

# Exit the King

by Eugène Ionesco



## Dear School Partner,

Welcome to A Noise Within Theatre! We are thrilled to welcome you to the 2025-26 season—a season that we like to call **Songs from the Volcano**—featuring timeless stories bursting with upheaval, transformation, and the embers that push us to grow. In *Exit the King*, an aging king of an undisclosed country clings to life as he avoids the reality of his pending death, posing the essential question: *how do we face the inevitability of mortality?*

In this study guide, you will find articles, classroom activities, behind-the-scenes interviews, and other exciting materials, all crafted to align with the Common Core and the California VAPA Standards. This study guide can be enjoyed by teachers and students alike, our hope being that teachers and students enjoy it together!

We offer this study guide as a free resource for contextualizing the show and drawing parallels with our modern world, and you can find guides from our past seasons available for download on our website.

We hope this study guide will prepare you to enjoy the show to its fullest potential and to create a lasting memory of a fantastic day at the theatre. We are happy to have you!

Warmly,

A Noise Within Education



# Table of Contents

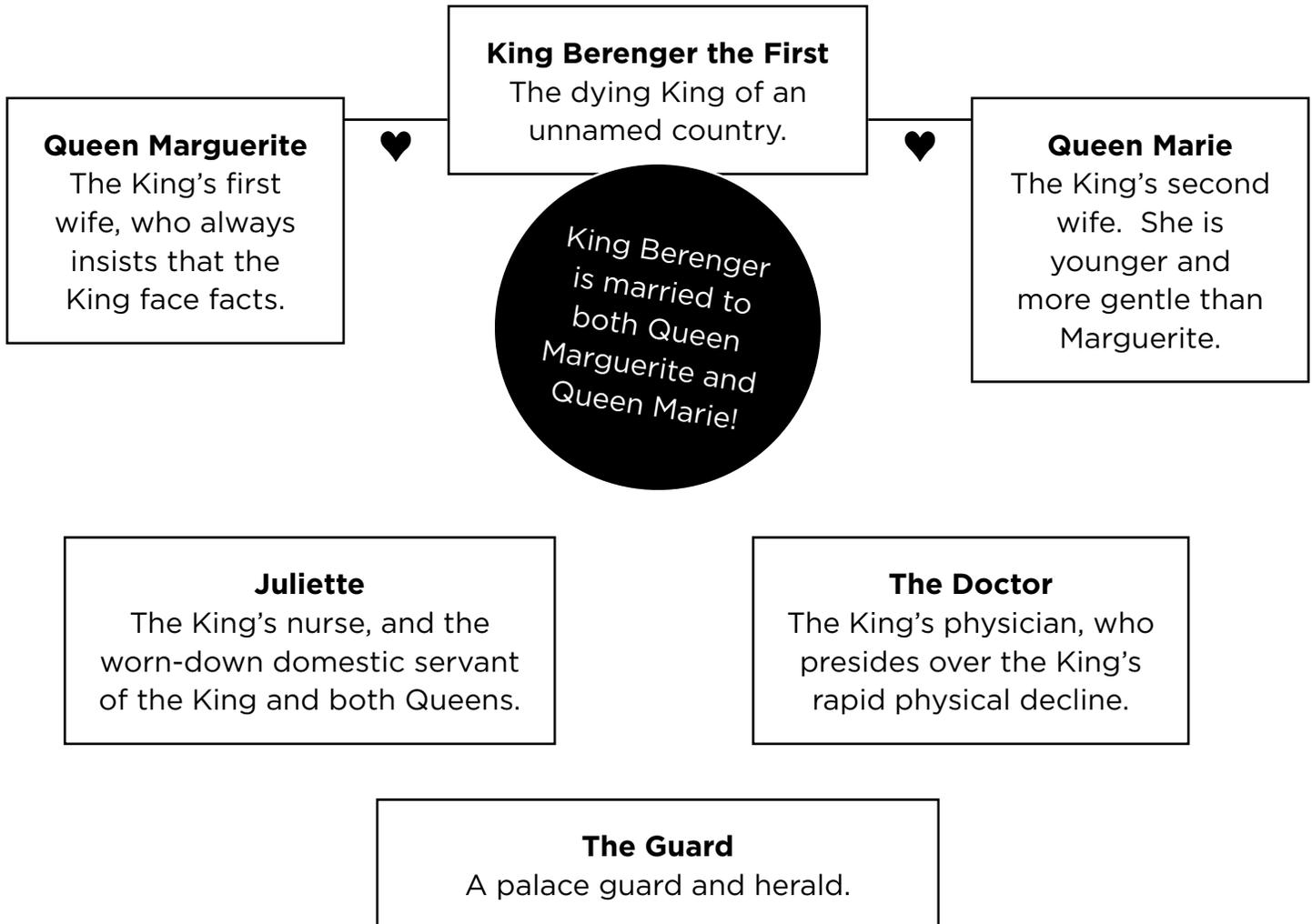
4	Meet the Characters
5	Play Synopsis
6	About the Author: Eugène Ionesco
8	Themes and Motifs in <i>Exit the King</i>
10	Essay: THEATRE OF THE ABSURD - DEATH AT EVERY TURN
13	Classroom Activity: What Is Theatre of the Absurd?
14	Essay: IONESCO AND SARTE - A POST-WORLD WAR II RECKONING
16	Discussion Questions
17	Bonus Material

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## Credits

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# ***Exit the King***



# Play Synopsis

**Setting:** The throne room in the palace of King Berenger, who rules over an unnamed country. The events of the play unfold chronologically and in real time.

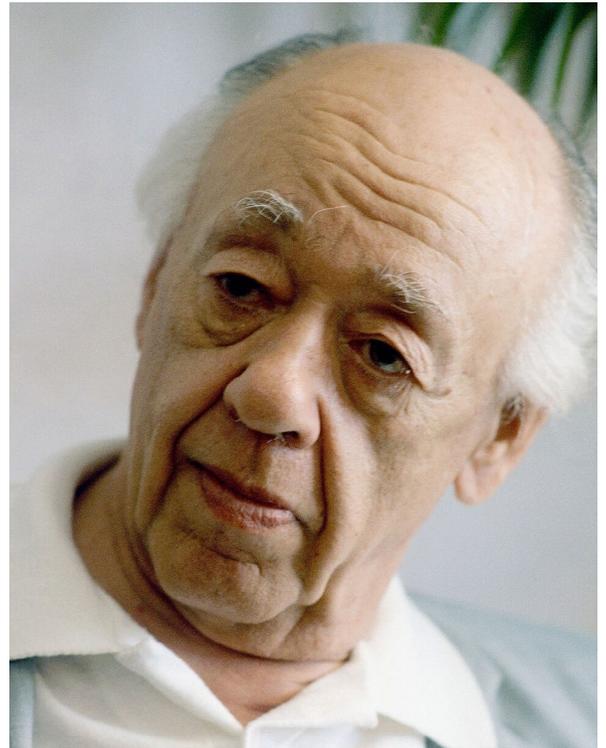
## Synopsis

As the characters enter the throne room, a Guard calls out their names and titles. King Berenger the First enters, followed by his first wife, Queen Marguerite; his second wife, Queen Marie (the King is simultaneously married to both); and Juliette, who functions as the King's nurse and also as the overworked domestic servant in the palace. Last of all, the King's Doctor enters. The Doctor and Queen Marguerite attempt to convince the King that he is going to die today—very soon, in fact—but the King refuses to accept the truth. Queen Marie also refuses to believe that the King is dying, though the Doctor and Marguerite steadily refute Marie's attempts to soothe and reassure the King. Throughout the play the Guard continues to make announcements about what we have just heard or seen, but these broadcasts become increasingly ridiculous and pointless.

As the action of the play moves along, we learn more about these individuals and their relationships with the King and with each other. We learn too that the King's realm is dying with him, and that his country is now as broken down as his palace and the throne room. As the King progresses steadily and inescapably through the physical, mental, and emotional stages of death, he passes from denial to panic, then to confusion and childishness. One by one the other characters disappear, until finally the King is alone, sitting on his throne while the encroaching darkness moves in and finally overtakes him.

## Eugène Ionesco

**Eugène Ionesco (1909-1994)** was a Romanian-French playwright whose dramatic works helped to usher in the theatrical movement that became known as **Theatre of the Absurd**. Born in Slatina, Romania, Ionesco moved with his parents (his father was Romanian, and his mother was French) to Paris when he was very young, and he wrote most of his plays in French, which he considered to be his first language (although he gave many interviews in Romanian, as well as those he gave in French). Ionesco's father returned to Romania in 1918, and Ionesco and his sister were raised by their mother. Ionesco later spent several years in Romania at the insistence of his father, who had secretly divorced Ionesco's mother, remarried, and started a new family. Ionesco strongly disliked his tyrannical father, a fact that some critics speculate was the source of the playwright's condemnation of authoritarianism. During his years in Romania, Ionesco completed his studies and taught French to support himself. He met his wife there, and the two returned to France after their marriage, where Ionesco lived for the rest of his life.



Eugène Ionesco. Creative Commons.

Although Ionesco is best remembered for his plays, he became a playwright relatively late in life, achieving his first theatrical success with the 1948 play *The Bald Soprano* (written when he was forty-one). Previously, Ionesco had earned his living by teaching languages and literature. His plays, however, were written primarily in French. Ionesco is often credited as one of the founders of Theatre of the Absurd dramas. This theatrical movement, which began in France, included the works of Samuel Beckett and Jean Genet, and all three playwrights exerted considerable influence on later playwrights of all nationalities.

By the time *Exit the King* premiered in Paris in 1962 (under its French title, *Le Roi Se Meurt*), Ionesco was an established and highly respected playwright. The first English production occurred the following year in London, and it starred Alec Guinness as King Berenger and Eileen Atkins as Juliette. The play is often considered as one of the "Berenger Quartet," which is a group of four plays in which the character Berenger appears (though not always as the same person). The most famous play in the Berenger Quartet is *Rhinoceros* (1959), which offers a metaphorical warning against fascism and the thoughtless conformism that gives rise to dictatorships and allows them to flourish.

## Eugène Ionesco *continued*



The first-ever performance of *The Bald Soprano* at the Theatre des Noctambules in Paris, 1950. Creative Commons.

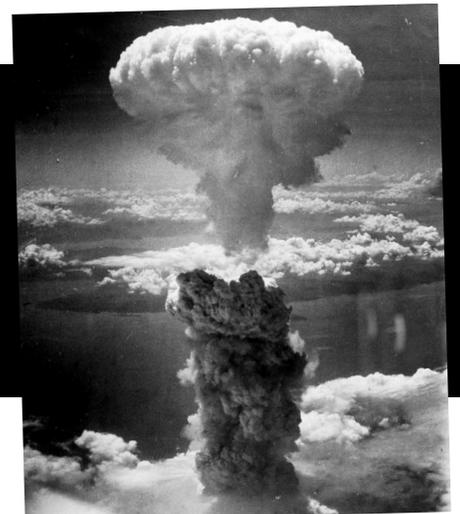
Ionesco once told an interviewer that as a young man, he was never interested in anything besides literature. “Not drama. Literature.” He added that the first dramas to capture his imagination were the puppet shows he saw as a child, but that “nothing else” in theatre had ever interested him as much as those shows had. He also noted in the same interview that he always knew that he wanted to be a writer, and that he always preferred being alone (as much as he adored his wife and daughter). Perhaps Ionesco had to master the intricacies of language and of literature in solitude first, before he could write his complex, nuanced plays, which question the very ability of language to lead us to any revelations about truth, or even about life itself.

Although Ionesco was nominated nine times for the Nobel Prize in Literature, he was never awarded that honor, although he received many other awards and recognitions. Ionesco died at the age of 84 and is buried in Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris.

### Interesting Fact

Theatre of the Absurd emerged in Europe in the 1950s and 60s largely in response to the chaos and destruction of World War II. This rebellious absurdist style was popularized by playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and *Exit the King* playwright Eugène Ionesco.

Mushroom cloud above Nagasaki after atomic bombing on August 9, 1945. Creative Commons.



## Themes & Motifs in *Exit the King*



**Theatre of the Absurd:** The theatrical movement known as Theatre of the Absurd had its origins in several French (or French-language) playwrights, including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Jean Genet. The critic and scholar Martin Esslin coined the term in 1961 to describe the works of these and other playwrights whose unconventional dramas used language in new and often nonsensical ways. To some extent, these authors were reacting against the existentialist dramas of Jean-Paul Sartre, who was himself influenced by the philosophical thought and writings of Albert Camus. Both Sartre and Camus insisted that language ultimately has meaning; the Absurdist playwrights, however, believed that language is at best imprecise, and that human beings' use of language to communicate with each other is often, though not always, doomed to fail.

**Fear of Death:** King Berenger knows that he is going to die “in an hour and a half,” but he refuses to believe it. Despite the repeated assurances from those around him that death is imminent; despite the fact that everything from his country to his palace is literally dying off or falling apart; and despite even his own awareness that he is becoming steadily weaker, the King refuses to believe that he is dying. The fear of Death, and the need to confront one's own mortality, are among the very oldest themes of drama and of literature, going back to Classical times and transcending national and cultural boundaries. The Absurdist spin that Ionesco gives to this ancient topic was considered radical when he wrote the play (1962), but his approach to death in this play has influenced countless authors, playwrights, comedians, and other artists ever since.

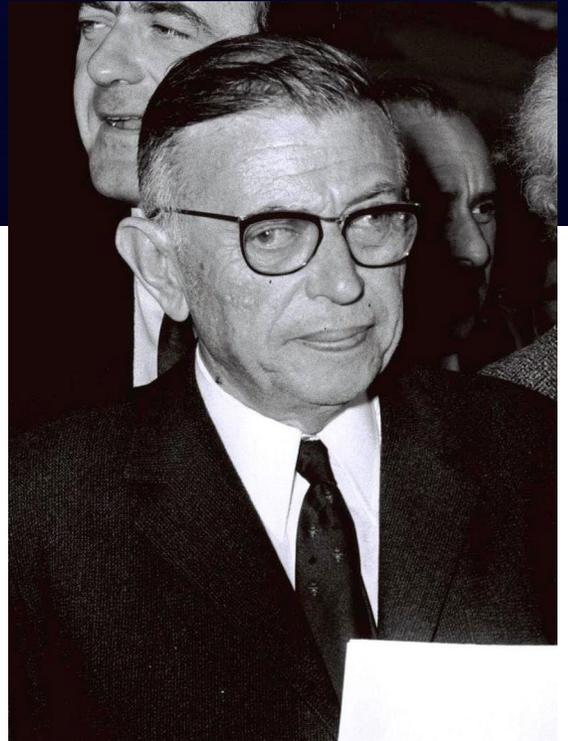
## Themes & Motifs in *Exit the King* continued

**Political Power:** A central concern in *Exit the King* is the nature of power, and particularly the use and abuse of political power. King Berenger may once have exerted extraordinary control not only over his subjects and his country, but apparently over the natural world itself. In the end, however, he cannot control death, any more than his queens or his doctor or his servants can. It is worth considering that Ionesco (and his Theatre of the Absurd peers) witnessed both World Wars, so they had lived experience of the chaos and destruction that unchecked power could bring. Furthermore, Ionesco was a great admirer of Shakespeare's plays, many of which also concern the extent and the abuse of power, and the tension that often exists between a ruler's political power and his personal power (or lack of either). *Exit the King* explores many of these same questions, but from an Absurdist perspective.

**The King and the Land are One:** The idea that the health of the King and the health of his realm are closely linked is a very old one. We see it in Arthurian legend and in much earlier literature and mythologies as well. In *Exit the King*, Berenger's once-thriving country has become a wasteland in which nothing grows and no one can flourish. As the King dies, so does his realm, and even his palace begins to fall apart around him.

**Fate/Destiny:** Ionesco maintained that comedy was more tragic than tragedy because tragedy typically includes an element of Fate or Destiny, against which a person can struggle, whereas in comedy there are no rules, no laws, and no concept of Fate. As a result, individuals must do the best they can in a world that doesn't seem to make sense. In *Exit the King*, the only element of Fate is death, which is the one law of being human against which no individual can struggle and ever hope to win.

# Theatre of the Absurd: Death at Every Turn



Jean-Paul Sartre in 1967. Creative Commons.

In the 1975 movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, an early scene takes place in what appears to be a plague-stricken medieval town. Comedian Eric Idle, looking extremely bored, walks beside a cart laden with dead bodies, occasionally banging a piece of metal and yelling “Bring out your dead!” Although this very silly scene may seem to have little to connect it with significant works of dramatic literature, this now-iconic skit actually owes a great deal to a major theatrical movement that began in the middle of the 20th century and came to be known as Theatre of the Absurd. This highly influential development, which began in France with the work of playwrights Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Eugène Ionesco, influenced far more than the Monty Python humorists; many playwrights, screenwriters, and other artists took inspiration from the Absurdist authors as well. Examples include the playwright Tom Stoppard, whose first hit was the zany yet witty play *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966); some of Quentin Tarantino’s more over-the-top movies; *The Cornetto Trilogy* movies (including *Hot Fuzz* and the zombie caper “Sean of the Dead”); such wacky adaptations as *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (another zombie caper); and even the supremely silly *Mystery Science Theater 3000* series.

Theatre of the Absurd is often said to have developed as a reaction against the Existentialist dramas of Jean-Paul Sartre, who was himself influenced by the philosophical thought and writings of Albert Camus. Both Sartre and Camus grappled with such

# Theatre of the Absurd: Death at Every Turn *continued*

concepts as free will and the awareness of death, as well as the meaning of language and its ability to clarify an individual's search for purpose. We can see Ionesco's mockery of these ideas in *Exit the King*, both stylistically, in the rapid-fire dialogue interspersed with longer philosophizing, often nonsensical, speeches, followed by awkward silences; and thematically, in the ways that Ionesco ridicules the existentialist preoccupation with death



Albert Camus in 1958. Flickr.com.

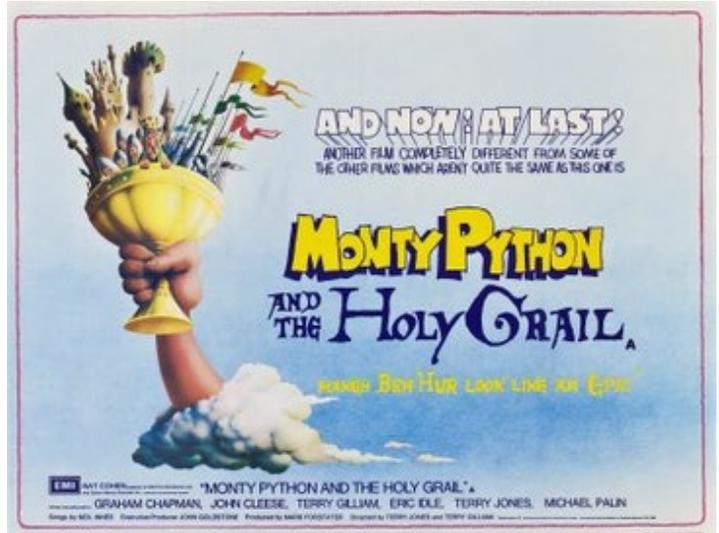
and the ultimate emptiness of life. We also see Ionesco's rejection of Existentialist concerns in the deliberate silliness of his play. Yet it would be inaccurate to understand Ionesco's Absurdist plays merely as comic entertainment. As Ionesco once told an interviewer, "Comedy is more tragic than Tragedy," and the tragic elements of *Exit the King* are all the more poignant and painful for being seen through a lens of comedy.

Some literary critics have suggested that the Theatre of the Absurd playwrights drew their ideas and inspiration from Elizabethan drama and literature, and Ionesco himself said in interviews that he greatly admired Shakespeare and considered him a genius. Furthermore, the themes of many Elizabethan plays are reflected in *Exit the King*, and in other Theatre of the Absurd dramas. These themes include questioning whether there is such a thing as Fate; trying to outsmart one's enemies, including humankind's ultimate enemy, death; the characters' struggles to accept that some forces may be beyond their control; and, ultimately, resigning oneself to one's fate. Other works that influenced Theatre of the Absurd include the seventeenth-century Italian *commedia dell' arte* plays and earlier medieval morality plays such as *Everyman* (in which Death comes to Everyman when he least expects it, whereupon all of Everyman's companions promptly desert him with comical speed).

Regardless of how well we know the influences on Theatre of the Absurd, or the philosophical schools against which Ionesco was reacting, we can enjoy *Exit the King* on

# Theatre of the Absurd: Death at Every Turn *continued*

its own merits; and even as we shake our heads over King Berenger and his willful, doomed resistance to dying, we can't help feeling sympathy, and maybe even a little admiration, for this man who clings so tenaciously to life. King Berenger's attempts to understand what is going on, and to make sense of his life's purpose, mirror our own struggles to do the same. In the end, Ionesco seems to say, we can do a lot worse than accept our lot with resignation and laugh at ourselves. After all, resistance to Death can be funny. In the Monty Python "Bring Out Your Dead" skit, one elderly man exclaims loudly, "I'm not dead yet!" when a younger relative attempts, a tad prematurely, to throw him on the plague-cart with the other dead bodies. Alternatively, we can choose to resist death with proud defiance; in George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones*, whenever a character is asked, "What do we say to the god of Death?" the response is simply, "Not today." But in Ionesco's *Exit the King*, where death is absolutely coming today (by the play's end, in fact), neither humor nor defiance can ultimately make any difference. And how we, as audience members, respond to the King's unavoidable fate (which is our fate too) is a choice that the playwright leaves entirely up to us.



Monty Python. 1975 Poster. Wiki Commons.



## Interesting Fact

Absurdist plays, such as *Exit the King*, are sometimes called "anti-plays" because they often reject the typical norms and dramatic structure of a play, favoring the illogical and disruptive over the conventional.

*Ubu Roi* by Alfred Jarry, a French playwright that helped lay for the foundation for Theatre of the Absurd. Featuring Deborah Strang and Alan Blumenfeld in a 2006 production at A Noise Within. Photo by Craig Schwartz.

**Objective**

Build a foundational understanding of Theatre of the Absurd and its philosophy.

# What is Theatre of the Absurd?

## Step 1: Discuss

What do you know about the theater movement known as **Theatre of the Absurd**? How does inclusion of the word 'absurd' shape your assumptions?

## Step 2: Watch

On YouTube, watch Crash Course's Theare #45 episode: "Beckett, Ionesco, and the Theatre of the Absurd"

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eJ7w2l83ba4>

After viewing, discuss:

- Do you agree or disagree with the following state: *Life doesn't really make sense. So theatre shouldn't make sense either.*
- Can a play have meaning even if it does not make sense?

## Step 3: Write A Scene

It is now your turn to write an absurdist scene! Are you ready to forget logic and give your scene permission to not make immediate and clear sense? What larger meaning might eventually emerge?

Your scene should be 1-2 pages and involve exactly two characters. You may only use words from the following word bank. Characters may repeat these words as often as you like. In this scene, your characters should be arguing about something.

What How Why When Hello I You  
 We He She They It

Am Is Are Do Happy Sad Up Down  
 Yes No Not Okay Nevermind Sure

Open Close Day Night Yesterday Today  
 Tomorrow Know Feel Think Suspect

# Ionesco and Sartre: A Post-World War II Reckoning



A propaganda poster created by the United States government between 1942 and 1945 inspiring Americans to work in resistance to Nazism. Creative Commons.

Playwright Eugène Ionesco disliked the term “Theatre of the Absurd,” although he is considered one of the foundational playwrights of that school. Instead, he preferred the term “Theatre of Derision” to describe his plays and those of certain other contemporary playwrights, many of whom he admired, such as Samuel Beckett (whose work he once described as “frank, simple, generous, and poetic”). But if Ionesco admired Beckett, he strongly disliked another contemporary and highly influential French playwright: the Existentialist philosopher, author, and public intellectual Jean-Paul Sartre. Although Theatre of Derision was probably a deliberate, and deliberately absurd, oversimplification by Ionesco of his works, to the extent that he was deriding anyone in his plays, he was pretty clearly deriding the Existentialists in general and Sartre in particular.

Although Ionesco and other playwrights whose works have been identified as belonging to Theatre of the Absurd shared the Existentialists’ belief in the absurdity of life, Ionesco strongly disagreed with the Existentialist argument that human beings theoretically could ultimately find meaning in life and impose order on it by subjectively defining what life means to oneself. (He also was scornful of what he considered their preoccupation with death.) But what seems to have really disgusted Ionesco about Sartre in particular were Sartre’s ideological shifts, which to Ionesco seemed to be nothing more than bending the

# **Ionesco and Sartre:** **A Post-World War II Reckoning** *continued*

knee to the political principles of whoever was in power at a given time. In one interview from the early 1960's, Ionesco denounced Sartre as "a man who yields to everything." He went on to disparage Sartre's support of Nazism in the late 1930's, noting that Sartre then lived quietly through the war, without any pro-Nazi activism, and then, once Germany was defeated, renounced Nazism. In the same interview, Ionesco described similar shifts in Sartre's support of Communism, noting that he didn't object to Sartre for his pro-Communism or his anti-Communism stances; what he found objectionable was his "lack of character, of force." Sartre was, in Ionesco's estimation, simply a "mirror" that reflected the prevailing sentiments of the time, with no principled convictions at all.

Despite maintaining that he didn't judge Sartre for his views on Communism, Ionesco quite clearly condemned Sartre for having supported Nazism, and he was candid in interviews and in his later writings that he thought Nazism was the fault of the intellectuals: not the "great intellectuals, but the professional intellectuals," as he once said. Some twentieth-century Existentialists believed in the concept of the "Superman," an idea first articulated by the nineteenth-century philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who suggested that the ideal of a superior version of humankind might serve as a goal towards which humanity could strive in order to more fully realize human potential. Nazism then promoted a racialized version of this concept as the basis for its theory of a "master race" (Aryan Germans) and inferior races (including Jews, Roma, and those with physical challenges), though Nietzsche himself (who died in 1900) never remotely suggested this interpretation and was strongly opposed to antisemitism. Nevertheless, the concept was regarded favorably by many of the "professional intellectuals" of whom Ionesco condemned.

Ionesco once said that "The world is comical because it is laughable, it is ridiculous." He explained that "comedy is more tragic than tragedy, because tragedy has rules and laws, fate and destiny," against which men and women struggle, whereas in comedy, there are no rules or laws, and no fate or destiny to battle with. Perhaps Ionesco preferred the term Theatre of Derision for his plays because, although his plays are often very funny, there remains a deeply poignant, even tragic, element to them which transcends pure comedy as we typically understand it. Yet as readers and audience members, we must never mistake the superficial absurdity of Ionesco's plays for a lack of moral conviction, much less a belief that humankind doesn't even need to take a principled stance on the crucial issues of the day because in the end nothing matters. Ionesco had a strong moral compass, and throughout his life he resisted the attempts of anyone, whether individuals or governments, to dictate what he or anyone else should think or believe. At times he would urge young people, "Dare to think against others"; and his plays continue to offer this encouragement, and this challenge, to audiences today.

## Discussion Questions

### Before the Show

1. What do you know about the theater movement known as **Theatre of the Absurd**? How does inclusion of the word 'absurd' shape your assumptions?
2. *Exit the King* widely explores the **theme of death**. How do you tend to respond to the idea of death—with fear, curiosity, avoidance, awe, acceptance?

### After the Show

3. What was the plot of *Exit the King*? Was there one? How does **the absence of plot** give the play more meaning?
4. What did you see that qualifies *Exit the King* as **an anti-play**? What elements were unconventional or radical?
5. How does King Berenger's **attitude towards death** change over the course of the play? Why do you think Ionesco decided to show death happening slowly?
6. What does this play suggest about the ways humans try to hold onto **power and control**?
7. How do **Queen Marie** and **Queen Marguerite** respond differently to King Berenger's imminent death? Is one 'right' and one 'wrong'? What does each queen represent as King Berenger faces his mortality?

## Bonus Material

**Want to go deeper? ANW's Resident Dramaturg, Miranda Johnson-Haddad, has some suggestions:**

### **Additional Media on *Exit the King*:**

- A 2009 Broadway production of *Exit the King* that starred Geoffrey Rush as the King and Susan Sarandon as Queen Marguerite received mixed reviews; here's a short video with clips from different scenes: <https://youtu.be/el66pyXs2io?si=dK9dSiyk2c5OXytR>
- In 1972, a semi-professional group of actors performed the play in English in an abandoned castle along the Hudson River in New York state: <https://youtu.be/4RIWxGLkEw?si=7r4bSYnZQoh8y7D1>
- For a video which includes clips from a 2010 production in French, see: <https://youtu.be/Nuea1gAMV5g?si=KgLgy4odkzfjKuB>
- In 2018, the National Theatre in London staged the play with Rhys Ifans as the King and Indira Varma as Queen Marguerite. In this short clip, the actors discuss Ionesco's play and their interpretation of it: <https://youtu.be/tTh8n5LDSvs?si=sYaFHn7og2s60My>

### **More on Eugène Ionesco:**

- For an interview with Ionesco from ca. 1960 (Radio Canada), see: <https://youtu.be/Qih8bwcfh1U?si=DOImHBbZOkZNL8qB>
- Note: This link is to the first of three parts; in French, with English subtitles. The final minutes of the interview are missing, which as one commenter observed is a perfect Absurdist ending.
- For a later interview (1976) with Radio Canada, see: <https://youtu.be/N82ifBhpVHM?si=IXjsgA4KU83tc7AT>
- Note: In French, no subtitles.
- In 1978 Ionesco made a three-week tour of the U.S., during which he spoke at the French Consulate in Boston. He was interviewed by two students, one from Tufts and one from Harvard. Here's the edited interview as it appeared in *The Harvard Crimson*: <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/1978/3/9/an-interview-with-Eugène-ionesco-pat/>

## **Bonus Material** *continued*

### **Additional Resources:**

- For further reading on Theatre of the Absurd, see Martin Esslin's classic work, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (written in 1961 and reissued in subsequent editions). Esslin himself coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd."
- The idea that "the King and the land are one" - that is, that the land thrives when the King thrives, and the land declines when the King declines - goes back at least as far as the Arthurian legends (and arguably much further: to classical times, for example, Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*). For a stirring (and fun!) cinematic representation of the concept, see this short clip from the 1981 movie *Excalibur*, in which King Arthur rouses himself from lethargy and despair, and his decaying land bursts into bloom once more: <https://youtu.be/nthojvLZoNY?si=BF5SO4zIWegQ2rsv>

## ABOUT

# A Noise Within

A Noise Within produces classic theatre as an essential means to enrich our community by embracing universal human experiences, expanding personal awareness, and challenging individual perspectives. Our company of resident and guest artists immerses student and general audiences in timeless, epic stories in an intimate setting.

Our most successful art asks our community to question beliefs, focus on relationships, and develop self-awareness. Southern California audiences of all ages and backgrounds build community together while engaging with this most visceral and primal of storytelling techniques. ANW's production of classic theatre includes all plays we believe will be part of our cultural legacy. We interpret these stories through the work of a professional resident company—a group of artists whose work is critical to their community—based on the belief that trust among artists and between artists and audience can only be built through an honest and continuing dialogue.

In its 30-year history, A Noise Within has garnered over 500 awards and commendations, including the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle revered Polly Warfield Award for Excellence and the coveted Margaret Hartford Award for Sustained Excellence.

More than 45,000 individuals attend productions at A Noise Within annually. In addition, the theatre draws over 18,000 student participants to its Education Program. Students benefit from in-classroom workshops, conservatory training, subsidized tickets to matinee and evening performances, post-performance discussions with artists, and free standards-based study guides.



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