

The Rhinoceros and The Regime Posthuman Bodies on Stage and Screen

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Abstract: Ever since its first representation on stage, Ionesco's play *Rhinoceros* became a mirror to the anxieties haunting the societies that it was held up to. Back in the 1960s, it would symbolize (Neo-)Fascism and Far-Right dangers in the Western countries, while subversively pointing at Communism and Far-Left ideologies in the Central-East European cultures. The text's versatility was highly praised by the literary and theatrical criticism, and allowed for its re-enactment in shows and films produced over the globe, in the most diverse social-political contexts. This study aims to revisit some of the first play stagings from the current perspective of post-theatre, pointing out how the early post-War productions are contributing to rewriting of the performative code in the language of posthumanism and post-drama.

Keywords: posthumanism, performative body, postdramatic theatre, Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*.

“Unusual, very unusual the destiny of my work!” – that’s how Eugène Ionesco contemplated his debut on the French stages, and this thought prophetically extends over his entire writing career. According to the legend,

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the first *mise-en-scènes* at Huchette and Lancry in the mid Fifties have made the famous dramaturg Arthur Adamov to enthusiastically declare: “No one on stage, no one in the audience, what a perfect illusion!”, but nothing announced the extraordinary success of Ionesco’s plays once they entered the repertoire of the prominent theatre companies, nor the amazing dynamics of their spreading across several continents in just a few years. By the end of the same decade Ionesco was signing his first international contracts for staging *Rhinoceros* - the play that made him universally known to significant theatre audiences. Düsseldorf, Krakow, Paris, London, New York, Toronto, Buenos Aires are just some examples of the stages that experienced the trophic regress of the last human being, the survivor of conflagrations, adulations and ideologies.

The interest this strange comedy would cause among producers, performers and audience far exceeds the seductive power of the irrational *The Bald Soprano*, the melancholy of *The Chairs*, or the erotic vampirism of *The Lesson*. *Rhinoceros* spreads rapidly, stirs up controversy and triggers earthquakes. On stage it conquers everybody, reveals vulnerabilities, awakens consciences and dormant wraths, questions ethics and the cultural constructs born in the eras of humanism and the Vitruvian Man. The several dozens of theatrical stagings in the decade of its debut left deep traces in the public’s conscience and created a series of discourses on corporeality as an act of presence and materiality.

The play fundamentals have been provided by its author in various contexts: the autobiographic character, anchored in the Bucharest experience of the ‘30s, the anti-Nazi message and the correspondence between the Logician (the only rhinoceros wearing a hat) and a charismatic philosophy teacher, which was affiliated with the Legionary State and had an unfortunate influence over an entire generation of young intellectuals. These are further emphasized in subsequent memorialist essays on the genesis and symbolism of the play. Basically, the dramatic text develops, in its three acts, a short story of autobiographical inspiration, published by Ionesco in 1957 in the magazine *Les lettres nouvelles*², which was further brought into the spotlight for a wider audience, following its reading on a Parisian radio station³.

² No. 52, September 1957.

³ This recording is preserved in the audio section of the *Gallica* digital library of the National Library of France.

During the approximately thirty minutes of the reading, the author's voice, with its unmistakable monochord and blasé timbre, was only occasionally accompanied by special effects (a few rhinoceros' roars could be faintly heard, highlighting the whispered, theatrical linearity of the performance). The spontaneous appearance of animals in the middle of the city is the pretext for the development of a *supernatural* philosophy, an absurd existential doctrine. The novel's core is the paradox created around the syllogisms of the Logician – a character with a consistent appearance in the source text, namely the debate about the various species of rhinoceros – one-horned or two-horned, African or Asian – that are taking over the city, occupying its streets, its newsrooms, and the thoughts and personal space of its inhabitants. Therefore, the emphasis is on questioning, in a parodic key, the superiority of reason in the discourse of race, and the anthropocentrism, challenged and debased by the still smoking ruins of the Second World War.

Like the two protagonists (*mon ami Jean et moi*), who, confined in their own apartments, experience and understand differently the proliferation of pachyderms, the listeners must have been distressed by the terrible roaches that invaded their homes when turning on their radios. A year later (August 20, 1959), the same text could be heard by an even wider audience on BBC Radio.

Further developed in the form we know today, with spectacular metamorphoses on the ramp and hordes of rhinoceros invading every corner of the stage, the play becomes an opportunity to experiment with non-human corporeality, with its movement towards the fluid zoo-/anthropomorphic suggestions of ultra-contemporary performances.

On one hand, the play success is due to the high-temperature osmosis of several imperatives of the post-war theatre (the appeal to the recent historical trauma, the adherence to the neo-avant-garde of absurdist essence – very popular in theatre in the second half of the century, and the text placement in authenticity). On the other hand, to the potential for resignification in the area of those topics that are opening the era of post-performance and post-drama.

From the very beginning, Ionesco's text is interpreted as a political allegory, a fable that incorporates identity questions, staged through the discourse of traumatic corporeality.

The polymorphism of performances also derives from a technical difficulty. In the second act, the main character slowly transforms, in front of the audience, into a rhinoceros, adopting a new “philosophy”, a new ideology.

Throughout the 60s the metamorphosis of the rhinoceros-men, the ones bearing the metatextual meaning, is approached in a sensorial manner, through two types of effects: one scenographic and one choreographic. Much of its impact on the audience is given by the way the animals are bodily, psychologically or symbolically integrated into the stage space. As we shall see, in the mentioned decade the avatars of the play's many stagings highlight a variety of representations and symbolizations of the rhinoceros, the harmful animal the audience is called to confront. Some of them describe *avant la lettre* “these composite bodies – so called human as well as non-human composites, bonded in a non-binary constellation”⁴, on which the first theories of post-humanism are developed.

From the very first productions several directors recognized the identity theme, which the French-speaking Romanian playwright, matured in the midst of two cultures and deeply marked by the metaphysical duality of his own existence, has invested into the metaphor of the rhinocerised city. Thus, the symbolic load of the play reaches several levels of significance through the figure of the rhinoceros: ideologically speaking – it is portraying the political danger/evil, perceived differently from one country to another; typological – it is depicting the foreigner or the stateless, in search of a utopian space of humanitarianism without borders.

In his conversations with the director and protagonist of the first Parisian production, Jean Louis Barrault⁵, Ionesco insisted on the necessity of playing with masks. In the language of the neo-avant-garde, this type of prop assumes the adoption of a specific stage discourse. In the same period, when the director Ariane Mnouchkine brings the mask back to the experimental stage of the French theatre, in order to represent the theme of emigration, this announces a crisis of both the individual and the society. The mask is not a make-up. It

⁴ Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, Laura Karreman (ed.), *Performance and Posthumanism. Staging Prototypes of Composite Bodies* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 8.

⁵ Jean Louis Barrault, *L'acteur: “Athlète Affectif”* [*The Actor: “Affective Athlete”*], Cahiers Renaud-Barrault, (Paris: René Julliard, no. 29, February 1960), 85.

subordinates its bearer. The actor must yield to it, for the mask will never yield⁶. Applying Mnouchkine's message to the Ionesco space, the act of dominance of the rhinoceros mask over the face it takes possession of/reconstructs, reduces the whole meaning of the play to a symbolic image.

However, although this accessory recommended by the playwright was meant to easily solve the most delicate aspect of the *mise-en-scène*, only a couple directors attracted by the rhinoceros city resorted to it.

Düsseldorf, 1959, Schauspielhaus

Paradoxically, the absolute premiere of *Rhinoceros* takes place at the Schauspielhaus in Düsseldorf. The Wall had not yet been erected in Berlin, but Karl Heinz Stroux's staging already places, ideologically, here and there, the contaminated city and the viewing audience, beyond the conventional boundaries of the stage and the unconventional ones of directorial intent. In the second act, the body contorted in metamorphosis merges chromatically with the entire *mise-en-scène*, it is covered, as in an epiphany, by a ritual cloth, embroidered with details of animal inserts matching the surrounding decor, meant to hide the act of transformation. The German director chooses to dissolve the metamorphosis of the man-rhinoceros into scenography elements. Hints of horns, hooves and massive corporeality are found in every detail of the set and contaminate the character's movement. The relationship between the setting and the desire-aspiration of its resident cannot be dissociated, they build the character's behavior and amplify it as a social act⁷.

Ultimately, Stroux's rhinos are barely perceptible in the scenic movement, and the anguish they are causing shifts into the confrontation between the performers and the audience, who supervise each other through a polyphonic scenography element – a moving frame, the door-window-lens of the room in which the metamorphosis occurs.

⁶ Josette Féral, *Întâlniri cu Ariane Mnouchkine* [*Meetings with Ariane Mnouchkine*], translated by Raluca Vida (Oradea: ArtSpect, 2009), 38.

⁷ Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, Laura Karreman (ed.), *Performance and Posthumanism. Staging Prototypes of Composite Bodies*, 85.



Fig. 1: Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorf, 1959, director: Karl-Heinz Stroux, set designer: Mario Chiari, photo: Roger Pic



Fig. 2: Schauspielhaus, Düsseldorf, 1959, director: Karl-Heinz Stroux, set designer: Mario Chiari, photo: Roger Pic

Paris, 1960, Odéon Théâtre/1965

The Parisian premiere, directed by Jean-Louis Barrault, takes place on January 22, 1960, at the Odéon Théâtre, and is well received by the media and the public⁸. Although *Rhinoceros* already had a first staging, Barrault's production represents a *zero degree* in the history of the play's mise-en-scènes, being probably the closest to the writer's original intention. This staging is the expression of the long meetings between the two good friends, the playwright Ionesco and the director-performer Jean-Louis Barrault, to whom, among others, the play is dedicated.

Here the inherent Ionesco's contradictions converge towards a surprising homogeneity. The director is determined to shape an ideology of survival in the post-War world. In fact, he had reserved for himself the main role, thus illustrating his vision of the "last man" and his revolutions.

The scenography conception belongs to Jacques Noël, a mature creator, familiar with the Ionesco's space and the territory of the neo-avangardists. For Noël, *Rhinoceros* seems to be the occasion for a conceptual revision. A short foray into the scenographer's workshop reveals his preference for decors with a Baroque air, of old-time atmosphere, based on the contrasting dimensions of the stage plans⁹.

This time, however, the set seems created in a museum-like style. Particularly the exterior – the city, built in perspective and maintained as an animated setting throughout the play, is treated in an impressionistic manner. The rhinocerised Paris is an anthropophagous city. The close-up accurately reproduces the author's directions: the grocery store with a floor and generous windows through which he carves out a tumultuous life, the cafe terrace with its chairs and tables, the dusty tree, are all accessorizing a recognizable space, staging a natural extension of the daily routine for the audience at the Odéon Théâtre. But in the background opens a cyclorama city, created by stage lighting at the limit of an optical illusion. The performers and the

⁸ Niels Thores, *Rhinocéros (Analyse approfondie)* [*Rhinoceros (In-depth Analysis)*], (e-book, 2015), 40-43.

⁹ Nancy Huston, Geneviève Latour, Victor Haïm, *Jaques Noël. Décors et dessins de théâtre* [*Jaques Noël. Theatre Decors and Drawings*], (Paris: Actes Sud, 2007), 20-25.

audience theatrically look at the clouds of dust that cover the cardboard Paris from the distant plane, after the animal's first raids¹⁰. There, behind the scenes, the contagious beast seems to nestle, from the very beginning, like a fault from the past.

With the second act Noël is getting closer to the manner that established him in the interior scenography. The chamber of metamorphosis and of last man's agony is gradually becoming the occasion of phantasmal resizing of the playing space. Here the presence of the animal is abundantly represented. Not only masks, but also fangs, horns, hooves, a whole unleashed horde takes the stage in the second act, while the protagonist faces the onslaught of beasts with a weapon in hand, a symbolic pose for the identity construct of revolutionary France. With bated breath, the audience could watch him heroically defending a gray, ruined Paris, in an image that echoes Delacroix's famous romantic fresco *Liberty Leading the People*. Proliferating horizons of heads and horns are accompanying the protagonist's agonizing waiting for the irreversible mutation. All the while, the rhinos march across the Odéon stage to the upbeat rhythms of the Wehrmacht¹¹, evoking painful memories of the Nazi occupation during World War II.

As I stated on another occasion¹², Noël had even imagined a metamorphosis of the stage objects - the sink, the bed and the coat hanger were supposed to transform, as the city was conquered, into animal fetishes, but this malformation of the inanimate was partially abandoned in the show, perhaps also because of implementation difficulties.

But there is an incongruity of vision between director Barrault and set designer Noël. The resistance to the irrational horde, contained by this elaborate setting, is parodically countered at the character creation level. From the first head-on encounter of the hero with the rhinos, the fear dissipates. The visit of the endearing pachyderms, whose disguise with puerile masks leaves the

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹¹ Rhinos Thores, *Rhinocéros (Analyse approfondie)* [*Rhinoceros (In-depth Analysis)*], (e-book, 2015), 40-43; Jean Vigneron, *Bérenger contre les robots* [*Berenger against the robots*] (*Croix de Toulouse*, February 21, 1965).

¹² *Rhinos Go on Stage. Animal Allegory Behind and Beyond the Iron Curtain*, in *Posthumanism in Fantastic Fiction* edited by Anna Kérchy (Americana e-book, 2018), 193-208.

impression of a farce, but also the protagonist's metamorphosis, a kind of gaudy gymnastics with silent film effects, end up provoking hilarity among the audience. Barrault does not opt for terrible metamorphoses, for serious political allegories. His rhinoceroses are too human or too theatrical to be fully identified with the ideology of evil that Ionesco had in mind.

A series of scenes abound in props, they seem created for a child's imagination. The *rhinoceration*, which had stunned German audiences in Düsseldorf, is diverted into a farce with Guignol effects. The contagious beasts have the posture of rigid marionettes, seem to descend from the small wooden stages of the Luxembourg Gardens, distort reality like caricatures, but do not frighten. Partially following the author's instructions, the director seems to interpret the play in the spirit of a universal humanism, importing into the space of this black utopia the techniques of the *gag* and the puppet theatre.

The first reviews greeted either warmly or with jovial irony the author's journey from "the unusualness of the banality" to the "banality of the unusual", categorizing *Rhinoceros* as a "thesis play"¹³, which promotes the values of a universal humanism, such as freedom of thought, nonconformism, individuality. These did not overlook either the slide into an overly explicit symbolization¹⁴, nor the parodic effect implied by the redundancy of symbols from the animal world, and placed Barrault's staging in the realm of the *fantastic*, noting in the background, as a subliminal message derived from the fears of the Bucharest youth of the author, the political allegory¹⁵. Jacques Lemarchand, the most ardent supporter of the play and the staging, shifts the interpretation focus from the overly clear, albeit allegorical, message of the play to its heart-moving sensibility, capable of touching the deepest layers of man, as a singular, free and moral being, thus giving it back much of the meaning the author had intended¹⁶.

Therefore, although the first Parisian staging of *Rhinoceros* is not devoid of ideological views, the historical-political context is rendered in the style of mannerism. The audience never identifies with the bizarre creatures

¹³ Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, *Le Monde*, January 25, 1960.

¹⁴ Jean Vigneron, *La Croix*, February 1960.

¹⁵ Robert Kanters, *L'Express*, January 1960.

¹⁶ Jacques Lemarchand, *Figaro Littéraire*, January 30, 1960.

seen on stage. In the hall of the Odéon in Paris, Ionesco's play sets off just an innocent laugh, doubled by a philosophical reflection on the subject of the human condition and its chance of surviving when confronting the imperative mechanisms of history.

A few years later (enough for decantation, comparisons, revisions), in 1965, a television production of *Rhinoceros* is released. The producer Roger Iglésis, in collaboration with the "Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault" Company, retains a good part of the cast and of the original scenography conception. The new production amplifies, with the technical means specific to television (or, as Ionesco would say, with its own language, which makes famous characters no longer simple abstract figures¹⁷), certain effects, and emphasizes, in some places too much, the political theme. It imposes the show in the consciousness of the French public as an artistic event of the year.

Although he confesses he did not watch his play on the small screen (out of a superstition the playwright used to observe even for the final rehearsals or the premieres), the television experience is revelatory for Ionesco. Here the imaginary world is rewritten, the phantasms take on a new dimension, the alternation of panoramas and close-ups creates new faces of illusion. Even if Iglésis used only small elements of cinematic trickery (the footage was recorded on tape and broadcast live to the audience in front of the TV screens), *Rhinoceros* now conquer a new, further refined form of expression.

The press reserves ample space to the analysis of the television production, interviews with the author, the performers, the director and even with the home viewers are published, the production from Odéon is brought back into the spotlight, going as far as giving it a new reception, in the already extensive context of the various stage versions which *Rhinoceros* had enjoyed in the meantime. Critics point out in unison the potential for resignification and the universality of the play's message, restoring its political-historical meaning, even if still diluted in the broader and more abstract philosophy of the human condition. Some of the chroniclers who had chastised the play's childish allegory in 1960, return with a new, deeper interpretation, anchored in the play's immediate and certainly more sensitive reality:

¹⁷ Clément Ledoux, *Entretien avec Eugène Ionesco dont Le Rhinocéros est présenté mardi* [Conversation with Eugene Ionesco whose *Rhinoceros* is released on Tuesday], *Le Monde*, April 27, 1965.

A few weeks ago, the whole world was leading Churchill to his grave. Churchill, the man who in the House of Commons, on June 4, 1940, shouted against the Nazi infection: "We shall never surrender!" This historical statement is the first meaning of *Rhinoceros*. Ionesco wanted it this way. The deafening foot strikes of the angry beasts represents the trampling sound of the marching legions, and the accompanying music, the most famous Nazi war march! But, beyond this historical symbol, we must see in Ionesco's play the fear of massification, the revolt against the aberrant conformism that conditions man and prevents him from keeping a unique, irreplaceable and personal soul – that's the lesson of *Rhinoceros*.

Contrary to the performance in Düsseldorf, for the Parisian audience – this time not only the selective one of the theatres, "Ionesco's easiest play" (Jean-Louis Barrault, *Tribune de Genève*, February 20, 1965) remains a brave demonstration of vitality, a triumph of humanist values, not just because the last man never surrenders, but above all because the audience, either "in pink outfits, tuxedos and generous necklines" or in front of the small screens, has countless opportunities to laugh, to wonder and to be disgruntled.



Fig. 3: L' Odéon Théâtre de France, 1960, director: Jean-Louis Barrault, set designer: Jacques Noël, photo: E.B. Weill; performer: Jean-Louis Barrault



Fig. 4: L' Odéon Théâtre de France, 1960, director: Jean-Louis Barrault, set designer: Jacques Noël, photo: E.B. Weill

New York, January 1961 to 1974

On Broadway, under the direction of Joseph Anthony and the scenography of Leo Kerz (also the show's producer), the *Rhinoceros*-men experience more of an anamorphosis. Through the deforming magnifying glass of comedy, the famous actor Zero Mostel, "Ionesco's comedy star" (Howard Taubman, *The New York Times*, January 10, 1961), subjects his Rubensian body to a hilarious exhibitionism. Anatomical effects are shifted towards the area of the grotesque body. The director abandons any artifice of props in the representation of rhinos. No animal symbols appear on the stage, only a strange, contagious frenzy with *sitcom* flavor takes hold of the performers. At first the effect is comical, but gradually the virtuosity of the interpretation creates a moment that compares in intensity with the atmosphere of a frightening ritual. A body "that becomes almost mute, sighs, cries and makes animal sounds is the symbol of a mythical reality beyond

the human drama”¹⁸, will affirm Hans Thies-Lehmann, in his attempt to frame the pulsating dimensions of corporeality in the post-drama.

From the first reviews, we note:

Zero Mostel grows from a rotund dilettante, all buttoned and slicked in the mold of fashion and the glass of form, into the ugly, snorting hulk of rhinoceros. (...) you'll think you're at the zoo.¹⁹

The dynamic polymorphism of this type of stage choreography anchors the viewer into a visceral representation of animality. Constantly doubled by the comic, the metamorphosis is emptied of both psychologism and symbolization. The rhinoceros is a huge living body, in compulsive movement, a representation of what Erika Fischer-Lichte, in the footsteps of well-known anthropologists who interfered with the theatrical environment, called “a liminal body”, a labile existence “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremonial”²⁰.

In the end, the allegorical meaning of the animalization is difficult to recover, the two snapshots – “the last timid human”, devoid of any trace of the heroism the playwright invested him with, and the beast, with its “Gargantuan baby face” – reduce this duality to a single trait and bring down the play’s meaning at a basic level.

Following a record number of performances (two hundred and forty), the production remains in the media history as “cleverly crazy” (*News*), “a big evening in the theatre” (*Journal-American*), “a joyous revelation” (*The New York Times*).

A few years later, in 1974, *Rhinoceros* reaches the American television studios. The director Tom O'Horgan keeps some of the original cast from the Broadway production and some set elements, while adding details meant to anchor the play in the country’s new political reality. It was the year of president Richard Nixon's abdication after his impeachment following the Watergate scandal. In the metamorphosis room, among the many objects reminiscent of

¹⁸ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, translated by Victor Scoradeţ, (Bucharest: Unitext, 2009), 298.

¹⁹ Kevin Kelly, *The Boston Sunday Globe*, February 19, 1961.

²⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, translated by Saskya Iris Jain (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), 175.

the scene from the 60s, a wall bed accidentally slides, revealing a painting of the president in the background. In the most intense moments of the grotesque metamorphosis, the protagonist seems to discover this painting for the first time, looks at it with adulation, kisses it, his body relaxes - the transformation is, finally, complete. Before giving in the “last man” will resignedly reply, rewriting Ionesco’s line, “I don’t agree with you at all”. Throughout the animal choreography the viewers can hear in the background the typical camera sound, suggesting the theme of constant observation/ surveillance by unseen and prying eyes – a reminder of the Watergate scandal. The rhinoceros-man is a follower of the right (here associated with Nixon’s politics), while the one who faces *rhinocerosisation* remains a solitary representative of eternal humanist values. Under the lens of the camera the transformation remains in the area of physicality, none of the effects specific to the cinematic environment, with the exception of the preferred close-up in key moments, comes to increase the body-sign, which has already become iconic, of the performer. If on stage this choreographic approach creates a distortion effect, on screen the same act, with the camera focused on capturing in detail the various face expressions, becomes a manifest choice of maintaining the staging in the area of verisimilitude.



Fig. 5: Longacre Theatre, New York, 1961; director: Joseph Anthony; set and lightning designer: Leo Kerz; Friedman-Abeles Photograph Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collections



Fig. 6: Longacre Theatre, New York, 1961; director: Joseph Anthony; set and lighting designer: Leo Kerz; Friedman-Abeles Photograph Collection, New York Public Library Digital Collections; performer: Zero Mostel

Moving at ease between various cultural imaginaries and production media, Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* open, since their very first symbolic "invasions", an insufficiently explored area of representation – the body between realms, totemic-ritual choreographies and anatomies of a dystopian environment, the uncertain, *anamorphised* body, in search of a post-human identity. *Rhinoceros* staging, with all its props, effects and moods, intended to rewrite several centuries of civilization through an atavistic form of human existence, thus joins the quotable *mise-en-scènes* in the post-drama era.

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