pour moi. Il sait créer un désert illimité sur deux mètres carrés; je l'ai vu, avec trois bouts de bois, deux oripeaux, un vieux fauteuil, un tabouret, installer un magnifique salon de grand style; il trouve le moyen de construire, sur une scène exigüe et très basse de plafond, une cathédrale plus haute, plus large, plus profonde que Notre-Dame de Paris. Les difficultés l'aident, l'impossible lui tend la main. Ce n'est pas un magicien: il n'a d'autre sorcellerie que son intelligence, la puissance de son imagination, la précision de sa pensée artistique, la faculté de s'adapter à tous les textes et à tous les plateaux, la connaissance innée des lois de l'architecture scénique, car, chez lui, l'intelligence se marie avec l'instinct.

25 Translator Donald Watson used the term “more mellow”, I changed it to “softer”. 

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Jacques Noël created the set designs for all my plays. I was very lucky. He knows how to create an unlimited desert in two square meters; I saw him, with three pieces of wood, two rags, an old armchair, a stool, create a magnificent, high style living room; he finds the means to build, on a confined stage with low ceilings, a cathedral that is taller, wider, deeper than Notre-Dame de Paris. Difficulties help him, the impossible lends him a hand. He is not a magician, his only wizardry is his intelligence, the power of his imagination, the precision of his artistic thoughts, his ability adapt to all texts and stages, his innate knowledge of scenic architecture, because in his case, understanding and instinct are coupled.

With instinct and understanding coupled together, Noël built Ionesco’s unlimited desert within the theater walls.
Chapter 3:

Moments When the Set Must Speak

According to Darwin Payne, author of *Scenographic Imagination*, imagery is a primary source of inspiration for playwrights: “It is true that the written word is the playwright's primary tool; it is not, however, the primary source of his inspiration no matter how eloquently he is able to use that tool. The great playwrights have always known that the image and the object are the most elementary carriers of meanings and messages” (121). Ionesco was aware of the importance of imagery and objects as it was what triggered him to write his plays: “Je dis que lorsque j’écris j’essaye d’empêcher la pensée discursive ou la conscience diurne d'intervenir, que je laisse surgir les images autant que possible” (“I say that once I start writing I try to stop discursive thoughts or diurnal consciousness from intervening, I let images arise as much as possible”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 70). Ionesco's words arose from his vivid imagery. Noël was very much conscious of Ionesco's strong ties to imagery as they played a key role in his plays: “...j'attendais chaque nouvelle pièce comme un merveilleux cadeau car, chez lui, le décor possède un rôle clé: il joue vraiment” (“...I awaited each new play like a wonderful gift because, in Ionesco's plays the décor plays a key role; it truly acts”; Noël 32). Ionesco's own vivid imagery and dreams played an essential role in his creations. This explains his intricate and detailed set design descriptions. For Ionesco, a muted world would be preferred as sounds made him unable to see: “j'ai aimé voir, j'ai beaucoup moins aimé écouter. Quand j’écoute, je ne vois pas. Je suis malheureux” (“I liked to see, I liked it a lot more than listening. When I hear I do not see. I am unhappy”; Ionesco, *Découvertes* 73). Dreams were important as they revealed thoughts through images which was a deeper penetration into discovering the authentic self. Ionesco himself said that through his dreams he had a more acute vision:

J'accorde beaucoup d'importance au rêve parce-qu'il me donne une vision un peu plus aiguë, plus pénétrante de moi-même. Rêver, c'est penser et c'est penser d'une façon beaucoup plus profonde, plus vraie, plus authentique parce que l'on est comme replié sur soi-même. Il est une pensée en image. Quelquefois il est extrêmement révélateur, cruel. (Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 12)
I give a lot of importance to dreams because they give me more of an acute vision, a sharper, more penetrating view of myself. To dream is to think, it is thinking in a deeper manner, truer, more authentic because we are as if withdrawn into ourselves. It is a thought transformed into an image. Sometimes it is extremely revealing and cruel.

For Ionesco nothing was clearer or more logical than something created from the imagination or through dreams: “J'ai la conscience d’être vrai lorsque j'invente et que j'imagine. Rien de plus évident et 'logique' que la construction imaginaire” (“I am conscious of being true when I invent and imagine. Nothing is clearer or more 'logical' than something constructed by the imagination”; Ionesco, Notes 85, 47). Ionesco's theater was a fusion of the dream, the imagination and even the nightmare as his vision at times could be extremely revealing and cruel.

Noël presented Ionesco's visual truth, dreams, and inspirations on stage. According to Etienne Frois: “Avec Victimes du devoir (1952) la vision de Ionesco devient nettement onirique; le récit des rêves et l'investigation psychanalytique y sont les modes de prospection du réel...” (“With Victimes du devoir [1952] Ionesco's vision became distinctly more oneiric; within that vision, dream tales and psychoanalytical investigation are modes of exploring reality...”; 6). 1952 was the same year Ionesco and Noël first started collaborating. Perhaps the oneiric in Ionesco's theater was present before 1952, or maybe it was Noël who inspired Ionesco to bring to light his oneiric world because he knew Noël could translate it visually. The collaboration resulted in making dream-truths visible in a manner that satisfied Ionesco himself.

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Ionesco had a different vision of the word surreal; nothing surprised him more than the banal. Within the ordinary he saw the surreal: “Ionesco himself has declared that, although interested as a young man in surrealism, he is not a surrealist. He accuses the surrealist of having become fixated on manifestos and systems and he feels different from them in his working method...” (Bloom 125). Yet Ionesco himself used the term “surréal”--one different
from that of Breton, Dali, or Ernst: “Le comique c'est de l'insolite pur; rien ne me paraît plus surprenant que le banal; le surréel est là, à la portée de nos mains, dans le bavardage de tous les jours” (“The comic is the unusual pure and simple; nothing surprises me more than the banality; the “surreal” is there, within our reach, in our daily conversation”; Ionesco, *Notes* 283, 165).

For Ionesco, the surreal was always there, as Ionesco said “within reach” in our everyday lives, in our daily chatter; it was the reexamination of the banal which led to the discovery of the original truth:

![Image](image_url)

In the passage from the banal to the surreal, through dreams and anguish, Ionesco found the route to what for him could be “la vérité originelle” (the original truth).

Noël, like Ionesco, reveled in the imagination and the dream surging from the banal: he explored the magical universe sprung from everyday life: “... je trouve ce qui m'attire au théâtre: un univers quotidien qui, tout à coup, grâce à un personnage, ici une vieille servante lozérienne, bascule dans un délire onirique, rejoint le mythe” (“... I find what attracts me in theater: an ordinary universe that all of a sudden, thanks to a character, in this case the old lozérienne servant, changes into an oneiric delirium, becomes akin to myth”; Noël 103). Ionesco and Noël admired the fusion of the everyday and the banal with the dream and the fantastic. It was through this fusion one would discover that: “...le réalisme sert à faire ressortir plus facilement l'aspect fantastique et vice versa” (“...realism functions to make the fantastic stand out and vice versa”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 84). The banal and fantastic were opposing forces amplifying each other and dependent on each other for their existence, creating a friendship like yin and yang.

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27 The old lozérienne maid Jacques Noël is referring to is a character in the play *La Reine de la nuit* written by Christian Giudicelli. Jacques Noël was the set designer for the production in 1976 at the Théâtre de Plaisance directed by Gérard Caillaud. In his scenic directions Giudicelli suggests: “Un seul décor. Les divers lieux seront suggérés par des éléments et des éclairages.” (“Only one set design. The different settings will be suggested by elements and lighting”; Noël, *La Reine de la nuit*, qtd. in *Jacques Noël: Théâtre* 103).
Noël found the way to amplify the theatrical expression of *La Cantatrice chauve* through the use of his “banal” set design, objects, and costumes. As Ionesco states, he wanted to bring to light the banality in order to amplify the theatrical expression in *La Cantatrice chauve*:

“J'essayais de mettre la banalité en évidence dans *La Cantrice chauve*, alors il fallait donc trouver un moyen pour amplifier l'expression théâtrale” (“I was trying to bring to light the banalities in *The Bald Soprano*, so it was necessary to find a way to amplify them through theatrical expression”; Ionesco, *Interview Pierre Dumayet*). The set design was able to reflect the banality which Ionesco needed in his play to amplify the surreal in the chatter of his characters in *La Cantatrice chauve*. Noël understood and saw Ionesco's words and created the typical English room Ionesco envisioned. According to Darwyn Payne, Ionesco's set directions for *La Cantatrice chauve* were most often not understood by scenographers:

Although the play (*La Cantatrice chauve*) is an example of what has come to be known as the theater of the absurd, since it takes a nonsensical approach to dialogue and situation--a characteristic feature of this form of theater--the author asks for (even though most scenographers have not taken him seriously) a typical English room and a middle-class home. And what most scenographers do not realize is that this is exactly what he meant, that the force of the play (its effect, at least) greatly depends upon the contrast of unreal dialogue against a very real physical background. (114)

It was crucial that the banal be expressed through visual accents in *La Cantatrice chauve*, and Noël created one that has been used at the Théâtre de la Huchette from 1957 to today.

![Set design for *La Cantatrice chauve* by Jacques Noël. This set design was created for the 1957 production at the Théâtre de la Huchette. Today the set design is still used in the performance in the same theater.](image)
Ionesco wanted his play *Rhinocéros* to grow from this banality. The theme of the ordinary and the credible in *Rhinocéros* was created through the scenery in the first act. Without the starting point of the play in an ordinary town, there would be no crescendo to the fantastic in the last act. The starting point of the play helped progressively amplify the bizarre in the succeeding scenes which made the fantastic stand out and in some ways become more believable.

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It was an evident fear of Ionesco's to be interpreted differently and to have his plays interpreted through the eyes of the director, ignoring his own vision, as he stated himself:

Des hérésies modernes veulent placer aujourd’hui le metteur en scène au dessus de l'auteur. On tente de le considérer comme l'auteur véritable de l’œuvre. C'est comme si on disait que l'entrepreneur ou le maçon sont les véritables bâtisseurs de l’édifice. (Ionesco, *Contre les metteurs*)

Today modern heresies want to place the director above the author. Some are tempted to consider him the true author of the work. It is as if we said that the entrepreneur or the bricklayer were the true builder of the edifice.

Ionesco believed that too many directors compromised the original vision of the playwright by putting their own vision before that of the author. For him, a great director would do as a conductor of an orchestra, Ionesco said:

Il faut dire qu'on n'a jamais entendu un chef d'orchestre intercaler dans une symphonie de Beethoven des passages d'une autre symphonie de Beethoven. Cela arriverait si le chef d'orchestre devenait un metteur en scène. (Ionesco, *Contre les metteurs*)

It has to be said that it is unheard of for a conductor to slip a passage of one of Beethoven's symphonies into another of his symphonies. This would happen if the conductor became a theater director.

Although he is talking about the director it may be assumed as well for the set design of his plays since Ionesco was such a visually opulent writer. In the quote below, Ionesco mentions an

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28 Press clippings cited here in below are in scrapbooks now archived at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France. Some information identifying newspapers, dates, etc., is taken from handwritten indications on the scrapbook pages. The compiler(s) of the scrapbooks are not identified. See Works Cited for further information.
experience he had with a difficult director, Antoine Bourseiller, who added his own vision of the play:

Un tel metteur en scène, par exemple, avec lequel il est très difficile de s'entendre, c'est Antoine Bourseiller. Dans Victimes du devoir, il a mis sur le mur du fond de la pièce une quantité très grande de masques à gaz. Alors je lui ai demandé pourquoi. Il m'a dit, bien voilà, dans votre pièce, il y a une atmosphère étouffante, asphyxiante, alors pour souligner cela, j'ai mis les masques à gaz. Alors là, c'était une idée qui était dans la tête du metteur en scène, mais qui ne collait pas avec la pièce, et qui était plaquée et qui n'exprimait rien. (Vaïs 253)

A director, for example, with whom it is difficult to get along is Antoine Bourseiller. In Victimes du devoir, he put a great number of gas masks on the back wall. So, I asked him why. He told me that, well, in your play, there is stifling, asphyxiating atmosphere, so to emphasize that, I put up gas masks. So there, that was an idea that was in the head of the director, but that did not go with the play, and that was tacked on and that expressed nothing.

Noël's sets were “modest” in the sense that he did not want them to overshadow the performance. Noël reiterates this in an interview with Claude Salvy:

Lorsqu'un décor est applaudi au lever du rideau, c'est à mon avis, nous dit-il, une mauvaise note. Le décor ne doit pas au théâtre, être un élément mis en avant. Il existe en revanche des moments où il doit parler tout seul, exprimer des choses qui ne peuvent être placées dans la bouche des acteurs.

When a set design is applauded at the rising of the curtain, a wrong note has been struck in my opinion. The set design cannot be an element that stands out. On the other hand there are moments when the set must speak alone, expressing things that cannot be put into the mouths of the actors.

Noël was more of an accomplice: he wanted to help the author show himself, as Jean-Louis Barrault said: “Noël, c'est mieux qu'un décorateur, c'est un complice” (“Noël is better than a scenic designer, he is an accomplice”; Noël 80). In theater, collaboration is key, and Ionesco was aware of this: “En réalité, il doit y avoir collaboration, chacun étant complice de l'autre” (“In reality there must be collaboration, each being accomplice to the other”; Ionesco, Contre les metteurs). For Ionesco it was important that his plays be presented in the sense he wrote them.
In lieu of sitting in front of a landscape and paint, Jacques Noël would sit in front of a text and paint.

The first performance of Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* was in Germany in 1959. In an interview, Ionesco was asked what he thought of the 1959 German performance, he replied comparing it to the 1960 Barrault production in France:

C.V.: Quelles différences pouvez-vous constater entre la mise en scène de Jean-Louis Barrault et celle que vous avez vu en Allemagne? E.I.: En Allemagne, j'ai vu une seule mise en scène, celle de Stroux, à Düsseldorf. La mise en scène allemande était plus nue, elle accentuait beaucoup moins le coté visuel. La mise en scène de Barrault est visuelle, au contraire, plastique. (Velogue)

C.V.: What differences did you notice in the staging of Jean-Louis Barrault and the one you saw in Germany? E.I.: In Germany I saw only one staging, the one by Stroux, in Dusseldorf. The staging in Germany was barer, it accentuated a lot less the visual side. The staging of Barrault was a lot more visual on the contrary, plastic.

As seen in the quote above, Ionesco seemed clearly less pleased with the staging in Germany which he described as “bare.” It was the production by Jean-Louis Barrault and Noël in France that he felt captured the visual, plastic potential of his play.

The first performance of *Rhinocéros* in France which Ionesco referred to was in 1960, at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.²⁹ The performance was directed by Jean-Louis Barrault in close collaboration with Ionesco and Noël. It can be considered the closest to how Ionesco envisioned the play, as he was very much present in the staging of *Rhinocéros*, attending all the rehearsals: “J'ai assisté à toutes les répétitions. J'ai fait de petites observations à la demande de J.L. Barrault” (“I attended all of the rehearsals. At the request of Jean-Louis-Barrault I made minor remarks here and there”; Velogue). The collaboration between Barrault, Noël and Ionesco gave life to an exemplary performance of *Rhinocéros*, the creator, the director, and set designer worked together. Ionesco, not a fan of watching his own plays, admittedly said he would repeatedly go

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²⁹ Jacques Noël also created the set design for *Rhinocéros* in 1962 at the Haifa Theater, in Israel, directed by Robert Postec. In 1972, he created again the set design for the same play; it was directed by Guy Lauzin at the Théâtre des Célestins de Lyon.
Ionesco enjoyed watching this specific performance, as it left him so much room to imagine, he did not know himself what to expect in the next scene.

Noël, Ionesco, and Barrault formed their own group as they collaborated together repeatedly; they may have referred themselves as: *The Three Musketeers*, since *The Three Musketeers* was a beloved tale in the childhood of Noël and Ionesco. Noël brought up *The Three Musketeers* when discussing what drew him to theater:

Ce qui m’attirait aussi dans le théâtre, c’était le travail d’équipe. Au fond, j’y retrouvais l’esprit de mes lectures d’enfant, le côté “un pour tous, tous pour un”, *Les trois Mousquetaires*...Faire partie d’une aventure comme ça, c’était merveilleux! (Noël 7)

What drew me to theater was team work. Deep down, I found there the moral from readings in my childhood, the “One for all, and all for one” *The Three Musketeers*....It was wonderful to be part of an adventure like that!

The novel also made quite an impression on young Ionesco. In an interview, he professed that among the few authors he liked, Alexandre Dumas was his favorite: “Quand j’étais écolier mon père venait dans ma chambre pour voir si je faisais mes devoirs. Il me surprenait en lisant *Les trois mousquetaires*” (“When I was a school boy, my

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30 Over the years, Ionesco Noël and Barrault worked together at the Théâtre de l’Odéon, they put on three plays: *Rhinocéros* 1960, *Le Piéton de l’air* 1963, and *Delire à deux* 1966. They also collaborated in other various theaters.
father would come into my room to see if I was doing my homework, he would catch me reading Dostoevsky for example or maybe *The Three Musketeers*”; Ionesco, *L'Homme en question*). Friendship was the core of their theatrical adventure and life, as Ionesco said: “La seule petite consolation au grand malheur d’être né c'est quand même l'amitié” (“The only small consolation to the great misery of being born is friendship”; Ionesco, *L'Homme en question*). Ionesco and Noël's friendship and adventures blossomed within the theater walls.

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*Rhinocéros* is a play in three acts containing four scenes, one scene in Act I, two scenes in Act II, and one scene in the third act. There is constant movement; the scenic backdrops had to steadily change. The changing scenes were possible to create with backdrops that could easily move to transport the tourist to different sceneries. The backdrops used for the performance were made out of muslin stretched on a wooden frame; they were light and easy to move which facilitated the job of the machinist between acts. Noël did not participate in the physical construction of the set; however, he did partake in the painting of the backdrops where he felt more comfortable, as he said himself: “Un constructeur, moi je ne peux pas prendre le marteau et travailler à sa place. Tandis qu'avec la peinture je peux éventuellement travailler avec parce que c'est un travail de transcription d'une maquette qui est sur une échelle réduite” (“I cannot pick up a hammer and do the work of a set constructor. Painting however I could perhaps do because it involves the transcription of a reduced-scale model”; *Jacques Noël: Décors*). Noël painted the muslin backdrops creating Ionesco's *Rhinocéros* world.

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31 **Tourist** is the term I wanted to use instead of audience; the audience travels for pleasure to an unknown place discovering a new world.
Chapter 4:

Looming Secrets

Fig. 3: Act I: scene I sketch for Rhinocéros by Jacques Noël (1960 Théâtre de l'Odéon)

The image above is Noël's sketch of the first act of the 1960 *Rhinocéros* performance. In the opening scene, Noël constructs Ionesco's banal, based on Ionesco's scenic directions:


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32 All sketches presented through digital images of Jacques Noël's *Rhinocéros*, and 179 other plays for which he did the set design for, can be accessed through this link <http://art.asso.free.fr/jacques-noel/theatre/resultat-eugene-ionesco.php?recordID=79>. 
arbre poussiéreux près des chaises de la terrasse. Ciel bleu, lumière crue, murs très blancs. C'est un dimanche, pas loin de midi, en été. Jean et Berenger iront s'asseoir a une table de terrasse. *(Rhinocéros 13)*

The scene is a square in a small provincial town. Up-stage a house composed of a ground floor and one story. The ground floor is the window of a grocer's shop. The entrance is up two or three step through a glass-paned door. The word EPICERIE is written in bold letters above the shop window. The two windows on the first floor are the living quarters of the grocer and his wife. The shops is up-stage, but slightly to the left, not far from the wings. In the distance a church steeple is visible above the grocers house. Between the shop and the left of the stage there is a little street in perspective. To the right, slightly at an angle, is the front of a café. Above the café, one floor with a window; in front, the café terrace; several chairs and tables reach almost to the center stage. A dusty tree stands near the terrace chairs. Blue sky; harsh light; very white walls. The time is almost mid-day on a Sunday in summertime. Jean and Berenger will sit at one of the terrace tables. *(Rhinocéros 3)*

The soft neutral colors invite the spectator to look on stage without feeling overwhelmed. Noël uses natural blue hues, pale, delicate grays in order to have the stage appear bright and luminous and for the audience to be comfortable. The different hues of blue and gray give depth and dimensions to the small provincial town Noël created.

The light, luminous colors in the first act are similar to a description from Ionesco's childhood memory: “J'ai des images d'enfance des lumières, des couleurs” (“I have images from my childhood of lights and colors”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 12). In the first act of *Rhinocéros* we have a glimpse of Ionesco's childhood. Ionesco frequently spoke about his time as a child at La Chapelle-Anthenaise where he lived with his sister after the war under blue skies:

Je me souviens d'un matin très heureux, très lumineux où j'allais en habits du dimanche vers l'église. Je vois encore le ciel bleu, et, dans le ciel, la pointe de l'église. Les cloches, je les entends. Il y avait le ciel, il y avait la terre, le mariage parfait du ciel et de la terre. *(Ionesco, Entre la vie 15)*

I remember a very happy and very luminous morning, when I was going to

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33 All *Rhinocéros* citations in English are translated by Dereck Prouse. In all references below, when two page numbers follow a translation, the first refers to the French edition, the second to Prouse's English translation.
church dressed in my Sunday clothes. I can still see the blue sky, and in the sky, the steeple of the church. I can hear the bells. There was the sky, there was the earth, the perfect marriage of the sky and earth.

This painted image of his past through his words about his past memories is very similar to the scenic description of the opening act in *Rhinocéros*.

Postcard photographs of La Chapelle-Anthenaise, year 1920, where Ionesco spent part of his childhood. Note the similarities between the Jacques Noël's sketch for Act 1: scene 1 (See fig.3).

It was as if Jacques Noël's sketch for the first act was a visual prolongation of Ionesco's childhood memory. For Ionesco La Chapelle-Anthenaise was a lost paradise: “Une plénitude: une symbolisation, si je puis dire, du paradis. Ce lieu est toujours pour moi comme l'image d'un paradis perdu” (“A fullness; a symbolization, I might say, of paradise. This place for me is still like the image of a lost paradise”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 14). Noël translated this world with no words but with images so precise that the critic Guy Dumur, seems to be describing Ionesco's
experience at La Chapelle-Anthenaise not the first act of *Rhinocéros*:

> C'est un jour comme les autres. Quelque part, dans une petite ville: une placette, une épicerie, un café. A la terrasse de ce café deux hommes, deux amis, bavardent devant un pastis. Sur la place, les gens se promènent, se disent bonjour et se répètent qu'il fait beau temps, c'est vrai: “ciel bleu, lumière, murs blancs...pas loin de midi en été.”

> It is a day like any other. Somewhere, in a small town; a small town square, a grocer's shop, a café. On the terrace of this café two men, two friends, chat over a pastis. In the town square, people are walking around saying hello to one another and repeatedly mentioning the nice weather, it is true: “blue sky, light, white walls...around noon on a summer day.”

Ionesco in an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, admitted visually revisiting his past which enabled him to write his plays: “C.B.: Avez-vous l'impression que votre œuvre dramatique doive quelque chose à vos souvenirs de La Chapelle-Anthenaise? E.I.: Oui, bien des préoccupations, des obsessions me viennent de La Chapelle-Anthenaise et de la rupture avec ce paradis” (“C.B.: Do you have the impression that your dramatic work is indebted to your memories of La Chapelle-Anthenaise? E.I.: Yes, many worries and obsessions can be attributed to La Chapelle Anthenaise and from the rupture with this paradise”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 18). This distant image of his childhood may have been the image which led him to write *Rhinocéros*: “C'est une image, une première réplique, qui déclenche toujours, chez moi, le mécanisme de la création, ensuite, je me laisse porter par mes propres personnages, je ne sais jamais où je vais exactement” (“It is an image, a first response, which in my case always sets in motion the mechanism of creation. Then I let myself get carried away by my own characters, I never really know where I am going”; Ionesco, *Notes et contres notes*, qtd. in Hubert 7). That is what Ionesco wanted; his creation on the stage, he wanted the audience to see what he saw when discovering his plays because when he wrote he would see the plays unfolding. Before his words came images: “Oui. Quand je les fais, je vois visuellement la pièce se dérouler, n'est-ce pas...” (“Yes. When I write them, I visually see the play unfold...”; Vaïs 252).
Everything appears to be open in the first act, the door to the grocer's store is transparent; the audience is invited to explore all that is on stage and it is pleasing to the eye. Nothing appears hidden; the primary zones of the stage (café, grocers shop) are open for all to see. Yet there is a secret looming in this space, and there are also signs of human life gone. Noël presents almost imperceptible hints of tension such as the dead leafless tree, closed or blacked out windows and doors echoing through the small village surrounding the café and grocers shop. The banal is there as is the fantastic through these looming secrets. These looming secrets did not pass unnoticed; the theater critic Jacques Lemarchand saw them and appreciated the liberty it gave to the imagination:

J'aimais la place de petite ville soigneusement construite par Jacques Noël. C'était le lumineux point de départ d'une aventure dont le détail me semble-t-il, devrait être laissé, et en chaque instant d'avantage, à l'imagination du spectateur plutôt qu'à la minuterie du metteur en scène et du décorateur. Ils nous privent un peu, l'un et l'autre, du plaisir de traduire et d'imaginer.34

I loved the small town square carefully built by Jacques Noël. It was the luminous starting point of an adventure whose details it seems to me, are better left to the spectator's imagination rather than to the minutiae of the director and the set designer. Both of them deprive us a little of the pleasure of translating and imagining.

The “secret” and “openness” in the first act leave room for interpretation for the audience so they may participate. To leave part of the play to the imagination was what Noël strove for. He wanted to return to a theater which would suggest rather than provide answers. Part of seeing a play is to dream, to imagine:

Il n'y a pas très longtemps encore mais il y avait une époque où le décorateur avait tendance à faire un décor extrêmement, très réaliste, c'est-à-dire que la vision cinéma avait une tendance à envahir le plateau. J’espère qu'on va assister à un retour de théâtre c'est-à-dire des matériaux plus légers […] je pense qu'on est maintenant en train de revenir à cette forme de théâtre qui sait faire participer le spectateur au spectacle, c'est-à-dire qui lui demande de croire même si ce n'est pas de lui donner envie de participer alors que si on le lui donne tout fait il ne rentre.

34 Jacques Lemarchand was not only a theater critic but also a French writer and collection director for the French publication Gallimard.
There was a time, not very long ago when the set designer had a tendency to make a set design very realist, in other words the cinematic vision had a tendency to invade the stage. I hope that we will return to theater, in other words to lighter materials [...] I think that we are now coming back to this form of theater that knows how to encourage the participation of the spectator during the performance, that is to say, ask him to believe, to give him the desire to participate, whereas if we present him with everything he does not really enter the stage. A set must give him freedom to imagine, a set design must not say it all.

For Ionesco, being left to imagine was what he enjoyed in theater, looking at the stage which invited one to see beyond: “...j’aime regarder les décors, j’aime regarder autre chose et voir autre chose au-delà ou à travers ce qu'on me montre ou ce qu'on me dit” (“I like to look at set designs, I like to look at other things and look beyond or through what I am shown or told”; Ionesco, *Découvertes* 69). As Ionesco looked at the set designs he would see beyond; discovering hidden gems enabling him to imagine.

Ionesco's appreciation for interpretations was apparent and is also apparent in his writings through his stage directions. Images are polysemous, the observer may choose what s/he wants to see and may interpret it.35 James Mills, author of “The Dualism of Decor and Direction in Ionesco's *Rhinocéros*”, found surrealistic overtones in Ionesco's stage descriptions; he saw the church steeple as being the horn of a rhinoceros: “This image takes on surrealistic overtones if the windows on the buildings on the left and right are seen to represent the eyes and the steeple the horn of a huge rhinoceros silently watching its indifferent prey”(57). But Noël when reading the text, saw differently, he did not make the church steeple resemble the rhinoceros horn. Instead, on stage right, the dead tree resembles a horn.36 The tree or now the horn, and the two dark doors balanced on each side resemble two giant rhinoceros eyes, carefully watching the town. The tree was on stage right, where most of the action occurred in Act one. At times, the

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35 Roland Barthes uses the term polysemous in his book *Image- Music- Text* stating “All images are polysemous; they imply, underlying their signifiers, a 'floating chain' of signifieds, the reader able to choose some and ignore others” (Barthes, *Image* 39).

36 Stage Right: these left/right directions are seen from the actor's point of view on the stage.
actors would stand in front of the tree in the actual performance, making it appear from certain angles as if they had horns budding from their heads.

Photographs by Etienne Weil of the actual performance of *Rhinocéros* (January 1960 at the Théâtre de l'Odéon). Beactors is the tree, notice at certain angles it seems as if a budding horn is protruding from their head.

Noël created a subliminal rhinoceros. The color gray Noël incorporated was perhaps already a “hint” of rhinoceros slowly creeping onto stage, leading to a slow progression for the final act. The gray color will metamorphose into a more sinister hue which will emerge in the final act.

Young Ionesco was fearful of trees, an object we see every day. In a vivid memory, Ionesco describes a time in his stroller, frightened, as he got closer to the trees they seemed to grow towards him: “Je ne savais pas très bien à quel ordre appartenait ces énormes masses, les arbres; je ne me rendais pas compte si j’avançais vers eux ou si c’étaient eux qui venaient vers moi, me faisant hurler de peur” (“I did not know how to classify these huge masses, the trees; I could not tell if I was going towards them or if it was they who were coming towards me,
making me scream in fright”; Ionesco, *Découvertes* 24). One of these trees from Ionesco's memory made its way into *Rhinocéros*.

The banal was never to remain ordinary for Ionesco. The post-war world was a constant source of anxiety, the ordinary was nightmarish, life as unbearable as a nightmare: “Je vous avoue, tout à fait entre nous, que j'ai bien le sentiment que la vie est cauchemardesque, qu'elle est pénible, insupportable comme un mauvais rêve” (“I admit just between ourselves, that I really do feel that life is nightmarish, painful and unbearable like a bad dream”; Ionesco, *Notes* 166, 110). With *Rhinocéros* we start the adventure in what *seems* to be banal: a small paradoxical village. The banal is communicated visually with objects pulled from reality. These objects for Ionesco express a truth: “Cet objet réel ou réaliste ou pseudo-réaliste donne sa vérité, sa force au fond abstrait du tableau” (“This real or realist or pseudo-realist object gives the abstract background of the painting meaning its truth, its force”; Ionesco, *Entre la vie* 84). Noël incorporated the tree, the tables, the church steeple, doors all inanimate objects because they were revealing of truth and were far from the ordinary.

Ionesco was not able to grasp or comprehend the essence of objects: “Je ne sais pas encore, je ne saurai jamais, ce que sont les objets dans leur essence, c'est à dire ce qu'est le monde” (“I do not yet know, nor will I ever know, what the essence of the object is, in other words what the world is”; Ionesco, *Découvertes* 36). He was unable to say what the essence of the physical world was. This is why in the opening scene it was important to emphasize these “ordinary objects” which will metamorphose into a world of extraordinary terrors later in the play.

In the town center is the meeting place where all the villagers gather in front of the café and the grocer's store, the heart of the town, surrounded by streets creating depth. With the depth created, Noël tricked the eyes and manipulated them, creating illusions, which he was able to construct with very little: “J'ai eu la révélation qu'avec très peu de choses on pouvait créer l'illusion” (“I had the revelation that illusions can be created with very little”; Noël 7). From stage left to right, there is a rail or small angled fence in the first act sketch that appears to grow, shift and twist in later scenes. The railing slopes down in a point at mid-stage forming an
elongated triangle between the audience and the stage. This rail will be the first visual metamorphosed object as it will become a stairway in the second act.

Noël's skill of creating illusions through metamorphosing the stage set did not go unnoticed by Ionesco: “Il a fait de la lumière sans lumière dans Tueur Sans Gage, il a créé le décor. Une lumière que les autres décorateurs ne peuvent pas exprimer. C'est un magicien le Jacques du décor. Le maître de ce que j’appellerais du trompe-l’œil” (“He created light without light in Tueur sans gage, he created the set design. A light that other set designers cannot express. The Jacques of set design is a magician. The master of what I would call trompe l‘œil”; Ionesco, Jacques Noël: Décors). Noël created clever dimensions through the use of mirrors and false perspectives: “Ces maquettes étaient toujours réalisées avec un soin bouleversant et comptaient presque toujours une astuce (l'utilisation de miroirs ou de fausse perspectives, par exemple, pour créer l'illusion de vaste espaces sur la scène)” (“His models were always created with overwhelming care and almost always included a clever trick [for example the use of mirrors or false perspectives, to create the illusion of vast space on stage]”; Hutson et. al. 7).

In the first act scene one, there is the introduction of the first two rhinoceroses in the play. They are present in an auditive way, but not visible. The actors claim to see them but the audience can only hear their grunts and stamping hooves. These sounds were recordings executed by Michel Phillipot, the composer of the 1960 production. The sound resonated through the theater. The sound allowed the spectators to imagine these mammals and amplified the mysticism as the audience envisioned the rhinoceroses through their imagination. “A ce moment, on entend le bruit très éloigné, mais se rapprochant très vite, d'un souffle de fauve et de sa course précipitée, ainsi qu'un long barrissement” (“At this moment a noise is heard, far off, but swiftly approaching of a beast panting in its headlong course, and of a long trumpeting”; Rhinoceros 21, 7). The rhinoceroses, stars of the show, appear visually later in the play, but, in each act, the presence of the rhinoceros will augment as well as get progressively tangible. They progress little by little into each scene, creating a progression of chaos and unease.

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37 Haley Zdybel, is currently writing an M.A. thesis on Sounds and Silence in Eugène Ionesco's Rhinocéros and Samuel Beckett's En Attendant godot. Zdybel explored the sounds created for this particular 1960 production of Rhinocéros.
Chapter 5:

“...tout s’achève dans le fantastique” (Neveu).

In Act 2, Noël and Ionesco guide the audience inside an administrative office: Berenger's workplace. One is again transposed visually to Ionesco's past. According to Etienne Frois:

Ionesco exploite, dans cette scène, des souvenirs personnels: il a lui-même travaillé dans une maison de publication juridique. Dans la description du décor, le souci de réalisme est poussé très loin. Il faut particulièrement noter la présence d'une horloge “qui marche”; c'est un détail que l'on retrouve dans d'autres pièces (La Cantatrice chauve, Amédée, etc.). (92)

In this scene Ionesco exploits personal memories: he worked in a juridical publishing house. In the description of this set design, the concern for realism is pushed very far. It is particularly important to note the presence of a clock “that works”; it is a detail that is found in other plays (The Bald Soprano, Amédée, etc.).

As soon as we enter the second act, there is a clock in the center of the backdrop: “...une horloge indique: 9 heures 3 minutes” (“...a clock registers three minutes past nine”; Rhinoceros 92, 38). For Berenger time does not exist, he was constantly late. In act one Berenger is late to meet his friend Jean “Jean: Toujours en retard, évidemment! (il regarde sa montre-bracelet)”
(“Late as usual, of course! [He looks at his wrist watch]; Rhinoceros 14, 4). In the second act Berenger is again late, this time to work: “M. Papillon: Bon! Il est neuf heures, Mademoiselle, enlevez-moi la feuille de présence. Tant pis pour les retardaires! (Daisy se dirige vers la petite table, à gauche, où se trouve la feuille de présence, au moment où entre Berenger)” (“Papillon: Well! It's gone nine, Miss Daisy; put the time sheets away. Too bad for the latecomers. [Daisy goes to the little table, left, on which the time sheets are placed, at the same moment as Berenger enters]; Rhinoceros 99, 42). Berenger is always late because he is different, untainted by societal norms; he sees things differently from the outside: “Berenger est peut-être celui qui, comme Denis Rougemont, est allergique aux mouvement des foules et aux marches, militaire et autre” (“It may be that Berenger is a man who, like Denis Rougemont, is allergic to mass movements and marches of all kinds, military or not”; Ionesco, Notes 278, 199).38 Noël places the clock above the door on center stage as “time” is the center of almost all the character's lives.

This scene moves inside, becomes a space enclosed by walls. Noël eases the progression from the first act outside to the second act by incorporating a glimpse from the first act. Noël includes a reminder of the blue sky in Act one now seen through the window. The sky is still present but now marginalized.

Fig. 5: Act II: scene I: sketch B for Rhinocéros by Jacques Noël (1960 Théâtre de l’Odéon)

Noël created a layout with a special architectural curving. Art Nouveau elements are found in

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38 Ionesco is referring to Denis Rougemont (1906-1985), a Swiss writer who wrote in French, and is perhaps best known for his work Love in the Western World (1939, 1972; English translations 1940, 1982).
the ceiling curving, the window frames, and the curved chairs. With Art Nouveau, structures are alive, continuous; on the other hand with straight lines there is a start and end. According to Mario Amaya, Art Nouveau is: “...restless, moving, agitated line takes on a nervous, expressive quality, either dictating the shape of the object or else complementing it in some unusual or unpredictable way” (Amaya 8). This constant movement in the architecture is also reflected in the play. In Act II scene I, there is a lot of agitated nervous movement on stage:

Daisy va à son petit bureau et tape à la machine. Dudard s'assoit à son bureau et commence à travailler. Berenger et Botard à leurs petites tables, tous deux de profil à la salle; Botard, de dos à la porte de l'escalier. Botard a l'air de mauvaise humeur; Berenger et passif et vaseux; berenger installe les épreuves sur la table, passe le manuscrit à Botard; Botard s'assoit en bougonnant, tandis que M. Papillon sort en claquant la porte. (Rhinocéros 107)

Daisy goes and types at her little desk. Dudard sits at his desk and starts to work. Berenger and Botard sit at their little tables in profile to the auditorium. Botard, his back to the staircase door, seems in a bad temper. Berenger is passive and limp; he spreads the proofs on the table, passes the manuscripts to Botard; Botard sits down grumbling, whilst Papillon exits banging the door loudly. (Rhinocéros 45).

The theatrical world of Ionesco and the visual world of Art Nouveau evoked by Noël are both places of unfinished lines without concrete ending: “En réalité, il n'y a pas de raison pour qu'une pièce finisse....S'il faut une fin, c'est parce que les spectateurs doivent aller se coucher” (“In reality, there is no reason why a play should end...If an ending is needed, it is because the audience need to go to bed”; Ionesco, Entre la vie 81). Rhinocéros has no concrete ending as one is left imagining the end of Berenger's future as the thick red curtains abruptly close as Berenger recites his final lines: “Je ne capitule pas!” (“I am not capitulating!”; Rhinoceros 246, 107). Even with the curtains closed, the play is still moving because we are only left imagining Berenger's next move.

Ionesco requested that the stage in the beginning of Act II scene I resemble a “tableau

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37 Art Nouveau was popular in Paris, France in 1895. According to Mario Amaya: “From about 1895 onwards Paris went wild with Art Nouveau, covering every square surface with a confusion of whiplash lines and floral motifs, undulating hair and trailing peacocks, twisted lily leaves and twining stalks, culminating in an all-out frenzy of curvilinear decoration for the occasion of the 1900 Exhibition” (Amaya 96). This was around the era of Jacques Noël's father's life.
“Au lever du rideau, pendant quelques secondes, les personnages restent immobiles, dans la position où sera dite la première réplique. Cela doit faire tableau vivant” (“When the curtain rises the characters remain fixed for a few seconds in position for the first line of dialogue. They make a tableau vivant”; Rhinoceros 92, 39). According to Etienne Frois: “Le décor et les attitudes 'parlantes' des personnages permettent ainsi au spectateur de saisir d'un seul regard une situation ou une atmosphère” (“The set design and the 'communicative' poses of the characters allow the spectators to grasp a situation or an atmosphere in a single glance”; 92). Ionesco needed the image to communicate to the spectators before their lines. Noël accomplished this tableau vivant by creating columns and dimensions that gave an effect of a picture frame. By looking on the stage we know immediately through costumes, architecture, objects, that this is a workspace. The tableau vivant in the beginning of the Act will also amplify the agitated movement found towards the end of the Act.

Noël painted a stairway in his sketch. This staircase was metamorphosed from the railing in the first act. The railing from Act I was moved horizontally (by a machinist between acts) and transformed into a staircase. Incorporating the rail in the first act adds fluidity to the changing of scenes. This time the rail, instead of separating the audience from the stairs, separates the actors from the rhinoceroses. Dust appeared from the corridor which helped reinforce the imagining of the rhinoceroses terrorizing the townsmen. Noël used dust to produce the physical presence of rhinoceroses destroying the village slowly. The staircase becomes part of the action:

*At this moment a noise is heard. The staircase steps are seen to crumble under an obviously formidable weight. From below an anguished trumpeting is heard. As the dust clears after the collapse of the staircase, the staircase landing is seen to be hanging in space.* (Rhinoceros 48)

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40 See figure 5 page 40.
There are the two extreme areas onstage; there is the blue from the window on stage right where
the actors will escape their slowly suffocating environment becoming succumbed by
*rhinoceritus*: “*Ils escaladent la fenêtre, en meme temps*” (“*They climb through the window
together*”; *Rhinoceros* 135, 57). On stage left, there is a dark mysterious staircase where the
mammals will slowly enter. The staircase has a railing that continues up, but there are no steps
that go along, this creates a world of chaos and illogic slowly entering from stage left. Joseph
Dodd, former professor and set designer at the University of Hawai’i at Mānoa said in an
interview that we are trained to read from left to right, our eyes are first drawn to the left of the
stage (from the spectator's positioning). The window is a strong point, Noël seemingly wanted
the audience to remember this paradise that we saw in the first act, he wanted us to reflect on it
before seeing the dark side of the stage...the crumbling staircase....the crumbling world of
looming shadows and dust slowly taking over the stage.

Noël created a stage with two extreme duals: a world where there is light, but contrasted
with darkness. This dualism played a key role in Ionesco's theater seen already between the
banal and fantastic and also in his life. Ionesco was bi-lingual and bi-cultural, being French and
Romanian. The bilingualism enabled him to live in dual world showing him that in the midst of
contradictions is the “seed” or its truth “Les contradictions éclatent et quand ça éclate on sait
quel est le noyau qui surgit” (“Contradictions come out and when they come out we know that it
is the seed which emerges”; Ionesco, *Radioscopie*).

The stage plays with the offstage, hiding part of the action creating a world unseen.
Ionesco and Noël did not want to present just yet the stars of the play: the rhinoceroses. For that
reason *Rhinocéros* takes advantage of off stage (stairway corridor) amplifying mystery and the
use of the imagination. Ionesco and Noël did not want just yet to reveal the surprise. The
inclusion of the off-stage is an important component of the play; as Joseph Dodd stated “You
have to manage the offstage space as much as the onstage space”. Ionesco, while writing his
stage directions, specified many times the off-stage in his play: the orchestra pit, and wings are
places that were just as important as the stage exposed to the public. Ionesco cites in his scenic
directions of the second act : “*Dans le cas où le théâtre aurait une fausse d'orchestre, il serait
préférable de ne mettre que le simple encadrement d'une fenêtre, au tout premier plan*” (“If the
theater has an orchestra pit it would be preferable to have simply a window frame in front of the stage, facing the auditorium”; Rhinoceros 92, 38). Théâtre de l’Odéon has an orchestra pit but Jacques Noël did not want to integrate idea of a window in the set design. Adding the window would block the view of the stage and create a distance between the audience and the stage. Noël wanted the audience to feel included and able to see clearly the stage. Noël thought it rude to block the eyes from seeing. He even stated that it is ill mannered and offensive to have curtains come down between acts: “C’est vrai qu’en tant que spectateur, j’ai horreur des rideaux de scène qu’on baisse en jouant de petites musiques pour faire patienter les gens. Je trouve ça mal-élevé” (“It is true that as a spectator, I cannot stand it when the curtains come down the stage that we lower the curtains and play little tunes while people wait, I find that very ill mannered”; Jacques Noël: Décors). The scenic designer must be conscious of the audience because they are the voyagers and he wants to keep their eyes drawn towards the stage, not overwhelmed nor disconnected from the stage.

Noël places the window on stage right.

In the first scene, we had only the auditory presence of the rhinoceros, but now the presence of these mammals is becoming more and more tangible. With the dust coming through the corridor we see the havoc they are causing. In Act II scene I, there is a momentary glimpse of the chaos happening in the exterior world on stage. It was not explicit, however. Noël left to each individual the possibility to imagine the metamorphosis of the
townspeople into rhinoceroses. He granted them the freedom to imagine what was happening in the stairway corridor.

Ionesco was very specific in his scenic details as he wanted the banal displayed not just to be seen but also because the banal exposes the fantastic. Ionesco himself described his play as a demystification: “Rhinocéros aussi est une tentative de démystification” ("Rhinoceros too is an attempt at demystification"; Ionesco, Notes 279, 199). The demystification in the final act exposes the chaos and the stars of the play (the rhinoceroses), revealing the first two acts (banal) as the opposite. They are the scenes where all the secret lay in the realistic tone of the dressed stage. It was Jacques Noël's task to translate the slip from the banal into the nightmare throughout the play.
Chapter 6:

Anguish and Suffocation

Fig.7: Act II Scene II: Jean's house. sketch for Rhinocéros by Jacques Noël (1960 Théâtre de l'Odéon).

Throughout the play, Mr. Ionesco exposes in his usual brilliant manner, the comical in everyday life, abrupt change, the absurdity within the common, the burlesque eruption of the fantastic within the banal; thus in the grand scene where, under our eyes, pacing from his bed to the bathroom, a man becomes a rhinoceros without even realizing it. The staging of Mr. Barrault and the set design of Mr. Noël give the effect of an almost tangible fable and its signification, this show should open the audience to Ionesco and Ionesco to the audience.
In Act 2 scene 2, the fantastic takes a faster pace and invades the Odéon stage. The scene commences in Jean's room. The sketch (fig.7) Noël painted shows the stage becoming again more enclosed: “Le monde de Ionesco, par contre, est encombré d'objets qui poussent sans l'intervention des hommes, comme en silence et en désordre” (“The world of Ionesco, however, is encumbered by objects that grow without the intervention of man, silently and disorderly”; Benmussa 201). In each act we progressively are encumbered by objects and the walls were growing inward. In this scene the stage took on a life of its own and shrank, the walls silently moving inward, caving in, reflecting the slow disintegration of Berenger's world as he knew it. Noël manages to incarnate the anguish and suffocation by closing in the walls, displaying that little by little the stage takes life of its own, and is also affected by rhinoceritus. The outside world is now closed off, the window is covered by a curtain.

Everything becomes unstable including man's and object's places in the world. Ionesco, in his book Découvertes speaks of his childhood memory, a day when he realized the constant threat of the unknown but also of the known surrounding him:

Je pris ainsi avec conscience la menace. Tout ce que je n'avais encore jamais vu était dangereux. Ce que j'avais déjà vu pouvait être dangereux: l'eau trop chaude, le couteau tranchant qui fait saigner, mais c'était un danger moins grave car on pouvait l'éviter. (Ionesco, Découvertes 24)

I thus became aware of the threat. All that I had never seen before was dangerous. What I had already seen could be dangerous: water that is too hot, the sharp knife that makes you bleed, but it was a less serious danger since it could be avoided.

This constant threat in Ionesco's childhood memory was evoked in Rhinocéros. Berenger realizes the danger in everything; even what he thought he had known became dangerous. Although it could be avoided for Ionesco, it was impossible for Berenger, as the world as he knew it was suffocating him, becoming a dangerous world.

Noël decided to paint the walls in a blue hue but with more of a greenish tint, perhaps to match Jean's transformed skin that will turn green “En effet, Jean est devenu tout à fait vert”
Jean has become, indeed, completely green”; 
Rhinoceros 162, 68).

The green and blue hues in this act will engulf the stage, Berenger will almost drown in these unsettling colors. According to Simone Benmussa, the color green represented anguish for Ionesco: “When he gets out of bed, he is wearing green pajamas, and his hair is uncombed. His memory has been blotted out. He constantly coughs, groans, and grunts.41 A bump grows on his forehead, and his skin begins to change to a greenish hue, a color used by Ionesco to represent anguish” (Benmussa, Eugène Ionesco, qtd. in Mills 60). The color green on stage used by Noël will continue to enhance the incarnation of mounting anguish. The walls also have painted gold brush strokes, strokes that could be either interpreted as horns or also eyes. The gold color is somewhat seductive as it pops out from the greenish blue tint. Noël did not want to only frighten. He left beauty because the rhinoceroses had to be appealing and beautiful, seducing others to transform into a rhinoceros. Daisy in the last act expresses this awe she finds within

41 The “he” which Simone Benmussa is referring to is Jean in Act II: scene II.
the beauty of the rhinoceroses: “C'est leur façon. Ils sont beaux” (“It's their way of dancing. They're beautiful”; Rhinoceros 241, 104), “Ce sont des dieux” (“They're like gods”; Rhinoceros 242, 105). Noël had to conceptualize the tempting aspects of the rhinoceroses by presenting them with beauty and grace, not making them frightening.

Ionesco had requested either a chair or armchair in his staging directions: “Au milieu du plateau, une chaise ou un fauteuil....” (“Up-stage, a chair or an armchair...”; Rhinoceros 136, 57). Noël decided to incorporate a chair. In his painted sketch, the chair is pulled from the previous scene in the administrative office. Again there is an object which appears from the previous scene aiding in the progression of the play. But there could also be a frightening aspect about it: it is as if it made its own way to the stage, assuming a life of its own. Proliferation of objects is something recurrent in Ionesco's theater, according to Simone Benmussa: “…l'objet possède une vie propre qui se rapproche plus du règne végétal que du règne humain. On a beaucoup parlé de cette prolifération des objets chez Ionesco, ils poussent comme des champignons, comme de la mousse” (“...the object possesses a life of its own which belongs more to the kingdom of plants rather than to the human kingdom. Ionesco's proliferation of objects has been addressed many times, they grow like mushrooms, like moss”; 200). Noël conceptualized visually the object that one may consider banal, but it is fantastical as it appears again on stage. Ionesco was interested as well in objects being “alive”: “Un philosophe prétendait, je crois, que tout pense, même la pierre qui est une pensée qui dort mais pense, puisqu'on pense en dormant” (“I believe a philosopher claimed, that everything thinks, even the sleeping rock has thoughts and still thinks, since we think while we sleep”; Ionesco, Découvertes 30).

There is again a staircase in this scene. Noël plays with the curtain to change the shape of the staircase, to make believe that it is in a different building. The staircase leads to Jean's apartment door, from where Berenger will enter the stage. Again the play moves offstage; there is life between the curtain and the backstage, a world hidden from the audience leaving it to the imagination of the spectator. The orchestra pit will be the area that shelters rhinoceroses instead of an orchestra: “....au même instant on voit apparaître, de la fosse d'orchestre, la parcourant à toute vitesse, une grande quantité de cornes de rhinocéros à la file” (“....at the same time,
crossing the orchestra pit at great speed move a large number of rhinoceros heads in line”;
*Rhinoceros* 165, 70). The rhinoceroses have also occupied the space between the stage and the audience invading the spectators space, they are not just creeping to the stage but also towards the audience, the spectators become actors in the play 42. As Jean metamorphoses into a rhinoceros, Berenger will be searching relentlessly for an exit, as his friend has now become a threat. The walls will protrude with horns, the rhinoceroses are coming from all sides of the stage; all modes of escape are now infested by rhinoceroses. Below are the intricate scenic directions given by Ionesco for the very end of Act II scene II:

> Affolé, il se dirige vers toutes les portes, et vers la fenêtre, tour à tour, tandis que la porte de la salle de bains continue de s’ébranler et que l’on entend Jean Barrir et proférer des injures incompréhensibles. Le jeu continue quelques instants: chaque fois que dans ses tentatives désordonnées de fuite, Berenger se trouve devant la porte des Vieux, ou sur les marches de l’escalier, il est accueilli par des têtes de rhinocéros qui barrant et le font reculer. Il va une dernière fois vers la fenêtre, regarde. Tout un troupeau de rhinocéros! Et on disait que c'est un animal solitaire! C’est faux, il faut réviser cette conception! Ils ont démoli tous les bancs de l'avenue. Il se tord les mains. Comment faire? Il se dirige de nouveau vers les différentes sorties, mais la vue des rhinocéros l’en empêche. Lorsqu’il se trouve de nouveau devant la porte de la salle de bains, celle-ci menace de céder. Berenger se jette contre le mur du fond qui cède; on voit la rue dans le fond, il s’enfuit en criant. (Rhinocéros 166)

Distracted he goes from door to door and to the window, whilst the bathroom door continues to shake and Jean continues to trumpet and hurl incomprehensible insults. This continues for some moments; whenever Berenger in his disordered attempts to escape reaches the door of the Old People's flat or the stairway, he is greeted by rhinoceros heads which trumpet and cause him to beat a hasty retreat. He goes to the window for the last time and looks out. A whole herd of them! And they said the rhinoceros was a solitary animal! That's not true, that's a conception they'll have to revise! They've smashed up all the public benches. He wrings his hands. Whats to be done? He goes once more to the various exits, but the spectacle of the rhinoceros halts him. When he gets back to the bathroom door it seems about to give way. Berenger throws himself against the back wall, which yields; the street is visible in the background; he flees, shouting. (Rhinoceros 71)

French theater critic: Gabriel Marcel attended the 1960 Barrault Ionesco Noël production.

42 Sidney Homan author of *The Audience as Actor and Character: The Modern Theater of Beckett, Brecht, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, Stoppard, and Williams* discusses the audience of Ionesco's theater as actors.
Marcel states: “Mais à ce moment très précis, au milieu du second acte, il s'est produit pour moi–et sûrement pour d'autres–une sorte de phénomène magique. C'est comme si j'étais brusquement passé de l'autre côté du rideau” (“At that very precise moment, in the middle of the second act, a sort of magical phenomena happened to me–and surely to others. It was as if I had been abruptly moved to the other side of the curtains”). Noël realized the magical surrounding, enabling the audience to journey in it. He transported the spectators from their seats to a world where the fantastic existed, where the fantastic thrived.

The audience along with Berenger, witnessed Jean's reaction as he looked in the mirror above his sink and saw a budding horn on his forehead and his green tinted skin. Noël wanted this part of the play on stage for all to see, Ionesco did not request for the sink and mirror to be within the audience's view, this is evident through Ionesco's scenic directions: “Je vais voir dans la salle de bain. (Il se lève brusquement et se dirige vers la salle de bain. Berenger le suit du regard. De la salle de bain:) c'est vrai, j'ai une bosse. (Il revient, son teint est devenu plus verdâtre)” (“I'm going to have a look in the bathroom. [He gets up abruptly and goes to the bathroom, Berenger watches him as he goes. Then, from the bathroom:] It's true, I have a bump. [He comes back; his skin has become greener]”; Rhinoceros 146, 61). Noël wanted the transformation on stage for all to see, so he created the mirror and sink exposed for all to see Jean's reaction. The critic, author of Un Rhinocéros à qui Barrault a coupé les cornes, recalls believing the mutation of Jean:

Deuxième partie sous les yeux de Berenger, son ami Jean se transforme, non sans nervosité, en rhinocéros. Là, le travail de Barrault est sans défaut. C'est extraordinaire, et par le réalisme du bizarre, et par la justesse de l'observation de l'imaginaire: on est tout près à croire à la mutation.

In the second part under the eyes of Berenger, his friend Jean transforms, not without nervousness, into a rhinoceros. Here, the work of Barrault is without fault. It is extraordinary, and by the realism of the bizarre, and by the exactness of the observation of the imaginary: we are all ready to believe in the mutation.

The partition (fig.7) is where actor William Sabatier (Jean) will put on his mask (photograph, see pg. 63) and tint his skin as he paces back and forth onstage. The sink and mirror onstage by Noël
may have been inspired by Ionesco's own apartment in his Paris apartment in Saint-Cloud:

I was thinking about Ionesco's apartment where he lived at that time, near Porte de Saint-Cloud where there is a statue of a rhinoceros....(maybe that is what inspired him). Anyway, in this rather dark apartment, there was an immense corridor which was very gloomy and troubled me like an invitation to the unconscious that I was obliged to obey by incorporating it in the set designs.

Noël transposed Ionesco's life in his set designs for his plays. Looking at a Jacques Noël sketch for an Ionesco play we are invited into a realm of Ionesco's diurnal unconsciousness. In an interview Noël was asked by Christian Giudicelli: “C.G.: De côtoyer Ionesco, vous a donc donné des idées? J.N.: Bien sûr, d'autant qu'il transposait dans ses pièces bien des éléments de sa vie, comme la plupart des auteurs, je suppose” (“C.G.: So spending time with Ionesco gave you ideas? J.N.: Of course, as he transposed elements of his life into many of his plays, as many authors do, I suppose”; Noël 28). The mutation can also be tied to a distant memory of Ionesco's who witnessed the metamorphoses:

I witnessed mutations. I witnessed people transform little by little under my eyes. It's as if I caught a glimpse of the actual process of the metamorphosis itself, as if I had witnessed it. I felt them become more and more foreign, I felt how little by little they were going further and further from me. I felt how another soul, another mind was germinating in them. They were losing their personality,
replaced by another. They were becoming other.

Like Berenger in *Rhinocéros*, Ionesco saw people transform under his eyes and he became the anomaly.

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This play has been deemed by set designers as difficult, due to the incorporation of rhinoceroses. Set designer Joseph Dodd, having done the set design for *Rhinocéros* in his career, addresses the challenges of the play, such as the inclusion of the pack animals: “I remember we used projections, I believe that is how we did all the rhinoceroses through projections as that is one of the challenges of the play” (Dodd). Though it may have been difficult, it was not impossible. As Noël thrived on difficulty, he had rhinoceroses join the stage by creating his own formula: “J'aime assez qu'un décor pose des difficultés de réalisation. Au moins, on ne s'en sort pas avec des recettes, il faut créer du nouveau, donc on ne s'ennuie pas” (“I enjoy it when a set design causes difficulties in its staging. We cannot manage with a formula, we must create something new so we do not get bored”; Noël 27). Scripts that may be interpreted as difficult open up a world of theatrical freedom escaping conventional reality, as Joseph Dodd said “I enjoy scripts that seem impossible because you open up solutions: what are the theatrical ways? That is the whole point of theater doing something that is not like in a movie, not realistic” (Dodd). Realism for Dodd and Noël leaves no room for creativity.
Chapter 7

The Reality of Imagination

Ionesco wanted to stay away from all that was too real or “realism” in his theater. Ionesco describes “realism” below:

...je disais que la réalité est beaucoup plus réelle si je puis employer ces mots l'un à côté de l'autre, plus réelle ou plutôt vrai que le réalisme. Le réalisme est menteur parce-qu’il défend une thèse, il n'est pas honnête, il n'est pas sincère, il est dirigeant, a un sens bien précis, il veut convaincre tandis que le poète ne fait qu’imaginer et dans son imagination vient des profondeurs de son être. Il choisit des images, des symboles qui sont tous chargés de signification. C'est pour ça que c'est plus vrai que n'importe quelle littérature documentaire. (Ionesco, Ionesco... Ou comment)

...I said that reality is a lot more real, if I can use those words next to one another, more real or rather more true than realism. Realism lies, because it defends a theory, it is not honest, it is not sincere, it leads, has a precise sense, it wants to convince whereas the poet only imagines and it is through his imagination that his profound being emerges. He chooses images, symbols that bear meaning. This is why it is a lot truer than any documentary literature.

Realism was liar for him as it attempted to produce a precise sense. Jacques Noël, like Ionesco, felt uncomfortable with realism. In his interview, Christian Giudicelli asked Noël: “C.G.: Au fond, c'est le réalisme que vous fuyez? J.N.: Je ne m'y sens pas à l'aise” (“C.G: In the end, is it realism that you run from? J.N.: I do not feel comfortable in it”; Noël 47). Ionesco wanted to capture the imagination which resulted in a theater with realistic conceptions but filled with illusions making one imagine. Both artists escaped realism in search of something more: reality in itself exposing the fantastic. As Ionesco put it, theatrical reality did not impose itself in his theater, he wanted instead a fusion in his theater, he wanted both reality and the imagination to come together and create, to be put into question, forming a reality beyond that signified to each person differently. As Ionesco said, theatrical reality did not impose itself, instead theatrical reality exposed truths:
Pourquoi la réalité théâtrale ne s'imposait-elle pas à moi? Pourquoi sa vérité me semblait-elle fausse? Et le faux, pourquoi me semblait-il vouloir se donner pour vrai, se substituer au vrai? Était-ce la faute des comédiens? Du texte? La mienne? Je crois comprendre maintenant que ce qui me gênait au théâtre, c'était la présence sur le plateau des personnages en chair et en os. Leur présence matérielle détruisait la fiction. Il y avait comme deux plans de réalité, la réalité concrète, matérielle, appauvrie, vidée, limitée de ces hommes vivants, quotidien, bougeant et parlant sur scène, et la réalité de l'imagination, toutes deux face à face, ne se recouvrant pas, irréductibles l'une à l'autre: deux univers antagonistes n'arrivant pas à s'unifier, à se confondre. (Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, qtd. in Hubert 10)

Why did theatrical reality not impose itself on me? Why did its truth seem false to me? And the false, why did it seem that it was trying to pass as truth, and substitute itself for the truth? Was it the fault of the actors? Of the text? Mine? I think I understand now what bothered me in theater, it was the presence of the characters on stage in flesh and blood. Their materialized presence destroyed the fiction. It was as if there were two levels of reality, the concrete reality, material, debased, empty, limited to these live men, in everyday life, moving and speaking on stage, and then the reality of the imagination, both of them face to face, not covering one another, irreducible one to the other: two antagonistic universes that were not able to unify themselves and blend together.

It was through the bizarre and realistic tones fused together by Noël designs that one was able to believe in the mutation, as if it were actually feasible. If the play had have commenced with the fantastic already on stage one would not have been able to believe it. As critic Georges Neveux states: “Dans l'univers de Ionesco, tout commence par être naturel, tout s’achève dans le fantastique” (“In Ionesco's universe, everything begins by being natural, everything ends in the fantastic”). The progression of each scene helped one believe as the scenery was also embedded into the mutations. Noël started in the banal with imperceptible hints of the secret “rhinoceritus world” which resulted in amplifying the fantastic towards the ending scenes.

Ionesco again requested that a window frame be facing the audience in Act II: scene II: “Berenger se dirige vers la fenêtre, qui est indiquée par un simple encadrement, sur le devant de la scène, face au public” (“He goes to the window which is represented simply by the frame, facing the audience”; Rhinoceros 165, 70). But Noël did not want to block the view of
the stage for the audience. If the spectators view of the stage was blocked they would not have been able to see the stars of the play progress out on to the stage nor Jean's mutation.

Noël executed the tearing of the walls with a sled of rhinoceros horns. The machinist accomplished this fluid effect by pushing the sleds of horns, which broke through the walls comprised of muslin backdrops.

![Fig.8: sketch by Jacques Noël of the “sled of horns”. The sled was pushed through, tearing the walls in the final act.](image)

Parts of the mysterious world of the backstage and wings are now starting to grow onto the stage presenting what Berenger and the townspeople witnessed all along: rhinoceroses.

**The Moving World**

From their seats, the audience travels along with Berenger into each scene, getting stranger and more nightmarish in each Act. The rhinoceros world keeps moving under their eyes, just as a stereoscope changes its visual creation in each click. The spectators following Berenger are a characteristic of “guignol.” Guignol is the main character of a puppet show for
children in France. During the performance, children participate in the action yelling warnings to Guignol, helping him catch the villain as they travel alongside and discover a fantasy world. The guignol puppet show is visually rich with beautiful scenic designs that change between each act. Young Ionesco was spellbound the first time he saw guignol:

Avais-je trois ans, quatre ans, ou cinq ans? Ma mère m'avait emmené voir le guignol, au Luxembourg je crois, à moins que ce ne fut aux Tuileries. Autour de moi, les enfants s'esclaffaient, remuaient, s'amusaient. Ma mère est venue me chercher parce que j'étais le seul à ne pas rire. Il lui semblait que je m'ennuyais elle voulait m'emmener. J'ai protesté, je suis resté, cela m'intéressait prodigieusement au contraire, mais ce n'était pas l'action qui me passionnait, ni le dialogue. Ce n'était pas l'intrigue qui me captivait, c'était le mouvement, tout un monde, le monde qui bougeait. (Ionesco, Découvertes 70)

Was I maybe 3, 4 or 5 years old? My mother took me to see guignol, at the Luxembourg garden I believe, it could have also been at the Tuileries. All around me, were children bursting into laughter, moving around, and having fun. My mother came to get me because I was the only one who was not laughing. It seemed to her that I was bored, she wanted to take me away. But I refused, I stayed, on the contrary the show was prodigiously interesting to me, but it was not the action that interested me, nor the dialogue. It was not the plot that captivated me, it was the movement, a whole world that was moving.

Guignol inspired Ionesco's theater and he produced it in his plays: “Quand je commence à les faire, écrire les pièces, j'ai fait une sorte de guignol” (“When I start to do them, write plays, I did a sort of Guignol”; Ionesco, Interview Pierre Dumayet). His theater is a guignol theater; gigantic puppets fill the theater, and project to the audience a familiar world filled with fantasy, nightmares, and shadows.

Berenger is somewhat like a giant Guignol. The audience follows Berenger into each scene and are his accomplices in the discovery of the moving world. The audience is sucked into this world, participating in the action mentally, just as the children do with guignol. Ionesco in an interview with Michel Vaïs states that the spectator is part of the action: “Oui de toute façon, il fait partie de l'action. Il fait partie de l'action mentalement. Il est là, avec ceux en face de lui, il
leur répond, il dialogue; 'il y a' la participation” (“Yes, any way he is part of the action. He takes part in the action mentally. He is there, with those who are facing him, he responds to them, he speaks, 'there is' participation”; Vaïs 260). The audience was invited to find their inner child and participate in the moving world. Ionesco went as far as to describe his theater as visually primitive and childish: “En ce qui me concerne, je pense que mon théâtre est très simple, très aisé à comprendre, visuel, primitif, enfantin” (“As for me, I think my theater is very simple, very easy to understand, visual primitive, childish”; Ionesco, Notes 192, 132).

Although there were similarities between guignol and Rhinocéros, the endings were different. In guignol's plays, the endings are happy, everything returns to normal; Guignol, accompanied by his fellow puppets, end the show with a gleeful song. On the other hand, the ending in Rhinocéros is one that is tragic and somber: Berenger's world as he knew it literally crumbles before him. Ionesco, in Le Roi se meurt (1958), a play with Berenger as the main character, specified in his stage directions the scene be played: “en guignol tragique” (“In tragic guignol”; Ionesco, Le Roi 45). Rhinocéros also ends in this “guignol tragique”.

In the terms of Roland Barthes, Berenger was a “héros tragique”. Barthes in his book Sur Racine, defines the tragic hero: “...il est enfermé. Celui qui ne peut pas sortir sans mourir: sa limite est son privilège, la captivité sa distinction” (“He is confined. He cannot escape without dying: his limit is his privilege, captivity his distinction”; Barthes, Sur Racine 14). Berenger was both similar to and different from the Racinian tragic hero; he was the “tragic Guignol hero” confined with no escape of this cruel world.

Noël used visual semiotics to illustrate the “Guignolesque” world as he drew in Berenger and the crowd through his intricate details and fluidity in each moving scene. The rhinoceros heads, protruding onto the stage, were guignol-like as they floated through the orchestra pit held by the machinists, or more accurately, puppeteers. Jean Paul Weber, writer for The Literary Figaro, interviewed Ionesco in the midst of a rehearsal for Rhinocéros. While interviewing Ionesco, Weber could not help but be enticed by the lively rehearsal, he shares: 

La voix de Jean-Louis Barrault est basse. Quatre heures de répétitions... 'Non! Non! Tu vas trop vite! Spectacle monstrueux, ahurissant!' Un rhinocéros se promène dans la fosse d'orchestre. Il est vrai qu'on n'en voit que le crane: il est
vert, coquet, surmonté d'un canotier et d'une corne, l'un sur l'autre, l'un coiffant l'autre qui le trouve...Le crane plonge remonte progresse, ondule, fait une pause...

'Tu vas trop vite!' (J.L. Barrault) Le rhinocéros hésite se recule regagne le point de départ. 'Trop lent maintenant! Et trop guindé! Tu es un rhinocéros! Tu es plein de vie, de verve, de fantaisie, de façonde, tu comprends? Tu es esthète, un intellectuel, en canotier, un logicien en vadrouille, comprends-tu? Et toi tu te promènes comme une nounou enceinte...' 'Bon bon excusez-moi' Dit le rhinocéros, qui recommence son manège. (Weber)

Jean Louis Barrault's voice is low. Four hours of rehearsal... 'No! No! No! You are moving too fast! A monstrous and appalling performance!' A rhinoceros is walking in the orchestra pit. It is true that we see only the head: it is green and elegant. Sitting on his head is a straw hat and a horn, the straw hat is on his horn piercing through the straw hat...the head plunges, gradually comes back up, zigzags then pauses... 'You are going too fast!' (J.L. Barrault) The rhinoceros hesitates, moves back, and returns to the starting point. 'Too slow now! And too stiff! You are a rhinoceros! Full of life, of expressiveness, of fantasy, of loquacity, do you understand? You are an esthete, an intellectual, in a straw hat, a rambling logician do you understand? And you, you walk around like a pregnant nanny...'

'Ok ok excuse me' says the rhinoceros, who restarts his routine.

The guignol-like quality Noël incarnated into the rhinoceroses was ideal as Ionesco did not want them too realistic:

P.D.: S'il y avait un comédien qui est venu vous dire: 'Je suis comédien et j'ai un autre talent, j'ai la possibilité de transformer en rhinocéros entre dix heures du soir jusqu'à minuit.' Est-ce que vous le choisiriez comme comédien? E.I.: Certainement pas, cela serait un simple cas, cela ferait trop vrai. (Ionesco, Interview Pierre Dumayet)

P.D.: If there was an actor who told you: 'I am an actor and I have another talent, I can transform myself into a rhinoceros between the hours of ten o'clock to midnight.' Would you hire him? E.I.: Certainly not, it would be too simple, it would look too real.

The guignol traits Ionesco created in Rhinocéros were visually adapted by Noël as Noël did not create realistic rhinoceroses but rather guignol-like puppets.
Chapter 8:

Everything Ends in Black and White

In the final act, Noël conceptualized the unveiling of Ionesco's chaos. All had turned rhinoceros imprisoning Berenger in a colorless world. The scene starts with Berenger in bed, turning as if he had had a nightmare: “Berenger est habillé sur son divan, Il a la tête bandée. Il doit faire de mauvais rêves car il s'agit dans son sommeil” (“Berenger is lying on his divan, his back to the audience. Berenger is lying fully dressed. He seems to be having a bad dream, and writhes in his sleep”; Rhinoceros 170, 71). The blue walls with gold brush strokes seen in the previous scene (Act II scene II) are dreamlike leaving one to wonder: did Berenger have a nightmare of Jean's metamorphosis or was he having one now? Noël used a similar set design for Berenger's bedroom as Ionesco requested: “C'est la chambre de Berenger, qui ressemble étonnamment à celle de Jean. Quelques détails seulement, un ou deux meubles en plus indiqueront qu'il s'agit d'une autre chambre” (“It is Berenger's room, which bears a striking resemblance to that of Jean. Only certain details, one or two extra pieces of furniture”; Rhinoceros 169, 71). The striking resemblance leaves one to question whether Jean's metamorphosis was all a dream.... which is what Ionesco may have done purposefully: “Je laisse aux spectateurs la liberté d’interprétation” (“I allow the audience the freedom to interpret”; Velogue).

For Noël, colors played an essential role in painting the climate of the play. When reading a play, he would envision the dominant color: “En général, la pièce impose une couleur dominante” (“Usually, plays impose a dominant color”; Noël 132). Noël started Rhinocéros in the paradisaical world of Ionesco, resembling his memories at La Chapelle-Anthenaise with light blue luminous skies. But he slowly progresses to Ionesco's anguished world, where green shadows and the darkness overtake the stage and become a world with no color (fig.9). In the sketch for the final act, Noël erased all the colors. As Noël states, Ionesco's plays would start in color yet end in black and white: “Chez Ionesco, tout commençait en couleur et s'achevait en

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44 The dominant color Noël envisioned for Rhinocéros was blue (figure 3) which slowly mutated into a green hue (figure 4,5,6,7) creating a turquoise color. In the final act, the sketch will be painted only in black and white (figure 9).
Noël emphasized dark colors and shadows in the final scenes to expose young Ionesco's great anguish of darkness. Ionesco, himself, spoke on how the dark caused him great anguish as a child:

...la rue mal éclairée, un soir d’automne ou d’hiver: ma mère me tenait par la main, j’avais peur, une de ces peur d’enfant; nous faisions les courses pour le repas du soir. Sur les trottoirs, des silhouettes sombres s’agitaient, des gens qui se pressaient; ombres fantomatiques, hallucinantes. Quand cette image de la rue revit dans ma mémoire, quand je pense que presque tous ces gens sont morts aujourd'hui, tout me parait ombre, évanescent, en effet. Je suis pris de vertige, d'angoisse. (Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes, qtd. in Hubert 5)

...a poorly lit street, on a fall or winter night; my mother was holding my hand, I was afraid, one of those childhood terrors; we were shopping for dinner. On the sidewalks, dark silhouettes of hurried people moved; ghostly hallucinory shadows. When I relive that image of the street in my memory, and when I think that almost all those people are dead today, everything seems dark and evanescent. I am overcome by vertigo and anguish.

Ionesco was mindful of the power of communication through visual accents, especially with his theater which was so visually opulent: “on raconte dans une image beaucoup plus que dans trois ou quatre pages dans un livre” (“an image tells more than three or four pages in a book”; Ionesco, Hubert 252). One understands a lot more through seeing because language in some areas are inadequate.

As John Berger states: “Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak” (Berger et al. 7). In each beginning scene of Rhinocéros, there are no words. In the first act the church bells are ringing while we watch a woman with a basket of provisions crosses the stage. In the second Act scene one, Ionesco requested that the stage seem like a “tableau vivant”, pausing the action. In the second scene of Act two, we see Jean in his bed coughing and Berenger walking up the staircase, and in the final act it starts with Berenger tossing around in his bed. The muted opening grants time for the audience to grasp the visual aspects of the stage before they hear; it gives them time to 'take it all in'. The beginning of each act uses
visual semiotics, by looking at the sketch, one is able to understand through visual accents the feeling and mood of the play.

In an experiment, I decided to show the sketch of the last act (fig.9) to people unfamiliar with the play *Rhinocéros*. I requested that in one word they describe how they felt when looking at Noël's sketch. In total, there were sixty people who responded, using words such as fear, unease, desolation, curiosity, daunting, loss, challenge, despair, uncertainty, independence, confusion, risk, loneliness, mystery, darkness, bleak, desolate, lonely, lost, torment, surreal, and unknown. Many words that were repeatedly used were challenge, loss, loneliness, fear. By looking at the sketch alone, people were able to describe the feel of the ending scene in *Rhinocéros*. “Vision is the primary means to understanding; it is our ultimate language that lies beyond are verbal systems” (Payne 121). Without Ionesco's text, people were able to read the play through the visual, feeling emotions behind brush strokes and objects.

Everything comes alive, there is constant movement. In the final moments of *Rhinocéros*, in the last act, the walls grow inward resembling the animate forest from the “Sleeping Beauty” fairy tale by Perrault, except it is a “rhinoceros forest” encircling Berenger in which everything has a life of its own and grows.

![Fig.9: Final Act of *Rhinocéros*. Act III. sketch by Jacques Noël (1960 Théâtre de l'Odeon).](image)

45 The survey was done via Facebook on July 10, 2014. People from around the world (France, Colorado, Hawaii, Spain) responded to the post.
Fairy tales inspired both Jacques Noël and Ionesco. Ionesco in an interview refutes the classification of *Rhinocéros* as an avant-garde play, instead he calls it a fairy tale: “Le *Rhinocéros* est inspiré par les contes de Perrault. Vous voyez que ce n'est pas une pièce d'avant garde” (“The play *Rhinoceros* is inspired by the tales of Perrault...You see it is not an avant-garde play”; Ionesco, *Le Rhinocéros n'est pas une pièce d'avant garde*). Charles Perrault, 17th century author and best-known author of the fairy tale genre, also inspired the works of Noël. Jacques Noël did the illustrations for a book of fairy tales written by Béatrix Beck called *Contes à l'enfant né coiffé* (*Tales of the Child Born Coiffed*) published in 1953.

![Fig.10: Book cover of *Contes à l'enfant né coiffé* by Jacques Noël](image)

The synopsis, on the back cover, described these fairy tales as being similar to those of Perrault:

Ces contes “A l'enfant né coiffé” sont de véritables contes de fées, où il y a, comme dans Perrault des enchanteurs, des bêtes qui parlent (et ne disent jamais de bêtises), des sorcières malfaisantes et des fées très gentilles. Mais ces contes de fées ne se terminent jamais comme on s'y attend. En réalité ce que Béatrix y montre, c'est comment les fées se comporteraient si les fées vivaient dans notre monde à nous, et ce que deviennent les merveilles, quand on les contemple avec les yeux d'un enfant de dix ans. (*A l'enfant né coiffé*)

These tales “A l'enfant né coiffé” are true fairy tales, where there are, like in those of Perrault, enchanters, creatures who speak (and never say nonsense), harmful witches and very kind fairies. But these fairy tales never end how one would expect. In reality what Beatrix shows us, is how these fairies would act if they lived in our world, and what happens to all of this wonderment, seen through the eyes of a 10 year child.

Noël visually fused together reality and fairy tale not only with *Rhinocéros* but with *Contes à l'enfant né coiffé*. Noël embodied the aesthetics of these fairy tales where the marvelous was
possible. Ionesco incarnated Perrault textually while Noël did so visually in the tales of Béatrix Beck. When seeing *Rhinocéros* we see the harmful and the marvelous become possible on-stage, accentuated by the fairy tale characteristics.

Generally the backstage and the wings off stage permit the dramatist to incorporate non-realistic elements that it is not feasible to create because of their complexity, and are left off stage for one to imagine. But with *Rhinocéros*, the wings and life backstage expose themselves for all to see; they grow onto the stage. According to Benmussa: “Ce thème de l'encerclement (qui aboutit à la solitude) se retrouve dans toute l’œuvre de Ionesco” (“The theme of encircling [that always leads to solitude] is found in all of Ionesco's works”; 202). As we progress through the play we realize that the walls were already growing inward starting in the second Act scene 1. The movement in the play was realized through the movement of the scenic designs, the set became part of the action. Noël transformed the stage into Ionesco's circus: “je ne veux avoir d'autres limites que celles des possibilités techniques de la machinerie. On m’accusera de faire du music-hall, du cirque. Tant mieux: intégrons le cirque!” (“I want no other limits than the technical limits of the stage machinery. Some will accuse of making music-halls, or circuses. So much the better: let us bring in the circus!”; Ionesco, *Notes* 84, 46). The rhinoceroses come out of the walls; on stage left there is a half wall, half rhinoceros. The partition which Noël chose to include in the previous Act has a rhinoceros head protruding from it. The carpet also has a rhinoceros horn growing through. Multiple rhinoceroses are now in the orchestra pit. The partially destroyed ceiling is covered in rhinoceroses. There is a chandelier still hanging that has transformed into rhinoceros horns. The stage is infested.

All the elements of physical presence of the rhinoceros from each act are all now found on stage. The sound of the rhinoceroses are present, now multiplied: “On entend les bruits d'un assez grand nombre de rhinocéros qui passent sous la fenêtre du fond” (“The noise of a considerable number of rhinoceroses is heard passing under the up-stage window”; *Rhinoceros* 169,71). There is also dust that appears again on stage, an element from the first act and second act scene 1 and 2, but again it is even more exaggerated, covering part of the stage and actors: “De la poussière envahit une partie du plateau, les personnages, si cela est possibles sont cachés par cette poussière” (“Dust covers part of the stage, enveloping, if possible, the characters”);
Rhinoceros 212, 91). In this scene, everything implodes and becomes rhinoceros. Noël helped lead to this progression by using imperceptible details of secrets seen in the previous acts. He leads us slowly to this mystic world, and it is by this slow progression that it makes this fantastical world seem as if it really exists. After this performance, on the way home, one might not be so shocked were one to see a rhinoceros strolling the streets of Paris or getting onto the metro.

Noël brought in thousands of rhinoceroses to the Théâtre de l'Odéon's stage. He painted a backdrop which looks like a sea of rhinoceroses; creating depth. It looks as if there are thousands upon thousands of rhinoceros because of the effect of the backdrop. Ionesco, in an interview, spoke on how Noël was able to create depth, though he was speaking about the play Les Chaises, one could assume the same for Rhinocéros: “J'avais fait une pièce où je voulais mettre des chaises les unes après les autres, à peine une trentaine et lui il en a fait mille, dix mille, il a fait une profondeur inimaginable” (“I had written a play where I wanted to place chairs one after the other, barely thirty chairs, but he created a thousand, ten thousand, he created an unimaginable depth”; Ionesco, Jacques Noël: Décors). With a few chairs, Noël was able to give the sensation of tens of thousands of chairs, Noël was a master of the sleight of hand as he was interested in magic.46 Below is a photograph of the model for the play Les Chaises. Noël used mirrors to add depth and to create an unlimited number of chairs, exemplifying his talent in trompe-l'oeil.

![Photograph of Jacques Noël's sketch for Eugène Ionesco Les Chaises at the Théâtre de L'alliance Francaise in 1962 directed by Jacques Mauclair. This photograph is only found at La Bibliothèque Historique de la Ville de Paris and in this thesis.](image)

Throughout the research of this thesis, I was in email correspondence with Hazel Karr, a close colleague and friend of Jacques Noël. Karr spoke on Noël's numerous interests such as magic, and quantum physics: “je peux dire qu'il n'était pas très expansif. Pas du tout "social" dans le sens aller aux cocktails, etc. Après la première d'un spectacle il fuyait les mondanités. Il lisait énormément, s'intéressait à toutes sortes de choses de la magie à la théorie quantique. Il était extrêmement cultivé. Il était me semble-t-il avant tout un artiste. Un vrai.” (I can say that he was not an extrovert. Not at all "social" in the sense of going out for cocktails, etc. after the premier of a show, he escaped social life. He read a lot, and was interested in numerous things from magic to quantum theory. He was extremely cultivated. But above all he was an artist. A true one.” (Karr).
All objects play a role in burying the stage. Everything and everyone Berenger knew became rhinoceros objects such as the sink and table, an object though familiar, metamorphosed into rhinoceroses.

“To create an ambiance of non-reality or of sur reality, with the deep anguish of a dream, is much more difficult and it is necessary to do it with great subtlety because what holds it together is so easily dissipated”; Ionesco, Entretiens avec Eugène Ionesco 118). The subtlety which Noël used was the progression from reality to the dream or in this case nightmare. Noël fused together the two giving the essence of a woven blanket with yarn strings of nightmares, dreams, and reality.

Fig.12 &13: The table and sink found in Berenger's room both metamorphosed into a rhinoceros in the final scene, Act III. Idea created by Jacques Noël for the 1960 production at the Théâtre de l'Odéon.

Objects that one seems to know such as a sink, a mirror, a table change in the final scene. Noël establishes a stage that shrinks progressively as the objects grow, slowly invading. As with the scenic designs that progressed from the banal to the surprising, Noël also envisioned banal objects metamorphosed into fantastic ones. Ionesco wanted transformation in his theater, as he said: “Mais je veux, moi, faire paraître sur scène une tortue, la transformer en chapeau, en
chanson, en cuirassier, en eau de source. On peut tout oser au théâtre, c'est le lieu où on ose le moins” (“I personally would like to bring a tortoise onto stage, turn it into a racehorse, then into a hat, a song, a dragon and a fountain of water. One can dare anything in the theater and it is the place where one dares the least”; Ionesco, Notes 84, 46). Noël dared by bringing together these objects and have them transform. The sink becomes a rhinoceros mouth with a leg protruding out of the wall where the sink is mounted. Three eyes are watching. The table on which the cognac of Berenger sits metamorphoses into this beautiful mammal. The legs of the table become the stumpy legs of a rhinoceros, accompanying those legs is a pointy rhinoceros horn piercing through the tablecloth. These objects are fused together: reality with dream. An object, which we think we know so well transforms and becomes a mysterious object from the unknown. Noël was the one who created this environment by communicating these details through props. Unfortunately, the sink and table were not incorporated in the actual performance. Noël had created at this point an imaginative vision of Rhinocéros that was never incorporated into the performance, but that still exists, in the sketches maintained by La Régie Théâtrale at La Bibliothèque Historique de la ville de Paris. As Noël tried to aid the vision of Ionesco and Barrault, he also attempted to find something he also believed in. This alternative vision of Noël is a valuable interpretation, even if Ionesco or Barrault did not want it in this performance.

**Alternative Visions**

For Noël, it was important for him to bring his own touch in the set designs; he would turn down doing the set design if he did not think he could express “his” touch in the play. During an interview with Christian Giudicelli, Noël was asked what made him choose or turn away plays. Noël's response was: “D'abord l'envie de voir ce texte à la scène. Ensuite, je me pose la question: quel pourra être mon apport? Il m'arrive de renoncer à des œuvres de qualité car j'ai l'impression que je n'y ai pas la place ” (“First I want to see the play on stage. Then, I ask myself: what could I bring to the play? Sometimes I turn down great works because I feel as if I have no place in them”; Noël 103). Noël was so in tune with Ionesco that he never turned down any of his plays.

At times it was necessary for Noël to invent scenic descriptions as they were not always
noted. According to Ionesco “...un vrai metteur en scène attentif peut se retrouver à travers les images de l'auteur et ne doit les inventer que lorsque cela est absolument nécessaire” (“A true and attentive director should find himself through the images of the author, he must only invent when it is absolutely necessary”; Vaïs 254). Though Ionesco is speaking about the director it may be assumed the same held for the set designer.

As with any partnership Ionesco and Noël did not always agree:

Avec Ionesco on a pu se disputer à cause de vétilles, mais ça ne dégénérerait jamais parce-qu'il se rendait compte que je n'avais aucune envie de réaliser à ses dépens, une œuvre personnelle. Voilà une crainte de beaucoup d'auteurs: qu'on s'enrichisse sur leur dos. (Noël 51)

With Ionesco we did argue over little things, but the argument never became serious because he understood that I had no intention of creating my own personal work at his expense. This is the fear of many authors: that we will enrich ourselves at their cost.

As Noël did with the table and sink in Rhinocéros, he proposed other ideas that were not in Ionesco's scenic descriptions. Noël was not only responsible for dressing the stage but also the actors. In an interview, Ionesco addresses Jacques Noël's stylistic choices for the costumes in his play Le Roi se meurt:

Par exemple, pour Le Roi se meurt, j'avais noté des costumes plutôt sordides. Or le décorateur, Jacques Noël, a fait des costumes de conte de fée, XVIIe siècle, influencé par les contes de Charles Perrault parce que, à ce moment-là, il illustrait un livre de contes pour enfants et finalement nous sommes tombés d'accord. (Vaïs 252)

For example, for Le Roi se meurt, I had noted that the costumes be quite old and dirty. But the set designer, Jacques Noël, created fairytale like costumes from the XVIIth century, influenced by the tales of Charles Perrault because at that time, he was illustrating a book of fairy tales for children and finally we agreed.
The book of children’s tales to which Ionesco was referring was *Contes à l’enfant né coiffé* by Béatrix Beck, mentioned earlier.

Costumes are an important part in a performance as colors and style choices set the tone of the play as well as the personality of the characters: “Costumes, like properties, are all-important to the actor, since on stage the way the character is dressed in large part tells an audience what that character is like” (Payne 75). Ionesco finally agreed with Noël for the fairytale-like costumes in *Le Roi se meurt* which proved his great trust and acceptance of Noël’s vision. Though Ionesco was concerned about having his vision being misinterpreted, he trusted Jacques Noël and knew the choices Noël made were prolongations of his own imagination.

In *La Cantatrice chauve*, Noël decided to design the costumes in a 1900's style because he remarked that while reading the play, a reference was made to the Manchester Balloon. Noël would read the play the first time for enjoyment, then the next reading he would start pulling clues for his creation: “La première lecture je l'a fait pour le plaisir puis s'il y a le plaisir ensuite la deuxième lecture est une lecture de travail. Il faut que je note tout ce qui concerne le décor, les personnages” (“The first reading is for pleasure and if there is pleasure then the second reading is for work. I have to note everything that concerns set design and characters”; Jacques Noël: *Décors*). Subtle clues in the script led to his vision of a 1900's set design as well as costumes for *La Cantatrice chauve*: “Une phrase a déterminé notre parti-pris: 'Nous sommes allés à
Manchester en Ballon” (“One sentence determined the route we took 'we went by the Manchester Balloon’”; Noël 23). The costumes and set for La Cantatrice chauve are 1900's quotidian, banal; nothing out of the ordinary to the eyes (see fig.2). The ordinary set design helped amplify the out of the ordinary dialogue.
Conclusion

Through Jacques Noël's set designs for Ionesco's plays, one is able to explore and read Ionesco, crossing boundaries and using text as well as visual signifiers created by Jacques Noël. Jacques Noël amplified Ionesco's theatrical idiom by exteriorizing Ionesco through concrete images and objects for his theater, as Ionesco said himself:

J'ai essayé, par exemple, d'extérieuriser l'angoisse (que M. Tynan veule bien excuser ce mot) de mes personnages dans les objets, de faire parler les décors, de visualiser l'action scénique, de donner des images concrètes de la frayeur, ou du regret, du remords, de l’aliénation, de jouer avec les mots (et non pas de les envoyer promener) peut-être même en les dénaturant--ce qui est admis chez les poètes et les humoristes. J'ai donc essayé d'amplifier le langage théâtral. (Ionesco, Notes 159)

I have attempted, for example, to exteriorize, by using objects, the anguish (I hope Mr. Tynan will excuse my employing of this word) of my characters, to make the set speak and the action on the stage more visual, to translate into concrete images terror, regret or remorse, and estrangement, to play with words (but not to send them packing) and even perhaps to deform them—which is generally accepted in the work of poets and humorists. I have thus thought to extend the idiom of the theater. (Ionesco, Notes 105)

Ionesco with the help of Noël extended the idiom of the theater.

Reading Rhinocéros and Noël's painted sketches for the 1960 performance in France, one is able to travel back in time and explore Ionesco through his childhood memories, fears, dreams, the fantastic and surreal, all part of his reality. Noël brought to life Ionesco's text and proved that a performance is not composed by only words, it is harmonized by the set design. He conceived the spacious and visual elements of the plays and helped the audience and readers understand Ionesco through their eyes.

Ionesco and Noël's lifelong theatrical adventure left a trace for the exploration of their theater. Through Jacques Noël's sketches married to Ionesco texts, we can travel to the past and read Ionesco through images. Ionesco once said that all fades over time: “Toutes ces notes, ces dessins, ces phrases au marqueur s'effacent avec le temps. Seul l’éphémère dure” (“All of these notes, these drawings, and these sentences written with a marker fade over time. Only the
ephemeral lasts”; Ionesco, *Découvertes* qtd. in Vasiljevic). But Jacques Noël proved this untrue. Through Jacques Noël's painted sketches, it is possible to explore Ionesco's pictorial universe he put forth through his words. As Noël said his sketches leave a trace of something that had once existed: “Au comédien, il reste le cinéma; au décorateur, ses maquettes...C'est une trace de quelque chose qui a existé” (“The actor has his movies left, the set designer, his models...It is a trace of something that existed”; Noël 139). The painted sketches which Jacques Noël created have not faded over time; they have left traces of the visual exploration of theater.
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