

Eugene Ionesco's The Bald Soprano



A Playgoer's Guide

There's no smell of anything burning

None at all? You don't have a little fire in the chimney, something burning in the attic or in the cellar? A little fire just starting, at least?

I am sorry to disappoint you but I do not believe there's anything here at the moment. I promise that I will notify you when we do have something.

Please don't forget, it would be a great help.

About the Playwright



Eugene Ionesco was born on Nov. 26, 1909, in Romania. Shortly after his birth his family moved to Paris, where he spent most of his childhood. In his early teenage years he moved back to Romania, where he taught French. Eventually he returned to France to complete his doctoral thesis and remained there after the onset of the Second World War. He earned a living as a proofreader.

Ionesco stumbled upon being a playwright almost by accident. While learning English in 1948, he was struck by the emptiness of the clichés that appeared in his English phrase book. Inspired by that, Ionesco wrote a play that satirizes the daily life of bourgeois society frozen in meaningless formalities. The play was called *La Cantatrice Chauve*, later translated into *The Bald Soprano*. (It has also been translated as *The Bald Prima Donna*.)

It was first produced in Paris on May 11, 1950. In rehearsal, the company had first tried staging the play as parody but had soon discovered that it worked best if presented as wholly serious drama, in the realistic mode of Ibsen. They had also experimented, trying several different endings, for example. Even after it opened, *La Cantatrice chauve* remained a work in progress. The first staging was poorly received but within a decade it was recognized as a modern classic, an important seminal work in the theater of the absurd, which was first coming into vogue in America.

Due to the popularity of the play, Ionesco decided to embark on a career as a writer. He went on to write several anti-plays, which combined a dream or nightmarish atmosphere with grotesque, bizarre and whimsical humour. His other works include *Rhinoceros*, *The Killer*, *Exit the King*, *Hunger and Thirst*, *A Stroll in the Air*, *The Lesson*, and *The Chairs*. Along with Samuel Beckett, he is considered one of the foremost playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Eugene Ionesco died in Paris on March 28, 1994. Although he wrote almost entirely in French, he is one of Romania's most honoured artists.

What happens

The play opens in an ordinary English home to an ordinary English couple, Mr. and Mrs. Smith. They engage in superficial, ridiculous small-talk, followed by a superficial fight and a superficial bout of making up. Afterwards, the maid, Mary, comes in to tell her employers that the Martins have arrived. The Smiths have forgotten that the Martins were supposed to come over for dinner, so the Smiths disappear to change their clothes.

Mary leads the Martins to the parlour, where they proceed to rediscover each other, including the facts that they are married and have a daughter, Alice. They share a romantic dance and then lie exhausted in an armchair together, where they fall asleep. In this opportune moment, Mary comes in to say that the Martins have been misled, that they don't really share anything together, and in fact, have never met before (she also announces that she is Sherlock Holmes).

Just then, the Smiths reappear and make more superficial, ridiculous small-talk with the Martins until the Fire Chief, who is looking for a fire (of which there seems to be a shortage), shows up. He rings the doorbell four times, and only the last time does either of the Smiths actually answer the door to find someone there. The chief shows disappointment at the lack of fires at the Smiths' house, so he is invited to stay and share stories. Mary reappears and falls into the chief's arms. She then recites a poem, which compels the Smiths to push her offstage. Soon after, the chief takes his leave, mentioning the bald soprano while doing so, which embarrasses the others into silence.

After his departure, the couples re-engage in a gibberish-laden conversation, which culminates in the couples screaming sounds at each other. The stage goes dark, and only the Smiths reappear. The play ends with them repeating their very first lines of the play.



The Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, mostly writing in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. In his "Myth of Sisyphus", written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd.

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language is shown as a vehicle of conventionalized, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words fail to express the essence of human experience, unable to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constitutes first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalized speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalized and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd makes people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being said about it. [Adapted from the University of Glasgow School of Modern Languages and Cultures Web site]

This guide was researched by
The *Bald Soprano* Task Force
Lindsey Cavanagh, Diane Cole, Cole Cormier,
Jule Anne Hardy, and Jessica Whalen

and edited by
Jeff Dingle, Chris Lyons, Everton McLean,
Brittany Stepniak, and Russ Hunt

St. Thomas University English 2223

The Page and the Stage

visit our Web site, at:

<http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/22230607/>

The Bald Soprano. Eugene Ionesco 1950. Author biography. In 1948, Eugene Ionesco began writing *The Bald Soprano*, as he later confessed, almost in spite of himself, for by that time he had come to despise the theater that he had much loved in his youth. What did intrigue him was the banality of the expressions used in an English-language phrase book. These phrases were the inspiration for this anti-play or parody, "œa comedy of comedies.œ