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Directing *Rhinoceros*

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in Theater Design with Honors

May/2005

Abstract

For my honors thesis, I am directing the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco. Ionesco wrote this play after World War II to artistically explore how something as terrible as the Holocaust, Fascism, and the Nazi party could be allowed control and power in society. How could people allow themselves and others to turn into wild beasts? *Rhinoceros* is an absurdist play, with characters literally turning into violent rhinos, symbolically allowing violence to overtake them.

The play explores the behavior of people facing and exploring groupthink, apathy, and standing up for one's own beliefs in the face of opposition. I think that this is an important subject to explore, especially as my classmates and I are entering a world where we will have to make choices about society and where our beliefs fit within that society. This will push not only myself artistically, but also the actors and audience members in their thought processes about the subject of amoral conformity.

Logistically, Black Box Players, a university-funded student organization, agreed to sponsor the show with performance and rehearsal space as well as a small budget. As far as the timeline of the production, *Rhinoceros* was cast in the Syracuse University general acting auditions; callbacks followed shortly after. Rehearsals began on March 21, 2006, with performances on May 4, 5 and 6, 2006.

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Advice to Future Honors Thesis Writers

My thesis project process was rocky. I started out doing a project on technical knitwear design with adjunct professor Allen Fannin as my thesis advisor. I was honored enough to go to Germany to study at Stoll, a knitwear machine and computer programming manufacturer. However, I was devastated to learn of Professor Fannin's death when I was abroad. I felt lost and adrift. Without Professor Fannin, I wasn't sure if my original topic was the correct fit. Generally, I didn't feel right continuing on that path.

Arriving back to the United States, I met with staff in the honors program, which helped me to get back on course. I decided to do a topic directly in my field of theater and theatrical production. In a meeting at the honors office, the play *Rhinoceros* by Eugene Ionesco was mentioned. I read a synopsis online and was intrigued; after reading the play I was hooked and knew I had found my fit. My thesis has taken off and, even with its

challenges and working through a strong bout of mononucleosis, it has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my college career.

In short, my advice is, just do it. When working on a project for such a long period of time, you are bound to face many bumps and challenges along your path, some may be more challenging than others. Find a balance between being malleable yet resilient enough to work through the difficulties. Although one must allow enough time for the thesis to develop, and I strongly advise you not to change a thesis topic, be willing to scrap an idea and change if you know, truly, things are not, or will not work out. Find something that will work. Your thesis should make you happy, something that is of a personal interest or desire for you to explore. Once that fit is decided upon, follow through. It will be most rewarding in the end.

Acknowledgements

I first have to take this opportunity to honor the memory of Professor Allen Fannin, who taught as an adjunct professor in the textiles department at Syracuse University. Allen Fannin was the first person who asked me about doing an honors thesis and encouraged my work within the honors department.

I am forever grateful to him and honor his memory. Thank you.

I thank Professor Maria Marrero, who has been my college advisor since freshmen year and who agreed to be my thesis advisor as well. Maria has not only become my professor, but also my confidante over the years.

Much of what I learned academically can be attributed to her, and I would not be the designer I am today without her insight into the process. I respect her and her opinion, as well as her strength and leadership. Thank you.

I thank Professor Felix Cochren. Felix was my first design professor freshman year, and his standards of quality have been incredibly influential in my educational experience. It was under his wing that I grew as a freshman student with little knowledge, to, four years later, a designer who could create large, main-stage productions at Syracuse University. I thank him for always sharing his experience, advice and feedback. Thank you.

I thank my family and friends for their constant support. I want to especially thank my mother, who pushed me to press on and complete my thesis when times were difficult. Thank you.

I thank last, but certainly not least, everyone who helped *Rhinoceros* become a fully realized project. It is at this time that I must thank my faculty advisor and second reader, Victor Lazarow. I must thank my assistant director, Matt Britten, and my stage manager, Mel McCue. I must also thank my designers and assistant designers: Hannah Hopkins, Bethany Richards, Jason Read, Jason Shelton, Matt Poe, Alok Wadhvani, and Taline Alexander. Thank you to my cast: Devin Horne, Rich Prugh, Christina Malon, Allen Arthur, Alex Billet, John Galas, Matt Lundy, Susan Merwin, Claire Moos, Megan Sass, Adam J. Wahlberg, and Michael J. Contini. Thank you to the Black Box Players organization for all their help and support, including all board members and support staff, especially to Beth Bloomfield. Thank you to anyone who had a hand in this production, whatever the extent. Thank you.

Thesis Essay

As a theater design major, I have focused the majority of my time and energy on the aesthetic of theater, specifically on costume and set design. My course of study has allowed me to develop not only artistic, but also communicative skills, which allowed me success working with a collaborative, theatrical team. In a healthy process, it is the goal of this collaborative team to work together to achieve the best possible theatrical work. From actors to designers, there is always one person who leads this team to, one hopes, a fantastic final product- the director.

The director's job is to achieve their own, personal vision of a production with strong leadership abilities, careful planning, and the help of the other members of the collaborative team. I have had the pleasure of designing a number of shows in my college career at Syracuse University. However, I wanted to explore and experience putting on a full, theatrical performance, from the initial, conceptual ideas to a final, finished product. I wanted to have complete artistic control and have my own, personal vision be brought to life. It is for these reasons I decided to direct a theatrical production of Eugene Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* in Syracuse University's black box space.

Eugene Ionesco was born in 1909, in Romania, and grew up in Paris, France. An absurdist and existential writer, he wrote *Rhinoceros* in 1958, in

the years after World War II. Dealing with the war, Ionesco as well as others wrote absurd pieces of theater. After Europeans had witnessed such devastation, the world did not make logical sense. The pieces were themed to show the banal and mundane, the insignificance and solitude of life. In the existential way of thinking, life is inherently without meaning. Ionesco stated in the *New York Times* on June 1, 1958, "There are no alternatives; if man is not tragic, he is ridiculous and painful, 'comic' in fact, and by revealing his absurdity one can achieve a sort of tragedy. In fact I think that man must either be unhappy (metaphysically unhappy) or stupid" ("Eugene Ionesco").

Rhinoceros opens on a small, unnamed village, when a rhino is sighted. The majority of the village is in shock at such an odd sight. Berenger, the play's protagonist, is incredibly indifferent about the situation, as he is about most things in his life. Although the members of the community are outraged and shocked, they are too concerned with the trivial and mundane to take any real action. They put their faith in the logical, shown in the play as providing no true answers, or do not think about the situation or its severity at all. As the rhinos become increasingly violent, Berenger discovers that they are humans who made the decision to transform themselves into the violent creatures. High status, male characters such as Berenger's friend, Jean, and his boss, Mr. Papillon, begin the transformation and relinquishment of their individuality to join the herd. The rest of the village follows until Berenger is, quite literally, the last man standing. He makes the decision in the final moments to give his life meaning; he will stand

up to the evil rhinos, even if he is the last human being. "I will not capitulate" (Ionesco 107).

Rhinoceros was written, self-described by Ionesco, as an anti-Nazi play. He was in Europe during World War II when he witnessed many of his friends and community members slowly accept a fascist regime. Symbolic of the Nazis, having allowed themselves to literally turn into animals, the rhinos begin as ugly creatures. However, as the violence continues, the creatures become more beautiful and accepted in the society as a whole. Ionesco was disgusted and absolutely disappointed about such societal acceptance. After *Rhinoceros* opened with popularity in Germany, the papers wrote, "Ionesco shows us how we became Nazis" (Plimpton 125). *Rhinoceros* shows how such evil can take place, how people can be seduced to succumb to such unhealthy amorality.

How did a group of individuals in all actuality allow themselves to do horrific things such as join the Nazi party or another authoritarian group? Luigi Fabbri, an exile from Italian fascism, states that, "Fascism is not just another form of government which, like all others, uses violence. It is the most authoritarian and the most violent form of government imaginable. It represents the utmost glorification of the theory and practice of the principle of authority" ("Anarchism"). How could a large group of people gather under such horrific terms and allow such abuses to take place? I began to delve into these themes after careful analysis of the script. I found that many experiments and studies, especially after World War II, had been completed to

explore the mentality of people and their behavior in a group setting. It is through this insight that one can begin to understand the material Ionesco was dealing with in *Rhinoceros*.

Groupthink is a term used to describe the process of a group of people forming a decision together. Masses have the tendency to make possibly unwise or irrational decisions based on what other members of a group do or say. People tend to conform and allow their opinion to be dictated by the group's opinion and what they view to be the consensus of the group at large.

Ionesco depicts the groupthink mindset by repetitive speech patterns shown in the first act. The members of the village speak in rapid succession, not listening or thinking for themselves, but reacting and forming opinions based on the mindless sentences composed by other characters. This is also shown when the characters begin their transformation into the beastly animals. Once the high status members of the society decide to change, relinquishing themselves to brute and animalistic power, other members of the society decide to join as well.

Many studies have been done to test the groupthink mentality. In 1955, Solomon Asch published an experiment on social pressure. The study was set up as a vision test; a group of people entered a room and had to match two lines of a similar length. However, there was only one real participant; the rest were working with the experimenter. The participant was seated second to the last in the room, and as the experimenter ask each cohort which line matched which, they would unanimously state an obviously wrong choice.

Asch was surprised to see the participants agreed with the majority 37 percent of the time (Asch 33). After completing his experiment Asch states, "The tendency to conformity in our society is so strong that reasonably intelligent and well-meaning young people are willing to call white black. This is a matter of concern. It raises questions about our ways of education and about the values that guide our conduct" (Asch 34).

Another study, which tests not only the power of conformity but also authority, is the Milgram Experiment. Stanley Milgram administered a study in 1961, in which there were three roles: "the student," "the teacher," and "the authority." "The authority" was the experimenter, whose only sign of status was a white lab coat. "The student", in collusion with the experimenter, was sent into an adjoining room while the teacher and the experimenter sat together. The teacher was in charge of reading a pair of words to the student in a memory test. If the student did not correctly read back the pairs, the teacher was to administer, what he thought was, a high voltage shock. The shocks would be increased from 15 volts (marked "slight shock") to the limit of 450 volts (marked "XXX"). The administrator verbally encouraged the teacher and coaxed him to continue. Even with the sounds of the student's screams and pounding on the walls, 65 percent of the teachers would administer the shocks all the way to 450 volts. Not a single person stopped before 300 volts (Milgram 376). "I observed a mature and initially poised businessman enter the laboratory smiling and confident. Within twenty minutes he was reduced to a twitching, stuttering wreck, who was rapidly

approaching nervous collapse. He constantly pulled on his ear lobe, and twisted his hands. At one point he pushed his fist into his forehead and muttered, 'Oh God, lets stop it'. And yet he continued to respond to every word of the experimenter, and obeyed to the end" (Milgram 377). The pressure to conform under authority proved to lead even the most respected members of society to tasks they would never ordinarily dream of capitulating to.

The themes I wanted to focus on in *Rhinoceros* aren't solely about faraway governments or situations found in history books. As shown by the tests, conformity and group pressure from society are constants. Most people know about being an outsider; all one has to do is attend a public middle school to see such mindsets in action. The pressures of conformity can be found in a variety of situations, not all with violent, negative connotations. For example, ways of dress, speech patterns, and other cultural trends tend to be slowly accepted by the masses. However, this same conformist mindset can carry over to groups of people validating violent behaviors, from hazing to bullying.

When deciding to produce or direct a play, I believe that it is vital to analyze it is important to produce such a piece at that present moment in time, why it is current, why its message needs to be seen now. *Rhinoceros* is the perfect piece to do at the onset of graduation from college. Going into the world, one has to be vigilant about the choices one is making, and whether or not they are healthy for oneself. What are you willing to do to make money?

Who are you willing to align yourself with to help you in society or at work?

What are you willing to do to get the job? One has to be aware and take care that their options are fully analyzed and are theirs alone, that they aren't making hasty decisions based on what is popular by the society as a whole.

Many times what is accepted and held as popular can be unhealthy.

Personally, going into the entertainment business, I will be bombarded with such choices. It is being aware that I can take the first steps in creating a healthy lifestyle for myself. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* is about making people aware.

The first step in directing a show, after choosing a script and careful analysis, is casting the actors. Casting is one of the most important things a director will do. With the correct actors, or actors who can take direction and are open to the process, the show can come together smoothly. When looking for a cast, I wanted to make sure I collected a group of people who would be willing to delve into the text, and be able to hold and enjoy intelligent conversations about it. I also wanted to gather a group of people who were down to earth, and could enjoy spending time with each other. Most important was to have a group of people who would foster an environment of fun and experimentation. This was my first directing experience; I wanted to make sure, if nothing else, the time spent was enjoyable.

The casting experience was interesting. The Syracuse Drama Department does all of the casting for an upcoming semester on one day, with all of the directors, faculty and students, in one room. The students auditioned

for the shows with a numerical system, ranking what they are most interested in, to shows they would not want to be considered for. This process puts quite a bit of stress on the acting students, and the atmosphere within the department is highly charged. As a designer, I was always on the outside of this process, having my projects assigned from the design professors well in advance. As a director, I was in the middle of the commotion. I tried to stay away from casting actors who were displaying a sense of crisis and fuss about the process, both in the audition room and out. Again, I wanted to create an atmosphere of ease and enjoyment with my cast; high-strung personalities would not fit in.

The designers for the production were the next to get in on the process. The visual concept was to create a setting that was timeless, almost post-apocalypse, using a minimalist motif. I wanted to create a setting where it was possible for people to turn to violent, altered states (namely, turning into rhinoceroses). This is not an environment that is open, artistic, and forgiving. This is an environment where people are holding in their emotions, are stifled without outlets, and are driven apart from each other. This is a depressed environment that would be ripe for an authoritarian government to step in and take charge, claiming to have answers to change the current state of the society. George Orwell's *1984*, as well as the movie *Brazil*, became inspirations.

I chose designers that I was comfortable with, as well as designers whose work I most respected and who, I thought, could best create the world I

envisioned. Hannah Joy Hopkins became the set designer; Bethany Richards created the costumes, Jason Read the lighting. Taline Alexander would be fashioning the masks, and Jason Shelton would be designing the sound.

Through numerous meetings, the team came together to create a design that would best suit the needs of the play and the overall concept. The set would be created with multiple-level painters scaffolding; this would also create interesting levels and playing spaces for the actors. Costumes would combine the innocence and narrow-cut suits of the 1950s, along with touches of modern style. The look would be fairly monochromatic; nothing in the world would be too flashy or bright. The lighting would be very direct and a bit harsh, the painters scaffolding was used to the advantage of the lighting designer by positioning the fixtures in such a way that it would create interesting patterns and cast shadows. The sound of the show would use many natural reverberations of dumb beats and white noise. Sounds were also of importance to create the off-stage rhinos during a stampede; they would be as dark and terrifying as possible. After the actors turned into the violent rhinos, they are seen again on the set, on various levels of the painters scaffolding, always watching the action of the play, aware, in a “big brother” sort of way. It was during this time that they would be fashioned with rhinoceros masks.

Rehearsals began on March 21, 2006. The cast of thirteen gathered to hear the opening remarks from the stage manager, the designers, who gave a brief presentation on the world that was to be created, and myself. The cast then read through the entire script for the first time. Before the end of the

evening, I broke the cast members into pairs to look up topics that would help drive conversation about the themes of the play, as follows: *Rhinoceros* (general information, past reviews, etc.), Ionesco, fascism, existentialism, groupthink, Asch experiment, and the Milgram experiment.

The following day the cast gathered again as a whole to discuss the topics assigned. It was after the discussion that I realized just how amazing this rehearsal process was going to be. All of the company was engaged, telling stories about being bullied in their pasts and moments when they stood up alone for what they believed in. People were aghast to learn of the psychological experiments; I brought in a student studying psychology to delve into the topics. It truly was a rewarding day, and I was quite proud to be leading and participating in such an amazing discussion amongst my peers.

I brought in a musical theater student with experience in movement to come in and talk to the cast about iconic, animalistic movements. The actors were to find a movement they could use in moments of deep frustration, to show the violence of a rhinoceros within him or her self. My conceptual goal was to depict the characters having solely a physical transformation into rhinoceroses, the violence suppressed within them at all times. Berenger had the true transformation; his transformation was in complete emotional and ideological mentality.

The rehearsal process was then broken up into scenes, five to ten pages long, to block the movement of the characters. The actors were still using their scripts at this time; the goal was to get them on their feet, making

beginning discoveries about their characters. Each scene was blocked and rehearsed. After the actors were off book completely, with the script memorized, further information was filled in about their characters. Movement was blocked more specifically and adjustments were given. Rehearsals continued Tuesday through Friday from 6:30 to 10:30 pm, and Saturday and Sunday 11:00 am to 5:00 pm. The first preview will be on May 4, 2006, and with performances on May 5, at 8 o'clock and on May 6, at 2 o'clock and 8 o'clock.

It has been through this directorial process that I have developed as a conceptual thinker, visualizing and planning a complete script. I have improved as a leader, and the articulation of ideas with various personalities has been achieved. I believe that the themes of this great play *Rhinoceros*, written by Eugene Ionesco, are of the utmost importance, and I hope to have communicated to their fullest extent. It is my hope that all who worked on and saw a performance of this show were affected and able to take away something that would carry with them in their every day lives. Personally, it was truly a great and growing experience.

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Structural Play Analysis

Genre:

Although the protagonist goes through a reversal at the end of this absurdist play, I would classify it as a comedy with serious undertones. Stealing Beckett's genre classification for *Waiting for Godot*, I believe *Rhinoceros* is a tragicomedy. Berenger decides that he will care about the rhino transformations and fight against them, standing up for mankind (his reversal). The transformation of Jean can be very dark, but the play would be lacking if one overlooks the comedic nature of it.

Major Dramatic Question:

During the first part of the play the audience has general questions about the rhinos: who, what, and why. The play's major dramatic question evolves into if anyone will unite, focus, and take action against the destructive animals. Specifically, will our protagonist, Berenger, do anything to stop them?

Will Berenger stop being apathetic and do something about the rhinos?

Attack:

Discovering the MDQ takes place throughout the course of the play. However, I need to pinpoint a definitive attack. I believe when we first get to see just how apathetic Berenger is in the café scene on page 16 during his monologue:

"...why go on at me just because some wretched perissodactyle happens to pass by. A stupid quadruped not worth talking about. And ferocious into the bargain. And which has already disappeared, which doesn't exist any longer. We're not going to bother about some animal that doesn't exist. Let's talk about something else, Jean."

Crisis:

The crisis takes place on page 105; Berenger is yelling at Daisy when she is leaving to become a rhinoceros. One knows the importance Daisy had on Berenger's life; she was the only person he truly cared about. The only thing he cared about, their love, is now gone. One knows that the question

will now be answered; it is now or never. Will Berenger follow his love and turn into a beast or will he stand up to the evil, even if he must do it alone?

Resolution:

Berenger's final monologue of the play holds the resolution. Berenger will decide to stand against the rhinos stating, "I will not capitulate!"

Spine:

To choose to be influenced by the "herd" or by your own beliefs

Rhinoceros is composed of a series of "logical debates," which are completely absurd. However, people listen and believe such nonsense. People, although aghast by the rhinos at the beginning of the play, start being influenced by the group mentality and succumb. What will one give to belong? Berenger is against the violent trend, but he does nothing until the end of the play to stop it. At this point he is the last man standing and has made his decision, however, the trend is now out of control. This play looks at the absurdity of human nature and how people tend to seek meaning in the absurdity of existence when there is none.

Action:

A town is hit by a series of rhinoceros sightings. The town's people choose to turn into rhinos. Berenger, the apathetic protagonist, decides to stand against the trend. Philosophical debates are woven throughout the text, along with depictions of the absurdity of men and their attempts at a logical life.

Thesis:

The herd mentality can bring about destruction, one must make a conscious stand or will easily be influenced by society.

Theme:

Stand up for your beliefs; think about your decisions and don't be rhinos...I mean sheep.