

Stage Directions Beyond Theater: Eugène Ionesco's exercise in theatricality

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ABSTRACT – Stage Directions Beyond Theater: Eugène Ionesco's exercise in theatricality – Stage directions are a special type of genre in theater, ranging from indications for the dramatic text to the emergence of the author's voice. In Eugène Ionesco's case, stage directions go beyond his plays and find another function in his critical writings and in his correspondence with directors. In this paper, we analyze how stage directions function in the texts published in *Notes et contre-notes* and in the manuscripts housed in Ionesco's Archives, from the perspective of a theoretical debate that involves Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes and Luiz Fernando Ramos, among other researchers interested in theatricality.

Keywords: Theatricality. Stage Directions. Eugène Ionesco. *Notes and Counter notes. Manuscripts.*

RÉSUMÉ – Les Didascalies Hors le Théâtre: un exercice de théâtralité d'Eugène Ionesco – Les didascalies constituent un genre tout particulier dans le domaine théâtral: de l'indication scénique à l'inscription de la voix de l'auteur dans le texte destiné à être mis en scène. Chez Eugène Ionesco, les didascalies échappent des pièces pour trouver une autre fonction dans ses textes critiques, ainsi que dans la correspondance de l'auteur avec ses metteurs en scène. On analyse dans cet article l'insertion des didascalies dans les textes publiés dans *Notes et contre-notes* et dans les manuscrits du Fonds Ionesco, à partir d'une discussion théorique sur le genre et l'importance de la figure de l'auteur, basée notamment sur les idées de Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes et Luiz Fernando Ramos sur la théâtralité. **Mots-clés:** Théâtralité. Didascalies. Eugène Ionesco. *Notes et contre-notes. Manuscrits.*

RESUMO – As Didascálias Fora do Teatro: um exercício de teatralidade de Eugène Ionesco – As didascálias constituem um gênero muito particular no domínio teatral: das indicações cênicas à inscrição de uma voz autoral no texto feito para ser representado. Na produção de Eugène Ionesco, as didascálias fogem das peças para encontrar uma função a mais em seus textos críticos e na correspondência com seus diretores. Neste artigo, trata-se de analisar a inserção das rubricas nos textos publicados em *Notes et contre-notes* e nos manuscritos do Fundo Ionesco, com base em uma discussão teórica sobre o gênero e a relevância da figura autoral, a partir de Bernard Dort, Roland Barthes e Luiz Fernando Ramos, entre outros pesquisadores da teatralidade.

Palavras-chave: Teatralidade. Didascálias. Eugène Ionesco. *Notes et contre-notes. Manuscritos.*

Authorship in the 20th century theater

Who is the author of a play? Not of the dramatic text, which seems to be the result of a more or less private writing process, but of the play, of the performance that takes place on stage and is seen and heard by the audience. Who is *that* author? Is he or she the person who wrote the text on which the performance is based? Or, is the author of the play the reader, the person who reads the dramatic text and puts on the show from a personal perspective? Or, maybe, the authors are the actors who, by playing their roles, give life to what was only an idea? Or, maybe, the role of author is played by those who watch and, therefore, have roles in the construction of meaning? If the concept of authorship is controversial, in theater – the most open of the open works of art – it submerges under the weight of modernity.

Following the poetics of Greek theater, we can understand the whole history of Western theater, at least until the beginning of the 20th century, as dominated by the concepts of text and authorship, that is of *a text written by an author*. In the *Poetics*, the century-old source for the theory of Western theater, Aristotle (2006) lays the foundations for what would become the rules of drama, having as a starting point, the observation and the comparison of Sophocles' and Homer's poems, which differ in their mode of enunciation: dramatic and narrative, respectively. Aiming at arousing fear and pity in the audience, tragedy takes the form of a poem and the poet is responsible for the construction of a series of elements that should have unity and verisimilitude, depicting the tragedy of characters of a higher type. Tragedy lies in the heart of the poem and not away from it. The performance, on the other hand, is just another element, even if it is characteristic of the genre.

In the reinterpretation of classical theater that French theater performed in the 17th century, and in keeping with Aristotle's *Poetics*, the author of the dramatic text not only holds on to his privileges: he strengthens them. He is not just the poet; through stage directions, he also plays the role, in the text, of stage director. This enhanced presence of the author had the purpose of making sure performances did not stray too far from the author's intentions. It was a way of controlling the reception of plays, from actors to audience. According to Marie-Claude Hubert (1998), one of the first playwrights to justify

the need for stage directions was Pierre Corneille, the author of *The Cid*. In his *Discours des trois unités* (1660), he explains the double function of marginal notes for small actions:

We also have another reason for not neglecting this little resource as they (the Ancients) have done: the printing press puts our plays in the hands of comedians that roam the country, and it is only in this way that they can be told what to do. If we did not help them through these notes, strange difficulties might arise (Corneille apud Hubert, 1998, p. 55)¹.

In this fragment, Corneille highlights two important revolutions of his time that inaugurated a new moment in the reinterpretation of the classics: the invention of the printing press, which increased readership, and the mobility of theater groups that put on performances outside the capital. It is true that he does not mention the problem of controlling reception, since the text was seen as the bearer of the truth for interpretation – and the lack of respect for the author’s intentions could be the source of *strange difficulties*. It is important to point out, though, that Corneille’s propositions were not accepted promptly or easily, since it was common knowledge that a text should have enough elements to guide interpretation, leaving no margin for doubt.

The “little resource” Corneille mentions was not entirely new, though: according to Ramos (2001, p. 10), marginal notes first appear in the religious dramatic texts of the Middle Ages and had the goal of “presenting concrete and symbolic aspects of the rite”, and, since the Renaissance, as Corneille’s fragment indicates, these notes function as stage directions, bridging the gap between text and performance. Through time, the emancipation of theater from text and its establishment as performance increased the interest in stage directions. Still according to Ramos (2001, p. 10): “[...] although, at the end of the 19th century, stage directions established itself as an element that could not be separated from the dramatic text, it was only in mid-20th century that it was approached by theory”.

The theoretical discourses presented by Luiz Fernando Ramos in the first part of his article *A rubrica como literatura da teatralidade: modelos textuais & poéticas da cena* [Stage directions as the literature of theatricality: textual modes & scene poetics] aim at defining stage directions in relation to the dramatic text: are they a secondary text?

an additional text? an autonomous one? In a sense, these debates came in the wake of the emergence of the role of stage director (as opposed to stage manager, who, as the title indicates, was responsible for the management, for the organization of the performance); but it also includes co-authorship, and, at the end of the 20th century, what is called post-dramatic theater, a term coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann to refer to contemporary theater that subverts or does away entirely with the concept of text. The autonomy of performance, which ignores centuries of text centered practices, makes us reevaluate the question of authorship.

At the end of the 19th century, the collaboration between Tchekhov and Stanislavski is, to some extent, responsible for inaugurating the modern concept of stage director. Theatrical creative process was seen, at last, as collaborative, and the stage director becomes part of the creative process as the co-author of the play. But, maybe co-author is not the right term for this role... maybe, we should really say author... This is what Marie-Christine Autant Mathieu does in her article *Tchekhov/Stanislavski ou la naissance de la mise en scène. Du texte dramatique à la partition scénique* [Tchekhov/Stanislavski or the birth of stage direction. From the dramatic text to scene collaboration] (2010). Discussing the origins of Stanislavski's stage production of the play *The Seagull*, she does not analyze Tchekhov's manuscripts but Stanislavski's stage direction exercise books as a way to understand the aesthetic ideas of the Russian director. Stanislavski is seen, then, as the author of the performance, and also as the author of a new concept of theater.

Beginning at the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, it is interesting to observe the way in which stage directors claim authorship of theatrical performances. Roger Planchon (in Grésillon; Thomasseau, 2006, p. 32), in a 1977 interview, indicates similarities between different kinds of writing: "[...] our contemporary age discovered a new attitude towards theater: it establishes a difference between dramatic writing, what we call the text, and scenic writing or performance". Already in 1945, director Gaston Baty explained:

The poet dreams of a play. He writes down what can be put into words. But those words can only express part of his dream. The rest is not in the manuscript. It is the job of the stage director to restore what was lost when the dream

became a manuscript (Baty in Grésillon; Thomasseau, 2005, p. 28)².

Throughout the 20th century, the increased importance of the role of the stage director transformed the way the dramatic text was written: stage directions become a way to indicate the writer's point of view, highlighting, at the same time, the shift from textuality to theatricality. The stage director, in turn, embodies this emancipation of theater from text, whose importance diminishes when compared to the scene. In this way, the debate over authorship acquires a new dimension: the search for the theatricality in theater.

In an utterance that became famous, Roland Barthes states that "theatricality is theater minus text". Isolated from its context and presented like this, this assertion might suggest an idea of theater that is exclusively dependent on stage production; however, the reading of a longer excerpt of the article *Le théâtre de Baudelaire* [Baudelaire's theater] (1954) clears it up: Barthes does not refuse the text or the stage production; he claims, however, that theatricality – the becoming of theater – should be the essence of all theater:

What is theatricality? It is theater-minus-text, it is a density of signs and sensations built up on stage starting from the written argument; it is that ecumenical perception of sensuous artifice – gesture, tone, distance, substance, light – which submerges the text beneath the profusion of its external language. Of course, theatricality must be present in the first written germ of a work, it is a datum of creation not of production (Barthes, 1972, p. 26).

In the complex relationship between author and director, the concept of authorship can sometimes become entangled with the concept of authority – or ownership – of the work. Italian writer Luigi Pirandello's manuscripts suggest that he read dialogues out loud in order to establish the rhythm and the tone that could best translate what he wanted to say, according to Dominique Budor in the article *Le chantier Pirandello* [Pirandello's construction site] (2010). But the mistrust that Pirandello showed towards stage directors also manifested itself in his desire to control interpretation through stage directions: for Budor, Pirandellian stage directions reveal an attempt to play all functions of production (including the technical ones), with the objective of being as faithful as possible to the authorial aesthetic project. Stage directions become, then, a

type of “proto-production” as, through them, Pirandello “ has the intention of controlling all aspects of theater, which he sees as a total art: scene and props, costume, the positioning and the movements of actors on stage, tone of voice, play, lighting and sounds...” (Budor, 2010, p. 20).

What Budor calls “proto-production” is identified by Bernard Dort, in genetic studies of theater, and especially of the Pirandellian theater, as the writing of performance (*Une écriture de la représentation*, 1986). The text that analyses the play *Tonight we improvise* highlights the importance that theater itself acquires in Pirandello’s world, whose trilogy *Theater in Theater*³ shows, at the same time, his preoccupation with his status as author and as stage director. This double role suggests an unresolved tension: although a preoccupation with the text and the author’s intention can be seen in his writing, it is also in his writing that we can see the importance he attributes to production. To argue this point, Dort cites Pirandello himself:

Pirandello states that the “dramatic element of a work of art is something; production is, as translation or interpretation of the work of art, a more or less faithful copy, something else; but, he does not settle this matter by taking the side of drama and abandoning production to its subordinate condition. On the contrary, he tries to inscribe production in drama itself (Dort, 1986, p. 19)⁴.

In the dramatic text, stage directions function, therefore, as indications to directors and actors, the ones that are responsible for the concretization of the play written by the author into production. In other words, stage directions are the tools of communication between author and production. These indications, somehow, imitate the dramatist’s desire to direct his own play, keeping it close to the imagined structure. This authorial irruption in the heart of fiction has a story which becomes more relevant in modern theater; a comparison between a classic play such as Racine’s *Phaedra* and Samuel Beckett’s *Happy Days* is enough to show the differences in the usage of the stage direction device through time. A small amount of notes, used mainly to indicate where actors should be placed on stage give way to all kinds of intervention: movement, voice, emotion, lighting and sound, amongst others. Of course, we should take into consideration the rules of classical theater which codified verse itself (what, on its own, determined part of production) and which can be

seen as a metonymical manifestation of the dominant question of moral decorum. In modern theater, artistic and moral rules become less important. Besides, in the beginning of the 20th century, the idea of director as co-author began to establish itself in such a way that text centered theater started to be questioned, what, in turn, led to seeing production as the result of a plurality of readings.

Ionesco as Puppeteer

In Ionesco's theater, stage directions are a particularly interesting writing space. In his first play, the first stage direction immediately shows the reader that there is a linguistic preoccupation that is very different from traditional or any other kind of model. In this first line, we read:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Besides him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes. (Ionesco, 2002, p. 9)⁵.

If we see stage directions as instructions for production, this particular specimen does not really indicate anything concrete other than the nonsense of a language that repeats itself without adding to the meaning of a message. On the contrary, in Ionesco's theater in general and in *The Bald Soprano* in particular, we see that repetition highlights the emptiness of a language that has lost its drive to communicate. What is the purpose of stage directions that indicate nothing? To whom is this text addressed? Closer to drama as literary text, the stage directions of Ionesco's first play are a type of exercise in style, very much like the disarticulated dialogue of his characters. In this play, there are no boundaries between stage directions and text, since stage directions themselves become one of the characters. This phenomenon can be seen, for example, when the stage direction text, indicating the strikes of the clock, contradicts Mr. and Mrs. Smith's perception of time or, when this text, telling the reader that the clock does not strike, avoids the silence of the stage.

In Ionesco's next plays, the procedure changes and stage directions become less autonomous, more in keeping with their traditional role, what does not mean that they become mere technical instructions for the stage. In the article *Proliférations didascaliques dans le théâtre de Ionesco* [The proliferation of stage directions in Ionesco's theater], researcher Benoît Barut analyses the presence and the function of stage directions in Ionesco's play from the perspective of a proliferation procedure which is seen as one of the features of this type of theater. For the critic, besides the sheer quantity of stage directions and characters in some of Ionesco's play, stage direction can also be said to proliferate " [...] from the point of view of scenic and technical languages and from the point of view of style" (Barut, 2010, p. 63). In his analysis, Barut shows us that Ionesco not only uses more stage directions but also changes their function: in order to control the possible interpretations of his work, the author asserts his presence through stage directions, which describe, in minute detail, the production imagined: tone, posture, costume, etc and also the techniques to be used: lighting and sound design and scenography.

When it comes to style, stage directions, like the one described above, can be said to relate more to the reading of the text than to the design of performance. Stage directions are used by the writer as a space for language: directions which are comical, such the one in *The Bald Soprano*, become one with others that, sometimes, have a narrative tone - such the one used for portraying Dudard in *Rhinoceros*: "Dudard, thirty-five years old; grey suit; [...] If the Department Head became the Assistant Director he would take his place: Botard does not like him" (Ionesco, 1960, p. 39) - and, sometimes, have a lyrical tone, such as the directions for the opening of *The Killer*, in which the environment is described as such: "The wind is blowing softly; maybe we see a dead leaf being carried away across the stage. Far away, we heard the sound of a train and we see the confusing profile of houses which are lost in the distance when, "all of a sudden", strong lights illuminate the stage" (Ionesco, 2002, p. 471).

If, in Ionesco's theater, stage directions are a space that allow for the author's presence, which mimic, in turn, the techniques and style of his plays, we could also think that there are no clear boundaries between the dramatic and the non-dramatic text in his writing. Just

as some of his critical texts are a kind of “stage performance”, they are, just like his plays, dominated by the author’s voice which makes comments or gives instructions, just as in the stage directions we are talking about. In *The London Controversy*, which is part of *Notes and Counter Notes* (a book which can be seen as a real dialogue, as it is composed of texts from various authors), stage directions make a clear appearance, occupying a space that is very similar to the one in the dramatic text. Before each text, between number and title, stage directions take the form of a text printed in a special font, and do more than just introducing the subject of the text that follows it. Full of irony, stage directions give the reader (in 1962) the context in which the controversy occurred, from an obviously biased point of view. Kenneth Tynan, for example, is introduced as “[...] one of the critics who fought most of battles that made Ionesco well known in England. When the battle was won, he, then, doubted himself and decided to talk about it in *The Observer*, giving an interrogative title to his article” (Ionesco, 2006, p. 135)⁶. In this presentation, Tynan’s weakness of judgment is made clear: not only has he changed his opinion about Ionesco but also he has *doubts* and talks about them using an *interrogative* title. But there is more. In the stage directions for that text, there is also what is seen as a gratuitous information: the title of the book in which one of Tynan’s articles was published in France, something like *Les jeunes gens en colère vous parlent* [Angry young men speaking]. As we can see, Tynan’s article loses its authority from the start. Although it seems objective (as it gives concrete data), Ionesco’s presentation of Tynan is clearly ironic in order to influence the reception of the text. Orson Welles is, in turn, introduced as a “very important personality”. But, during this introduction, we see another stage direction text, which appears in the form of a comment between parenthesis and which brings Ionesco’s voice to the critical text: “(Orson Welles denies that a critic should limit his judgment to the internal laws of a work of art. A critic is a human being, who entitled to have his personal reactions and to express his own ideas)” (Ionesco, 2006, p. 150)⁷.

This is not what he says of H. F. Garten’s point of view: the stage direction text warns us that “[...] the second letter ends with a sentence that could have been written by Robert Kemp” (Ionesco, 2006, p. 148)⁸. H. F. Garten, who, according to Emmanuel Jacquart,

specializes in the expressionist theater of Germany, is presented simply as a *reader*. In his letter, Garten states that if Ionesco's play were as clear as his essays, he "could become a great dramatic writer" (Ionesco, 2006, p. 149)⁹. Ionesco's observation refers to an article written by Robert Kemp and published in the newspaper *Le monde* in 1955 when *Jack, or The Submission* premiered. Kemp ends his text with a phrase that is similar to Garten's: "If he [Ionesco] really applied his talent as a writer to the plays, he could produce some important stuff (Kemp, 1955, p. 4). Memory? Archives? The fact is that Garten, presented as a reader, is depicted, in 1962, through a critical text written in 1955, in order to make fun, at the same type, of both critics.

In the last scene of this fight, the stage direction text has a change in tone: the aim is to present *Le coeur n'est pas sur la main* [I'm not all heart], Ionesco's last response to Tynan. The newspaper debate had come to an end years before, but, in *Notes and Counter notes*, Ionesco creates a scene in which he has the last word: "This debate can go on forever. To give it a (provisional) conclusion, we will present Ionesco's response to Kenneth Tynan. This text has not been published before. *The Observer* bought its rights in England, but did not publish the text (Ionesco, 2006, p. 152)¹⁰. Like Berenger from *Rhinoceros*, the only character that remains a human being amongst the rhinoceros, and claims, at the end of the play: "I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end! I'm not capitulating!" (Ionesco, 1960, p. 107), Ionesco, before defending his ideas, makes it clear to his reader/accomplice that critics are trying to shut him up. If, in the plays, stage directions aim at instructing the actors and the stage director during production, in his critical text, they aim at instructing the reader. Through the objectivity of tone and the pseudo-informative character of texts, Ionesco plays the role of the misunderstood author.

When talking about *The London Controversy*, it is also worth pointing out that the texts for the Kenneth Tynan debate were first published in the journal *Cahiers des Saisons*, n. 15, in the winter of 1959, and, in these versions, they were already introduced by non signed short presentations. In this context, the texts seemed to be introduced by an editorial voice, a manifestation of the journal itself

that seemed to agree with Ionesco's point of view as they, unlike *The Observer*, gave him the possibility to have the last word in the debate. When those texts are then transplanted, as a block, to a book signed by Ionesco, those presentation texts seem to originate in his voice.

This appropriation is even clearer when we observe a copy of the journal preserved in Ionesco's Archives: the printed cover brings us the table of contents of a number dedicated to Ionesco. At the top, we see a handwritten inscription in blue ink, followed by an arrow: *Prendre p. 255 à 268 incl.* [Select pages 255 to 268, included]. The arrow points to the section of table of contents that refers to those pages:

KENNETH TYNAN, PHILIP TOYNBEE and ORSON WELLES
The London Controversy
translated by Jean-Louis Curtis

In Ionesco's copy, the pages of the *Controversy* were, indeed, torn, becoming drafts for the book edition. But, when it comes to the title, the stage directions and even the choice of letters from the readers of *The Observer*, it is impossible to determine if they were made by Ionesco, as it is difficult to assess Ionesco's level of involvement in this publication as he was, in principle, its theme and not its author. However, when he selects those texts for his book, he is definitely acting as author. The indication that *Le coeur n'est pas sur la main* was also published in *Cahiers des Saisons* is responsible for the ambiguity: was it only this text or the whole set? As a consequence, we can ask ourselves: the documents we have just read were written by the author or by the editors of the journal?

In this climate of frequent aesthetic and ideological conflict, another element can help us make sense of the texts of *The London Controversy*. One year before its publication in *Cahiers des Saisons*, the *Théâtre populaire*, a journal that published most of Ionesco's detractors, also published his version of the debate with Tynan, entitled *Ionesco à l'heure anglaise* [Ionesco in English time]. From the structure, the organization of the parts and the choice to publish letters of readers, everything (with the exception of Ionesco's final article) is similar to the *Cahiers* publication that was, in turn, reproduced in *Notes and Counter Notes*. However, the editors of *Théâtre populaire* did not publish presentation texts for each article, just a general introduction to the "English debate":

This 'English debate' will not only give our readers important pieces of information (what exactly do we know about the influence of the contemporary French theater abroad?), but also, it will show them, we are sure of it, the vitality of the debate about theater in a foreign country, where people are not happy, it seems to us, with the idea that 'theater is theater' – something that can certainly make us more modest – and more demanding (Théâtre Populaire, 1958, p. 5)¹¹.

The communication between publications is clear and this makes Ionesco's discursive appropriation even more interesting. The same texts and the same structure have different functions in two opposite journals with very different points of view when it comes to the French theater of the 1950s: the pure aestheticism of the avant-garde vs. the proposals of engaged art, whose function goes beyond aesthetic pleasure. When he makes those structures his own, Ionesco plays, in a theatrical manner, with the formative/informative file, giving it another function: the construction of an image of himself as a misunderstood author, someone who is constantly fighting literary critics. And, it is in the book format, which is less ephemeral than the newspaper or the journal, that this image finds the density and the duration that are necessary for its consolidation.

Stage Directions in Ionesco's Correspondence with his Directors

We should, then, understand Ionesco's stage directions in a very broad sense, as instructions for the stage which appear both in the dramatic text and in the critical text, and as something that is always part of the construction of theatricality. We can, in this sense, read the letters exchanged between the dramatist and his directors as stage directions, since they function as authorial instructions which aim at making sure production remains closer to the author's intentions, and, as a sign of an authorial performance that is developed in this particular dialogue. It is worth pointing out, maybe out of curiosity, but not by chance, that Ionesco's relationship with his directors was always difficult, according to the testimony of the directors themselves and of the actors and critics of the time.

The private letters sent to Sylvain Dhomme, first director of *The Chairs*, became another type of text when published in this

play's file in *Notes and Counter Notes*. Functioning as stage directions aimed at indicating to Dhomme how to produce the dramatic text, when published in *Notes and Counter Notes*, those letters become stage directions for the reader/audience, indicating how they should read/understand the play. Besides, they also establish the role of the producer in the construction of meaning on stage. For Ionesco (2006, p. 258)¹², "the director should be led" by the text; he should "disappear". The need to be understood, to see on stage the performance he imagined, and that was revealed through the stage directions, also manifests itself when the private text becomes public, and addressed the audience in an attempt to fill in the gaps and guide the comprehension of the work.

The letters that were actively exchanged between Ionesco and Sylvain Dhomme in 1952 were published in *Notes and Counter Notes* with a clear gap in one of the intrinsic elements of the correspondence genre: the addressee. Dhomme's name is simply replaced by *stage director* or *first stage director*, what can be interpreted either as an attempt to preserve him from the public eye, as the content of the letters makes it clear the minor role the stage director played in the production, or as a way of obliterating the name of someone who wanted to interfere with the dramatist's work.

Written in the winter of 1951-1952, Ionesco's first letter gives indications not only on how to stage the play but also on the play's ideological conception. These indications aim at highlighting the writer's intentions and choices: the number of chairs on stage, for example, should be "excessive, as is a caricature", even though this excessive number of chairs might strike the stage director as "superfluous" (Ionesco, 2006, p. 259). Ionesco's suggestions add to the stage directions present in the text, and, when published, these suggestions might function as a way of conditioning the readers' understanding of the debate.

We should, however, be aware of the boundaries between the public and the private domains: how can we be certain that the letter published was the exact same one sent to Sylvain Dhomme? The proofs of *Notes and Counter Notes* give us clues to the extent to which the letter draft was modified for edition. In the first set of proofs, handwritten inscriptions show us a series of writing movements: erasures, suppressions and additions that transform text and discourse. If, in the published version of the letter, the role

of the stage director is questioned by Ionesco, who seems to refuse the idea of a co-authorship between the writer and the director, in the proofs, the writer's vanity becomes clearer when we read what was hidden behind the crossing out. In an excerpt censored by the author during the proofreading of the text and, hence, not published, we can read a statement that indicates the superiority of the writer in relation to the director:

One can be director and author, then, two egos would inhabit the same character. It is rare, but it can happen. With modesty, I could (we could). ~~There is a crisis~~ There could be a crisis in theater because there are proud directors that write, themselves, the play¹³.

Trying to avoid the temptation to explain the reasons that have led Ionesco to erase the excerpt presented above, we can, at least, observe what was suppressed: the ego, the modesty, the I. And what takes their place? A crisis in theater and the pride of directors. If we take into consideration that this letter is published as part of a file that aims at helping the reader to understand the play named *The Chairs*, what really stands out is the dramatist's understanding of what is happening in contemporary theater: the destabilization of the authorial voice due to its constituent plurality. The supremacy of production over text is harshly criticized by Ionesco in various articles, and the letters sent to Sylvain Dhomme can be seen as part of this set of documents. A little further in the same document, Brecht and then Villar are mentioned and then suppressed from the text. As a result, all the names of directors and playwrights disappear from this first letter; what remain to find their way into the book are Ionesco's ideas about the director's job: "for a while, allow yourself to be moulded by the play" (Ionesco, 2006, p. 259).

Director, actor, editor, a man of the theater, someone who was very active in French theater for decades, Jean-Louis Barrault was greatly responsible for the change in reception of Ionesco's theater when he produced the play *Rhinoceros* in the Odéon Théâtre de France [Odeon Theater of France] in 1960. When this play became part of Barrault's repertoire, who was already a well-known director at the time, it increased Ionesco's audience, changed the tone of the critic, and helped the playwright to become famous. Ionesco was aware of Barrault's importance in the French theatrical scene and of his role in his own personal success, what he acknowledged

publicly in interviews and, privately, in his correspondence. In *Notes and Counter Notes*, however, Barrault is mentioned only in passing in the *Rhinoceros* file, and his production, seen as similar in quality to the German production, is considered “valid, as two production types for the play” (Ionesco, 2006, p. 284).

In Ionesco’s Archives, the correspondence with Barrault deals with the production of the play *A stroll in the air* (1963), which was their second collaboration. It is important to point out that the success of *Rhinoceros*, which was the result of the encounter between a text and a stage proposals, did not really change Ionesco’s beliefs about the role of the director, even though ten years had passed since the moment he wanted Sylvain Dhomme to play the role of mere orchestrator of the sheet music of the dramatic text. The first letter of *A stroll in the air* file was written on the 31st of July, 1962 – the contract was signed on the 12th of July. In this letter, the first thing Ionesco does is present himself as author:

My dear Jean-Louis, why not take the text as it is? Bérenger flies to the sky, he comes back, he recounts what he saw: the end of the world is around the corner, a cosmic cataclysm is about to happen¹⁴.

In this same letter, the dramatist uses an idea developed in previous texts: text and production should oppose themselves in order to create an effect. In 1952, when thinking about the play *The Lesson*, Ionesco (2006, p. 252) wrote in his journal: “A burlesque text requires a dramatic production. A dramatic text requires a burlesque production”. For the play *A stroll in the air*, which is a little fantastic, the production imagined by the writer and suggested to the director in the letter should have “very little stylization” and “no ballet”. It is important to notice the appearance of the author’s voice on the stage directions for this play, and which are very similar in context to the letters sent to Barrault. We are talking about a musical scene, in which Joséphine’s singing made the other characters sing as well. In the stage directions, we read:

After that, all the English people sing together the same notes. Standing alone, John Bull’s voice is a little deeper and Young’s voice, a little higher. This musical scene should be very brief. The performance should not make the scene longer or complicate it. The English will only have time, when singing, to smile briefly twice. (Ionesco, 2002, p. 679)¹⁵.

The play is dedicated to Madeleine Renaud and to Jean-Louis Barrault, who were responsible for the production and were, therefore, constantly in touch with Ionesco. The stage directions for the play seem to continue the interaction initiated in the correspondence. In the next letter, dated 26th of September, 1962, Ionesco keeps the pressure on, in an attempt to control stage production and effect on the audience:

That's how I wanted the play, that's what I wanted to do. Maybe my ambitions are very high, my demands too difficult. But this is what I wanted to do. And maybe I got it, in the sincerity of anguish. It could also be a fantastic short story, a little lighter and then a little cruel and inhuman. It cannot be much more than that. In any case, it is how it should look like, I believe, to the audience¹⁶.

In the correspondence between writer and director, to the conceptual aspects (textual and scenic) of the play, we should add some practical aspects that are as important as the first ones. Barrault postponed the premiere of the play many times. According to Ionesco's letter of November/1962, "*A stroll in the air* should have premiered in October, but then it was postponed to November and then to the end of November and again to the 5th of December and now to the 10th"¹⁷. The play finally premiered on the 8th of February, 1963. In the correspondence between writer and director, we can see this time gap was fulfilled by demands and requests, from Ionesco's side, and by demands of creative freedom, from Barrault's side. The delays, more or less justified by the demands of text modification, produced a change in Ionesco's letters, which became less explanatory and a bit more authoritarian in tone. However, Ionesco's more violent impulses were apparently expressed only in the drafts, and it is possible to imagine that Barrault did not read the following lines of a draft of a letter written in February, 1963:

Recto¹⁸:

My dear Jean-Louis,

Madeleine Renaud thinks that the scene with the journalist is a little longer. Then, why not cut it out? Madeleine Renaud thinks that the flight scene, or, more precisely, what Bérenger says when he is flying should be less long. Maybe we should get rid of the whole scene. Why would Bérenger fly in the first place? Let's get rid of its force. But if we get rid of its force – the "presence of death" – this force that shows itself, that exhibits itself – the scene does not make sense. So, let's get rid of that scene too, entirely.

Let's get rid of the two judges, of the three judges... let's only keep

Verso¹⁹:

Madeleine, when it comes to, let's say, her monologue... we could make it a bit longer... and this would be enough for the night. Unless we get rid of the whole play ...and that would be enough for the night. Why produce the play in the first place? Let's get rid of the play and I can get rid of my testicles...since we can get rid of everything. But before, changing the play, however – I am withdrawing/ will withdraw my play before it gets reduced like that – every phone call is enough to make everyone panic. I like Madeleine very much, but I hope I won't work with her anymore. She takes my breath away. Yours, Eugène Ionesco.

In this (probably not sent) draft, the violence of the discourse lies in its irony: Ionesco exaggerates, repeats the verb to get rid of (in both literal and figurative senses), simulates a dialogue with the interlocutor, asks questions he already knows the answers to. But, in this draft in which Ionesco shows himself in such a violent and a theatrical manner, a tiny correction appears to soften his discourse: he is not withdrawing the play now, but will withdraw it in the future, if the text continues to be modified. From the certainty of the present continuous to the possibility of the future, which depends on certain circumstances, his discourse reestablishes, at the end of the letter, the bond that seemed severed from the start.

The version actually sent to Barrault, whose typed copy can be found in Ionesco's Archives, seems to be an exercise in the controlling the impulses that motivated writing in the first place. The objections the director (as reader) voiced to Ionesco were then transformed into a list of points that deserve to be debated and which are, then, given titles such as: "I. The Judges scene, "II. The dreaming with the father scene", and so on. Although Ionesco still criticizes Madeleine Renaud's work, in the version of the letter sent, those criticisms are softened in a such a way that the only thing he asks is more *power* in the actress' performance.

A stroll in the air was badly received by the audience. Fans of the first Ionesco missed the play with words, and the absurd that emanated from the essence and the form of his plays; those who have been excited about *Rhinoceros* did not find the same universal values or the same debate of social and philosophical questions

that were important at the moment. In a letter sent on the 22nd of February, days after the premiere and after the first reactions of critics on the newspapers, Ionesco writes to Barrault to defend *his* play. The typed part of the document deals with Ionesco's regrets in relation to its production: three paragraphs start with the phrase "I regret" [*je regrette*], and the fourth with "I don't understand" [*je ne comprends pas*]. For Ionesco, then, was the production to blame, as it misunderstood the meaning of the play? Handwritten additions seem to soften criticism: Madeleine's performance is "really exciting". In the end, Ionesco writes to Barrault as if he is writing to himself:

[...] I swear the text is good, I swear you weren't mistaken, I swear we need to believe in the text and not hide it²⁰.

The relationship between Ionesco and his directors can be read not only in his plays' stage directions, but also in his critical texts and in his interviews because his desire, as a puppeteer, to play with the strings of his characters is so strong it goes beyond his correspondence with directors. Just as the strings should be visible on stage, as stated in his *The experience of theater* [*Expérience du théâtre*], strings are also visible in his manuscripts not only in the dialogues, its most visible, and spectacular, part, but also in his more subtle authorial performance which manifests a desire to control that is deeply enmeshed in the other discourses that form the scene.

Notes

¹ “Nous avons encore une autre raison particulière de ne pas négliger ce petit secours comme ils l’ont fait: c’est que l’impression met nos pièces entre les mains des comédiens qui courent les provinces, que nous ne pouvons avertir que par là de ce qu’ils ont à faire e qui feraient d’étranges contretemps, si nous leur aidions par ces notes”.

² “Le poète a rêvé une pièce. Il en met sur le papier ce qui en est réductible aux mots. Mais ils ne peuvent exprimer qu’une partie de son rêve. Le reste n’est pas dans le manuscrit. C’est au metteur en scène qu’il appartiendra de restituer à l’oeuvre du poète ce qui s’était perdu dans le chemin du rêve au manuscrit”.

³ Guinsburg, 1999. The trilogy is composed of the following plays: *Six characters in search of an author*, *Each in his own way* and *Tonight we improvise*.

⁴ “Pirandello constate que ‘le drame comme oeuvre d’art est une chose; la représentation en est une autre, en tant que traduction ou interprétation de l’oeuvre d’art, copie plus ou moins ressemblante’, mais il ne se résout pas à ce partage, prenant le parti du drame et abandonnant la représentation à sa condition servile. Au contraire, il essaie d’inscrire la représentation dans le drame même”.

⁵ “Intérieur bourgeois anglais, avec des fauteuils anglais. Soirée anglaise. M. Smith, anglais, dans son fauteuil anglais et ses pantoufles anglaises, fume sa pipe anglaise et lit un journal anglais, près d’un feu anglais. Il a des lunettes anglaises, une petite moustache grise, anglaise. A côté de lui, dans un autre fauteuil anglais, Mme Smith, anglaise, raccommode des chaussettes anglaises. Un long moment de silence anglais. La pendule anglaise frappe dix-sept coups anglais”.

⁶ “Kenneth Tynan, dont on a traduit en France un essai: *Le théâtre et la vie* (in: *Les jeunes gens en colère vous parlent*), est un des critiques qui ont le plus bataillé pour faire connaître Ionesco en Angleterre. La bataille gagnée, il eut soudain des doutes et les exposa dans *l’Observer* du 22 juin 1958, sous un titre interrogatif”.

⁷ “Orson Welles nie que le critique doive se contenter de juger si l’oeuvre est conforme ou non à ses lois internes. Un critique est un être humain, il a droit à ses réactions personnelles, à l’expression de ses propres idées”.

⁸ “En voici deux opinions de lecteurs de *l’Observer*. La seconde lettre s’achève sur une phrase qui pourrait être de Robert Kemp”.

⁹ “Si seulement M. Ionesco pouvait mettre un peu de cette clarté et de cette sagesse dans ses pièces, il pourrait devenir un grand dramaturge”.

¹⁰ “Le débat est inépuisable. Pour lui donner une conclusion (provisoire), nous donnerons le texte d’une réponse de Ionesco à Kenneth Tynan. Ce texte est inédit. *l’Observer* en a acheté les droits pour l’Angleterre mais ne l’a pas publié”.

¹¹ “Ce ‘dossier anglais’ non seulement fournira de précieux éléments d’information à nos lecteurs (que savons-nous exactement de l’influence du théâtre français contemporain à l’étranger ?), il leur donnera, nous en sommes sûrs, de la vitalité de la discussion sur le

théâtre dans un pays étranger, où l'on ne se contente pas, semble-t-il, de décréter que le 'théâtre c'est le théâtre', une idée qui nous rendra plus modestes – et plus exigeants”.

¹² “Vous avez voulu tout naturellement tirer la pièce à vous alors que vous deviez vous y abandonner ; le metteur en scène doit se laisser faire. Il ne doit pas vouloir quelque chose de la pièce, il doit s'annuler, il doit être un parfait réceptacle”.

¹³ “On peut être metteur en scène et auteur alors, deux égo habiteraient le même personnage. C'est rare, mais cela se peut. En toute modestie, moi je pourrais (ou nous nous pourrions). ~~Il y a une crise de~~ Il peut y avoir crise du théâtre parce qu'il y a des metteurs en scène orgueilleux qui écrivent, eux, la pièce”. Fundo Ionesco. Departamento Arts du spectacle da Biblioteca Nacional da França (BnF). Os demais excertos em que não constam as referências bibliográficas constituem trechos extraídos do Fundo Ionesco.

¹⁴ “Mon cher Jean-Louis,/ Pourquoi ne pas prendre le texte à la lettre ? Bérenger s'envole, il redescend, il dit ce qu'il a vu: la fin du monde imminente, un cataclysme cosmique va se produire”.

¹⁵ “Puis tous les Anglais reprennent en chœur les mêmes trilles. Seule, la voix de John Bull est un peu plus basse, celle de la petite fille, un peu plus aigüe. Cette scène musicale doit être *très courte*. La mise en scène ne doit pas insister, ni compliquer la scène. Les Anglais auront tout juste le temps, en chantant, d'esquisser deux sourires”.

¹⁶ “C'est ainsi que j'ai voulu la pièce, c'est cela que j'ai voulu faire. Mes ambitions sont peut-être trop grandes, mes exigences insurmontables. Mais c'est bien ce que j'ai voulu faire. Peut-être ai-je réussi un tout petit peu dans la sincérité de l'angoisse./ Ce peut-être aussi qu'un conte fantastique, un peu léger, puis atroce. Ça ne peut être que cela. En tout cas, c'est ainsi qu'il doit apparaître, je crois, au spectateur”.

¹⁷ “Le Piéton, qui devait être monté en octobre, a été remis en novembre, fin novembre, au 5 décembre, et que maintenant, vous ajournez tout pour le 10”.

¹⁸ “Mon cher Jean-Louis,/ Madeleine Renaud pense que la scène avec le journaliste, du début, est un peu longue. Après tout, pourquoi ne pas la couper ? Madeleine Renaud trouve que la scène de l'envol, ou plutôt ce que dit Bérenger pendant qu'il s'envole, doit être allégé. Peut-être devrait-on l'alléger entièrement. Supprimons même toute la scène. Car pourquoi Bérenger s'envolerait-il? Supprimons la potence. Mais si on supprime la potence, – “ la présence de la mort, – cette potence qu'on lui propose, qu'on lui montre, qu'elle regarde, – la scène n'aurait pas de sens. Alors coupons aussi cette scène. Entièrement./ Coupons aussi les 2 juges, et même les 3 juges... gardons simplement”.

¹⁹ “Madeleine, avec disant son monologue... on pourrait l'allonger un peu, lui... et cela suffirait un peu pour la soirée! A moins tout de même que l'on coupe toute la pièce. A quoi bon faire une pièce? Coupons la pièce et moi je me coupe les testicules... puisqu'on peut tout couper. Avant de la couper toutefois, – je retire^{rai} ma pièce si on la réduit encore... si chaque coup de fil met tout le monde en panique. J'aime bien Madeleine mais j'espère ne plus travailler avec elle. Elle me coupe le souffle.../ Je vous embrasse Eugène Ionesco”.

²⁰ “[...] je vous jure que le texte est bon, je vous jure que vous ne vous êtes pas trompé, je vous jure qu'il faut jouer sur ce texte, ne pas tâcher de le camoufler”.

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