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Theater of the Absurd: A Personal and Universal Tragedy

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ANNOTATION

The "Theater of the Absurd" originated in Paris as an avant-garde phenomenon, and after some time gained international recognition. The anti-play denies realistic characters, situations and all other relevant theatrical techniques. Time and place are uncertain and changeable, even the simplest causal relationships are destroyed. Senseless intrigues, repetitive dialogues and aimless chatter, dramatic inconsistency of actions. The plots of the plays, the behavior of the characters are incomprehensible, irrational, reflect the absurdity of mutual understanding, communication, dialogue.

KEYWORDS: theater of the absurd, anti-drama, existential philosophy, destruction of language, satirical work, totalitarian regime, transformation, metamorphosis.

Theater of the Absurd: a personal and universal tragedy in the post-war years in France and in other Western countries, the fear of the inevitability of an atomic war gave rise to a pessimistic attitude to reality, depriving faith in the future, forcing the minds of mankind to focus on the thought of death. In literature, these moods and changes in political and public life have been expressed in the form of existential philosophy, the brightest representatives of which are recognized as J.-P.Sartre and A.Camus. A kind of manifesto of the development of the theory of irrationalism, preaching the meaninglessness of being, the absurdity of human existence were the works of J.-P.Sartre's "Being and Non-being" (1942), "Existentialism – Humanism" (1946) and A. Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" (1942). P. de Boisdeffre looks for the reasons for the current situation in literature in the article "What happened to our literature": "Let's move on to the reasons. One thing catches everyone's eye: the state of the modern world. It is not fun to write in an era of total war, camps and death, absolute weapons, terror – in a word, under the sign of the Apocalypse... Many writers seem to be trying to inflate the misery of our time. The absurdity of creativity has become a dogma for them..."¹

A special place in this niche is occupied by playwrights, to whom the French anti-drama owes its origin.

For the first time, the term "theater of the absurd" was used by Martin Esslin, a writer and critic, to define the theatrical direction that arose in the 1950s of the twentieth century in France, which absolutely did not correspond to the principles and aesthetics of the existing theatrical art, and to classify the works of

¹ «Nouvelles littéraires», 1962, 15. II, p.1,7.

playwrights. A theatrical direction that has retained its relevance and does not leave the stage these days. What is the true creative credo of playwrights and what is the reason for the undying popularity of S. Beckett and E. Ionesco, A. Adamov and J. Genet?

The theater of the absurd is more evident in the works of S. Beckett and E. Ionesco, whose plays could not be attributed by theater critics to any of the already existing trends, because the authors went beyond all the generally accepted rules of theatrical art. Critics agreed that it was clear only that Beckett and Ionesco violated all the hitherto existing rules for the creation of the play, its structural component (the unity of time, place and action). The absurdity of the situations in the plays, as well as the destruction of language, eventually led to the emergence of a completely new dramatic phenomenon in the theatrical art. It should be noted, however, that the theater of the absurd cannot be attributed either to the theater movement or to the theater school.

A little-known playwright creates his masterpiece – "The Bald Singer" (*Cantatrice chauve*, 1948), 2 years later the play was staged by Nicolas Bataille on the stage of the Théâtre des Noctambules theater in Paris. "When I started reading the manuscript "English without Difficulty" (this was the original title of the play), it became a discovery for me, a novice actor: the text was not like any of those I had ever seen or read. A few days later I met Ionesco: "Somehow I wanted to learn English, I got hold of the Assimil manual, and then I discovered a world in which they expressed their thoughts in some amazing way. In this way, my English heroes began to speak like Frenchmen learning English."

Why did the author decide to change the title of the play in the end? Once, during a rehearsal, the captain of the fire brigade, retelling the story about the "cold", forgot the text, and skipping three lines, instead of saying "very blonde singer" stunned everyone by saying "bald ... singer". Ionesco exclaimed: "That's the name! It will be a "Bald Singer"! Ionesco was sure that his play could not be staged on stage, and when Bataille announced to him that he would do it, the author replied: "Is it true? Do you want to stage my play? But everyone says it can't be played!" But, contrary to all predictions about the "unstoppability" of the play, the premiere still consisted of May 11, 1950. After the premiere, a flurry of criticism poured in: "This is the "anti-play". The more we understand how provocative it is, the more we don't understand what it might mean. "Antipyesa" is the only expression that is the discovery of Mr. Ionesco" (J.-B. Gineur, *Le Figaro*). "There are other languages that are not foreign, and which, nevertheless, I do not understand better. That's how the troupe of Nicolas Bataille plays something called "antipyesa" (Thierry Molnier, "Red and Black"). "Fortunately, we will never hear from Mr. Ionesco again," another announces after the first performances of the "Bald Singer" in May 1950. Such judgments will put Ionesco in the position of a kind of marginal in the eyes of the public for a long time. Fortunately, some critics defend this play: "... the theater of Eugene Ionesco is undoubtedly the strangest and most spontaneous that we have seen in the post-war period" (J. Lemarchand in *Le Figaro Littéraire*). Writers also stand up for Ionesco: Zh. Polan, A. Breton, A. Salaku, R. Keno, J. Audiberti, A. Camus...

Ionesco's dramaturgy takes on a comic tinge, transforming tragedy into comedy: "... I cannot be so immodest as to educate my contemporaries. I'm not teaching, I'm testifying, I'm not explaining, I'm trying to explain myself."²

When the play " Rhinoceroses " (1959) appeared, the attention of critics was attracted by Ionesco's short stories. Of the seven short stories, five were rewritten in the form of dramatic works: "Oriflamme" (*Oriflamme*, 1954) served to create the play "How to get rid of him" (*Comment s'en débarrasser*), the story

² Ionesco. Notes et contre-notes. «Paris-Théâtre», №181, p.8.

"The Colonel's Photograph" (1955) was eventually transformed into the play "The Murderer without Pay", "The Victim of Debt" (*Une victime du devoir*, 1953) in the pseudodrama "Victims of Duty", the short stories "Rhinoceroses" (1957) and "Air Pedestrian" (*Le piéton de l'air*, 1962) in the plays of the same name. All Ionesco's plays are written in the first person "I", gradually acquiring the features of a specific character – Beranger. Beranger is the main character of the playwright's plays. In *Rhinoceros*, Beranger witnesses a metamorphosis: people consciously abandon the human form. "Rhinoceroses" is a satirical work that reveals the vice of the totalitarian regime, which manifests itself as a contagious disease: all residents of the town turn into rhinos. The only person who does not turn into a rhinoceros is Beranger. The most tragic moment for the main character was that his beloved girlfriend Daisy was also going through a metamorphosis, while he, with all his desire to take an animal form, could not join the herd of rhinos...

The antipode of Beranger in the play is Jean. Complacent, deeply convinced of his rightness, Jean instructs Beranger, teaches him to be smart. What Beranger says is felt and suffered by him, what Jean utters is just learned chatter, it is absolutely useless for him binding. Jean is a "convinced rhinoceros", for whom the rhinoceros condition is completely ordinary. Beranger did not turn into a rhinoceros, outwardly he remained a man, having experienced the deep drama of parting with his beloved girl, obsessed with the desire to become one of them, morally he was trampled because of his dissimilarity with the mighty herd. A lone wrestler, tormented by doubts, resisting conventional conventions is the hero to whom Ionesco eventually came.

Ionesco's play echoes Camus' novel *The Plague*: J.-L. When staged, Barro gives a pronounced anti-fascist sound, drawing a parallel with the brown plague. The author himself claims that he opposes totalitarianism and conformity in general. Ionesco later writes: "I have to say that I really tried to describe the process of Nazification countries, as well as the confusion of a person who, being immune to infection, is present when the minds of society change. Initially, "rhinoceros disease" meant Nazism."³ In the image of Beranger, the playwright admits that not all of humanity is a society of semi-humans, semi-automatons, and the main character himself is the Alter Ego of the author himself.

Comparing Ionesco's early work with those works that were created by him in a later period, the author's connection with real reality is felt. Covering the themes of absurdity and human helplessness, Ionesco goes through a difficult creative evolution, which is manifested in his attempt to expose evil.

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³ « Art », 1961, janvier.