



Rhinoceros

Background Pack

Contents

About the production	2
Synopsis of the play	3
About the writer:	
Eugene Ionesco	5
Ionesco and Berenger	6
Ionesco on theatre	7
About the play:	
Writing the play	8
Ionesco on <i>Rhinoceros</i>	9
Historical background	10
Rehearsal diary	11
A writer's view	15
Interviews:	
Dominic Cooke	16
Benedict Cumberbatch	18
Zawe Ashton	20
Classroom activities:	
Writing activities	22
Design challenge	24
Movement exercises	25
Useful links	27





About the production

Housewife	JACQUELINE DEFFERARY
Grocer Woman / Madame Boeuf	ALWYNE TAYLOR
Jean	JASPER BRITTON
Berenger	BENEDICT CUMBERBATCH
Waitress	CLAIRE PREMPEH
Grocer / Dudard	PAUL CHAHIDI
Old Gentleman / Papillon	GRAHAM TURNER
Logician	MICHAEL BEGLEY
Cafe Boss / Fireman	DAVID HINTON
Daisy	ZAWA ASHTON
Botard	LLOYD HUTCHINSON
Director	DOMINIC COOKE
Designer	ANTHONY WARD
Lighting Designer	JOHANNA TOWN
Sound Designer	IAN DICKINSON
Composer	GARY YERSON
Movement Director	SUE LEFTON
Assistant Director	LYNDSEY TURNER
Casting Director	AMY BALL
Production Manager	PAUL HANDLEY
Stage Manager	BA PENNEY
Deputy Stage Manager	TAMARA ALBACHARI
Assistant Stage Manager	CHARLOTTE NEWELL
Costume Supervisor	IONA KENRICK

First performance at Royal Court Theatre on 21 September 2007





Synopsis of the play

Act I

Rhinoceros begins in a small town square where Jean, a refined young man, meets his semi-alcoholic and fully apathetic friend, Berenger, for a drink. Jean reprimands Berenger for his drinking habits and his aimlessness. Soon, a rhinoceros runs through the square, shocking all the townspeople with the exception of the indifferent Berenger. Jean lectures Berenger about willpower while a Logician explains the concept of a syllogism to an old man. Berenger tells Jean that he has a crush on Daisy, a typist at his office, but worries that she favours Dudard, an up-and-coming co-worker. Jean recommends willpower and cultural self-improvement to garner Daisy's affections. Another rhino rushes by and tramples a cat. The townspeople debate whether or not it was the same rhino and what breed it was. Berenger and Jean get in a fight over the physical specifics of the rhino, and Jean storms off after calling Berenger a drunkard. The townspeople ask the Logician to clear up confusion. The townspeople vow to stop the rhinos. Berenger expresses remorse for fighting with Jean, then says he's too upset to culture himself as planned and instead drinks.

Act 2, Scene I

In Berenger's office, Daisy and Dudard argue with Botard, a sceptic who doesn't believe in the rhinos. Berenger arrives late, but Daisy sneaks him in. The employees ask Berenger if he saw the rhino. Botard claims the illusory appearance of the rhino is an example of "collective psychosis." They return to work, proof-reading law proposals, and wonder where co-worker Mr. Boeuf is. Mrs. Boeuf rushes in and says her husband is sick and will be back in a few days. She tells them that she was just chased by a rhino, which is now downstairs. The rhino crushes the staircase it tries to ascend, stranding the workers. Mrs. Boeuf recognizes the rhino as her husband. Daisy telephones the fire station to rescue them. The men give Mrs. Boeuf practical advice for dealing with this setback, but she is too devoted to her rhino-husband and vows to stay with him. She jumps down to the ground floor and rides off on his back. More rhinos are reported in the town. The firemen arrive to help them out the window. Botard vows he'll solve the rhino-riddle. Berenger passes on an offer to drink with Dudard so he can visit Jean.



Act 2, Scene 2

Jean coughs in bed at home. Berenger visits and apologizes for their argument the previous day. Jean's voice grows more hoarse, a bump on his nose continues to grow, and his skin gets greener by the moment. Berenger informs him of Mr. Boeuf's transformation, which Jean applauds. He moves in and out of the bathroom, each time appearing and sounding more like a rhino. He tries to run down Berenger, apologizes, and runs into the bathroom. Berenger is about to escape, but follows Jean into the bathroom to help him. Off-stage in the bathroom, Jean attacks Berenger. Berenger escapes and closes the bathroom door behind him (but is pierced by a rhino horn) as Jean, now a full-blown rhino, tries to break free. Berenger alerts the tenants in the building to the rhino's presence in the building, but everyone else has transformed as well. Berenger looks out the window, where a herd of rhinos march. The bathroom door is on the verge of breaking.

Act 3

Berenger wakes up from a nightmare in his room and inspects himself for any signs of rhinoceritis. Dudard visits and they discuss Jean's transformation. Dudard considers the metamorphoses natural, while Berenger continues to find them abnormal. A herd of rhinos passes and Berenger vows not to become one as well. Daisy visits Berenger, which makes Dudard jealous. Daisy appears not to care too deeply about the epidemic. She informs them that Botard has turned into a rhinoceros. Berenger can't believe it, but then later rationalizes it. They start to have lunch, but are interrupted by a crumbling wall outside. The fire station has been destroyed, and the firemen have turned into rhinos. Dudard leaves; he wants to experience the epidemic first-hand. Berenger tries to stop him, but Daisy lets him go. Dudard soon turns into a rhino outside. Daisy reminds Berenger that they have no right to interfere in other's lives. She pours some brandy for Berenger and removes his bandage — still no signs of a transformation. The phone rings, but they hear only rhino trumpeting on the line. They turn to the radio for help, but the rhinos have taken that over, as well.

Daisy believes they must adapt to their new neighbours, but Berenger proposes they regenerate the human race, like Adam and Eve. The noise of the rhinos becomes more musical to Daisy, though Berenger still finds it savage and argues with her. Daisy breaks up with him and leaves. Berenger barricades his room and plugs his ears. He inspects photographs and cannot recognize any of his former friends — but he does identify himself. He envies the bodies of the rhinos, but at the brink of desperation, he nevertheless decides that he will fight the rhinos.



Eugene Ionesco

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|-------------|--|-------------|---|
| 1909 | Eugen Ionescu born in Slatina, Romania, to a Romanian father and a mother of French heritage | 1945 | Ionesco moves back to Paris where he works as a proof reader in a large publishing house, just as Berenger does in the play |
| 1911 | When Ionesco was 18 months old, his family settle in Paris | 1948 | Ionesco writes his first play, <i>The Bald Prima Donna</i> , which is performed at a small Parisian theatre in 1950 to disastrous reviews |
| 1916 | Ionesco's father returns to Romania, just as the country enters the First World War. Ionesco hears nothing of his father until the end of the war: the family assume that he died at the front | 1958 | By now, Ionesco had written several plays, which had been attacked by British theatre critic, Kenneth Tynan. Ionesco defended his vision of the theatre in a virulent polemic |
| 1919 | Ionesco stars writing plays which end with the children smashing furniture and crockery and throwing their parents out of the window | 1959 | Ionesco writes <i>Rhinoceros</i> . The play is performed in a large Parisian theatre to excellent reviews |
| 1920 | Ionesco learns that his father is alive, but that he has divorced his mother (without even telling her), gained custody of the children and has remarried | 1970 | Ionesco is made a member of the Académie française |
| 1922 | Ionesco moves to Romania to live with his father | 1994 | Ionesco dies and is buried in the Montparnasse Cemetery in Paris. The inscription on his headstone reads: "Pray to the I-don't-know-who: Jesus Christ, I hope" |
| 1926 | Ionesco moves in with his mother after a violent row with his father about the nature of authority | | |
| 1928 | Ionesco begins writing poetry | | |
| 1935 | Ionesco is writing regular book reviews in a variety of Romanian journals | | |
| 1936 | Ionesco marries Rodica Burileanu: his mother dies the same year | | |
| 1938 | Ionesco returns to France to write a doctoral thesis on sin and death in French poetry | | |
| 1939 | Ionesco and his family settle in Romania where he witnesses several friends become Nazi sympathizers | | |



Ionesco and Berenger

When asked whether Berenger, the central character in *Rhinoceros*, was supposed to be taken as a dramatic representation of Ionesco himself, the writer answered coyly “perhaps there’s some resemblance there”. Even the most cursory glance at Ionesco’s biography reveals striking similarities between the playwright and the character who would go on to intrigue and infuriate audiences across the globe.

Between 1948 and 1955, Ionesco worked as a proofreader in the offices of a publishing company which specialised in law books. Like Ionesco, Berenger rails against ideologies, group-think and political slogans, fearing the might of the rhinoceroses and vowing to fight them until the end. But for all of his protestations, Berenger is far from heroic: instead he is almost comically naïve, a meek apologetic clerk who “defies totalitarian hysteria and refuses to become part of the monstrous phenomenon of massification”.

A character called Berenger appears in four of Ionesco’s plays: *Rhinoceros*, *The Killer*, *Exit the King* and *A Stroll in the Air*. The character was ‘born’ in *The Killer*: although he loses his life at the end of that play, he rises again in *Rhinoceros*. In *Exit the King* Berenger is a tragicomic sovereign, a petit bourgeois tyrant who refuses to die without some insight into the meaning of death. In *A Stroll in the Air* Berenger, now a writer, returns from outer space with the sad report that the worlds beyond offer no better hope than man’s miserable lot here. From one play to the next, Berenger remains true to himself, a recognizable Ionesco type.

But Ionesco himself was keen to show that Berenger is more than merely “a specialist in survival”. The playwright sees in Berenger a ‘modern man’, a character seeking spiritual vitality and freedom of choice, resistant to tyranny and repelled by conformity:

Berenger is, I hope, above all a character. And if he is time-resistant, it will be because he has proved himself as a character; he should, if he has any real worth, survive even after his ‘message’ has become outdated. Poetically, it is not his thought but his passion and his imaginative life that will matter, for his message could quite as well be delivered now by a journalist, a philosopher or a moralist

Berenger may seem passive, but his very reluctance to make decisions, to be a leader, protects him from getting involved in ideological struggle that Ionesco dramatises in *Rhinoceros*. Indeed, his indecision and empathy eventually become the source of a kind of strength.



Ionesco on theatre

Ionesco wrote his first play, *The Bald Prima Donna*, in 1948. He gave his early works for theatre the title *anti-pièce* (anti-plays): this was an attempt to suggest a practical protest against all current forms of theatre, rather than a serious attempt to propose a 'new' theatre. Ionesco disliked conventional French drama because of its refusal to embrace the subconscious or evoke an imaginative truth:

Bourgeois drama is magic drama, spellbinding, drama that asks the audience to identify itself with the heroes of the play, drama of participation. Anti-bourgeois drama is a drama of non-participation. A bourgeois public falls into the trap.

The writer claimed that he hated going to the theatre as a child because it gave him "no pleasure or feeling of participation". In particular, felt embarrassed by the prevailing style of acting popular in the post-war French theatre, claiming "acting is a sort of exhibitionism I do not like".

Ionesco's first plays could have been written to be performed by puppets. The words he used were deliberately divested of meaning and his characters were emptied of psychology. He later admitted that these plays were written as pages of dialogue, with no visualisation of the room in which the action might take place. For this reason, critics and scholars interpreted his works as 'absurdist', and he was repeatedly reproached for failing to include a social, Marxist or Brechtian message in his plays. Ionesco's response was characteristically economic: "I believe that the writer shouldn't deliver messages because he isn't a postman".

Ionesco was profoundly uncomfortable with the term 'absurdism': "I find that the name Theatre of the Absurd which has been glued on to us is absolutely meaningless — all theatre is absurd." However, the writer remained fascinated by the artificiality of theatre and its potential to present a distorted or subjective version of reality:

It was not for me to conceal the devices of the theatre, but rather make them still more evident, deliberately obvious, go all out for caricature and the grotesque, way beyond the pale irony of witty drawing room comedies.

Gradually, Ionesco came to realise that "dialogue is only a small part of a play". *Rhinoceros* marks a real development in his style as a dramatist: for perhaps the first time, Ionesco writes characters with a plausible psychology, and uses the conventions of the traditional theatre to tell a story about protest and conformity.



Writing the play

Rhinoceros was first written as a short story, published in 1957 in a volume called *The Colonel's Daughter*, before being adapted into a three act play. Both the play and the story that acted as its prototype operate on a highly metaphorical level. Although Ionesco refused to identify the animals in his play as either Fascist or Communist, claiming that they represent authority in all of its horrific glory, the playwright's own diary entries provide an interesting insight into the origins of *Rhinoceros*:

We must go back to the time when I was a young man in Romania. I was amazed to witness the total conversation to fascism of everyone around me. It did not happen overnight of course; it was a gradual process. Little by little, everyone – the professional men, the intellectuals, the so-called liberals – found sufficient reason to join the party in power. You would run into an old friend, and all of a sudden, under your very eyes, he would begin to change. It was as if his gloves became paws, his shoes hoofs. You could no longer talk intelligently with him for he was not a rational human being ... I often felt that I was the last human being left in the world, among creatures of some other genus. Not that I belonged to a superior kind, or race, but that a strange responsibility had befallen me, the most insignificant of creatures, that of remaining who I was, a human ... In my early journal entries, written when I was still in Romania, I said that all around me men were metamorphosed into beasts, rhinoceroses. I forgot these notes, jotted down in an old notebook. After I completed the short story on which the play is based, and then this play, I happened to come across this ancient entry. I was astounded to discover that the central image had come to me in 1940.

The diary entry to which Ionesco refers, reads: "The Police are rhinoceroses. The Magistrates are rhinoceroses. You are the only man among the rhinoceroses. The rhinoceroses ask themselves how the world can have been run by mane. You ask yourself: is it true the world once was run by men".

Some years before writing *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco read the diaries of writer Denis de Rougemont, who was living in Nuremberg during 1936. The diaries describe the "delirium which electrified him" as he was lured into a Nazi rally attended by Hitler. His conclusion: "I am alone and they are all together."



Ionesco on *Rhinoceros*

On rhinoceritis

“People always wish me to spell out whether I mean the rhinos to be fascists or communists. Rhinoceritis is not an illness of the Right or the Left; it cannot be contained within geo-political borders. Nor is it characteristic of a social class. It is the malady of conformity which knows no bounds, no boundaries.”

On Nazism

“*Rhinoceros* is certainly an anti-Nazi play, yet it is also and mainly an attack on collective hysteria and the epidemics that lurk beneath the surface of reason and ideas but are none the less serious collective diseases passed off as ideologies.”

On humanity

“Berenger finds himself alone in a dehumanised world where each person tried to be just like all the others. It’s just because they all tried to be like each other that they became dehumanised, or rather depersonalised, which is after all the same thing.”

On rhinoceroses

“They fanatics have the same mixture of ingenuousness and ferocity. They would kill you without a qualm if you did not think as they do. And in the last quarter of this century history has given us clear proof that people transformed in this way are not just *like*, but truly *become* rhinoceroses.”

On conformism

“One of the great critics in New York complains that, after destroying one conformism, I put nothing else in its place, leaving him and the audience in a vacuum. That is exactly what I wanted to do. A free man should pull himself out of vacuity on his own, by his own efforts and not by the efforts of other people.”

On genre

“I have read the American critics on the play and noticed that everyone agreed the play was funny. Well, it isn’t. Although it is a farce, it is above all a tragedy.”

On satire

“Strictly speaking my play is not even a satire: it is a fairly objective description of the growth of fanaticism, of the birth of a totalitarianism that grows, propagates, conquers and transforms a whole world and, naturally, being totalitarian transforms it totally.”



Historical background

Living in Romania at the outbreak of the Second World War, Ionesco would have witnessed the spread of Nazi ideology throughout parts of Europe. He wrote of the terror of watching his liberal intellectual friends becoming Nazi sympathizers, and of the persecution his Jewish friends suffered under the wave of anti-Semitism which spread throughout Romania.

Each of the characters in the play who contracts rhinocertis has a reason that echoes the rationales or excuses of various groups who became Fascists. Jean is a zealous conformist who speaks and thinks only in platitudes. Botard is an ideologue, a left-wing activist who sees conspiracies everywhere and claims to know the secret behind the sudden appearance of rhinoceroses. Dudard represents the type of intellectual for whom to understand is to justify. Daisy and Papillon are ordinary citizens who go along with the rhinoceroses because everyone else is doing it or because they are afraid.

Ionesco was particularly suspicious of revolutionaries, writing that “as soon as the truth for which they live their lives is officially accepted, there are no more heroes, only bureaucrats, craven and cautious as befits their function”. The transformations that Ionesco dramatizes throughout the second part of *Rhinoceros* can be read as a comment on the dominant political ideologies of the day. The playwright wrote that “wars, uprisings, pogroms, collective frenzies and collective crimes, tyrannies and oppressions” are “just some aspects of the revelation of our monstrousness”. Indeed the rhinoceroses green skins are a reminder of the green shirts worn by the Iron Guard legionnaires — the Romanian ultra-nationalist Fascist party — a point which didn’t go unnoticed when the play was performed in Romania in 1964. Parisian audiences, however, would have been reminded of the green uniforms worn by the Nazi occupiers in 1940.

While Ionesco’s refusal to ally himself with a particular political critique of Nazism infuriated his critics, the writer continued to maintain that absolutist ideologies of all types should be feared and despised: Ionesco: “the Little Red Book is even worse than *Mein Kampf*. To me it seems there’s a certain diabolical aggressiveness, a fanaticism which just changes its banner.” Instead of exposing a specific political system, Ionesco chose instead to make a critique of a type of individual who blindly accepts authority without challenging it: “for me the petit bourgeois is just a man of slogans, who no longer thinks for himself but repeats the truths that others have impressed upon him ready-made and therefore lifeless. In short, the bourgeois is a manipulated man”.



Rehearsal diary

Week 1

Rehearsals begin with a question from the play's director, Dominic Cooke: has *Rhinoceros* been "justly neglected" since its first major London production? What might the play mean for a contemporary audience? Dominic swiftly bans the word 'absurd' from rehearsals. The phrase 'Theatre of the Absurd' was coined in the 1960s to describe a movement in drama that tended towards non-linear plots, minimal character psychology and unexpected theatrical metaphors. But while absurdism is based on the notion that life is meaningless, *Rhinoceros* ends with a man vowing to "take on the whole wide world" in his struggle against conformity. Ionesco's play, Dominic argues, is essentially humanist in conception – it might begin in despair but it ends by proclaiming the "value of human life".

We begin work on the play by giving each scene a title, before dividing the scenes into smaller units. Dominic challenges the actors to describe what their characters are doing in each unit by using a transitive verb, for example, 'Berenger *provokes* Jean' or 'Daisy *calms* the Housewife'. By being precise about the choice of verb, and making sure that each of the verbs is transitive, the acting becomes more dynamic and exciting. After the 'units' have been named, and the actors have defined what their characters are doing to each other, we practice each of the units in turn, using these new 'objectives'.

During the first week of rehearsals, Dominic invites a series of experts into the rehearsal room to talk to the actors about various aspects of the play. John Drury, an expert on crowd behaviour argues that crowds aren't necessarily 'irrational' in nature. We learn that communities, such as the town in Ionesco's play, share much in common with crowds. Most people implicitly trust other members of their community: if our neighbours become rhinoceroses, we are likely to follow.

The week ends with a trip to Colchester Zoo where the actors meet Flossie, Emily, Cynthia and Simba, the zoo's four white rhinos. We learn that rhinos are capable of charging at up to 45mph, that they are herbivores and that they communicate by making a high-pitched squeaking noise (nothing like the "trumpeting" that Ionesco describes in the stage directions). By the end of the day, the whole company has a much more vivid understanding of what it might mean to turn into a rhinoceros.



Week 2

Our second week of rehearsals begins with a visit from Sue Lefton, the show's movement director. After some gentle warm ups, Sue begins to introduce the company to the way in which rhinoceroses move, through exercises which focus on the 'breath' of the animal. Very gradually, the actors start experimenting with rhinos at rest, asleep and at play. Dominic wants us to find a "language of movement" that expresses something essential about the animals without the actors "actually trying to *be* rhinoceroses". When Sue asks the actors to inhabit a formal French cafe as if they were half human, half rhino, the results are both funny and terrifying.

Further movement work focuses on formal French behaviour. Sue asks the actors to walk around the room in rigid straight lines before greeting each other with the word 'bonjour'. The actors use the greeting as a formal exchange rather than an expression of genuine delight. We set up a cafe within the rehearsal room: the actors arrive in the cafe one by one, establishing an activity and watching each other's movements. We explore the way in which the cafe's customers react to 'outsiders' or individuals who don't conform to the social norms of the town.

We begin to get the play 'on its feet'. Dominic asks the actors to identify their 'wants' or 'objectives' in each of the scenes, asking "what would your character *love* to happen by the end of the scene?". By being specific about the characters' 'wants', the actors get a clear sense of what is at stake in each scene. We practice each scene in the space and draw out some of the psychological detail of the writing. The language of Martin Crimp's translation is really coming alive – the play feels supple, multi-faceted and highly relevant.

We mock up a small cafe in the rehearsal room, and the rehearsal of Act 1 gets underway. Dominic asks the actors to identify their 'wants' or 'objectives' in each of the scenes, asking "what would your character *love* to happen by the end of the scene?". By being specific about the characters' 'wants', the actors get a clear sense of what is at stake in each scene. The language of Martin Crimp's translation is really coming alive – the play feels supple, multi-faceted and highly relevant.

Sue, the show's Movement Director, asks the actors to walk around the room, when she bangs a drum, the actors form the largest circle they can while keeping their movement fluid and effortless. The actors practice walking together in the same rhythms and patterns until group movement becomes second nature. Dominic applies the principle of this group movement to the entrance of the first rhinoceros.



Week 3

We begin the week by looking at the ‘transformation scene’, in which Jean, Berenger’s best friend, turns into a rhinoceros. Jasper and Benedict, the two actors playing Jean and Berenger, discuss what their characters want in the scene. We practice the scene without any physical or vocal reference to rhinocification in the hope of finding the genuine concern that Berenger has for his friend, as well as Jean’s alarm at what is happening to his body. We find a way of playing Jean as a man who “hates to be ill, hates being vulnerable or weak”. The challenge with this scene is, Dominic speculates, “not playing the final transformation too early” – neither Jean nor Berenger (nor, crucially, the audience) should know that, by the end of Act 2, Jean will have transformed into an animal.

We move on to the office scene, in which a staircase is destroyed by a rampaging rhinoceros. Ionesco himself worked as a proof reader in an administrative publishing house – the office politics, grudges, relationships and rituals in this scene are drawn with remarkable accuracy. In particular, the section of the play in which Berenger and his colleague Boeuf get down to the business of correcting proofs is a depressingly precise recreation of office life. Dominic asks the actors to complete the sentence “work is ...” as their characters would: this helps the actors to identify their characters’ attitudes towards office life. Each character then begins ‘work’ informed by the sentence they have formulated (e.g. ‘work is boring’, ‘work is inspiring’, ‘work is satisfying’). The result is an office scene which feels specific, detailed and full of life.

Week 4

The rhino suit has finally been delivered to the Royal Court – two members of the production team volunteer to try it out and the results are staggering. The ‘fake’ rhino could absolutely pass for the real thing. But because the suit is too big to fit through the doors of the rehearsal room, we’ll have to set up some separate rhino calls for the actors to practice walking in the suit. Meanwhile, a specialist props maker has begun work on sculpting the rhinoceros heads that the actors will wear once they’ve turned into animals. In the rehearsal room, we continue to work on the play’s key transformation scene. Jasper, the actors who plays Jean, practices the scene removing any physical or vocal reference to rhinoceroses. The result is a scene in which Jean’s transformation into a rhino comes as a surprise, both to him and to his friend Berenger. During the rehearsal, Dominic (the play’s director) suggests that Jasper completes his transformation into a rhinoceros by smashing up the set, first crashing into a chair, then upending a bed. We’ve already destroyed a table during a particularly energetic rehearsal, but Jasper throws himself into the destruction with real vigour and the result is terrifying.



Week 5

We rehearse the final scene of the play in which Berenger and Daisy attempt to pledge their love to one another while the rhinoceroses gather around their apartment. During the course of the scene, Daisy and Berenger begin to realise that they are the only human beings left on earth, as rhinoceroses invade their domestic bliss. The scene is emotionally demanding and difficult to place, given that it's hard to find a 'real life' parallel to the situation in which the two characters find themselves. Dominic suggests that the actors engage imaginatively with the reality faced by the Germans as the Nazis began to take power in the 1930s. Ionesco lived through the Second World War (indeed, his father was part of a Fascist movement in his native Romania), and the play is very much a response to his experience of watching his friends become Nazi sympathisers. This particular point of concentration really helps the actors to find a realistic reaction to the events of the scene (rhinoceroses on the radio, rhinoceroses on the phone, and rhinoceroses stampeding through the apartment block).

The last moments of the play, in which Berenger decides to 'take arms' against the rhinos, elicit a lot of discussion because of the ambiguity of Ionesco's writing. If Berenger is the last man alive, how much longer can he hold out? Now we've worked through the entire play, identifying the characters' objectives and examining the 'action' of each scene, we return to Act I and begin to run sections of the play. The play's first scene 'reads' differently now we all know *Rhinoceros* a little better – the quality of acting we have achieved is richer and deeper now that it's informed by a clearer understanding of the journeys which the characters undertake.



A writer's view

Elinor Cook, a writer whose work has been performed as part of the Royal Court's Young Writers' Festival, observed the rehearsals for *Rhinoceros*. Here she describes what she saw.

As someone who hopes to be a playwright one day, the opportunity to spend so much time inside the head of another has been an exciting, and occasionally disturbing, experience. It has forced me to ask some uncomfortable questions about my own writing, and, more broadly, to ask questions about the society we live in, and the way it's currently reflected on stage.

Ionesco was writing in direct response to something horrifying he had witnessed. It's larger-than-life and grimly funny, but it's also a raw, heart-felt response to the random cruelty of the world. Is the world we live in now any less cruel? Bearing in mind what is happening in Darfur, in Zimbabwe, in Iraq, I would say not. So why aren't we writing about it? Where is the burning desire to challenge audiences, change attitudes? It's a deeply-ingrained malaise that's infected our entire society. It's not that we're indifferent to the scenes of famine, violence and genocide that dance across our screen every day. It's simply that we've lost the belief that we can change them. We've slid into a state of dangerous complacency. Like Daisy, we want to protect our domestic idyll. Like Jean, we feel that if we honour our 'duty', that we are somehow doing enough. Like Dudard, we wear our tolerance and liberal values on our sleeves. But, Ionesco suggests, this makes us prime candidates for the curse of rhinoceritis and it's not a flattering depiction.

The moments of transformation, from human being to lumbering pachyderm, provoke a shudder of horror - one that initially took me by surprise. Rather naively, I was expecting something funny. It couldn't be further from it. There's a queasy inevitability to the way Berenger's closest friends and allies are seduced into their rhinocerototic conformity. Berenger's bewildered, uncomprehending sense of betrayal is terrible to watch. When I go to the theatre, it's those spine-tingling, hairs-standing-up moments that I'm longing for. They are sadly few and far between. But watching Dudard hurl a bed across the room is one of the most frightening things I've ever seen on stage. It's rare to encounter something so visceral, both in its alarming strangeness and its devastating logic. It's what all writers should aim to do to their audience.

There has been plenty of murmuring about how new writing for the theatre is too small, too inward-looking, too intimate. Initially, as a timid new writer starting out, my instinct was to defend these smaller stories, and of course there will always be a place for them. But being a part of *Rhinoceros* has inspired me to set a tentative foot outside my comfort zone. I want to tell bigger, bolder stories and generate a bit of spine-tingling myself. Hopefully, there'll be no more rhinoceritis for me.





Interview: Dominic Cooke

What made you want to direct *Rhinoceros*?

Part of it was to do with the play, and part of it was to do with the timing. I've been thinking of doing it for years—I really like the fact that the play explores how a person's identity is made up and how that relates to the world they are living in, how it's possible for a person to lose their sense of self when there's a pressure from a majority view around them. I thought it was also bold to use a such a metaphor and to extend it for that long. I also I didn't really know how to do it which is always a good reason to do a play. I'm trying, in my first season as Artistic Director , to go back to some of the early plays that plug into a different tradition of Royal Court plays, plays that aren't realistic or naturalistic.

Does the play still have a relevance in 2007?

We'll find out—and that's part of the exploration. We've resisted updating it because we thought that might limit that play's meaning, but I think that there is so much more in the play than just the idea of conformity or the idea of what the rhinoceroses represent. They were drawn from his own experience of the rise of the Nazis and from his own view that dogmatic systems of thought are dangerous, that the natural end of any system of thought is destruction. The things that he was dealing with would apply to our times in different ways. We've all obsessed with the end of the world at the moment—it's something that's appearing all over the culture and this is a play that deals with accommodation of extremism and turning a blind eye to potentially deadly forces. I think those things, in terms of an atmosphere, are very much around. Having worked on it now, we've discovered that the play is about more than that: it's a very personal play about Ionesco's relationship with his father, about the betrayal he experienced as a child, about alcohol and depression which is something that he himself experienced. The more I work with it, the more I'm convinced that it's a very personal play.

Ionesco has been criticised for being a writer of ideas. Has your experience of the play proved that theory wrong?

It's certainly tested it. There are points in the writing that become about the writer showing off but there are other parts of the play that have a very organic momentum. He's writing from personal



experience: he's writing about being an outsider, about needing a drink in order to survive, about working in a very dull office (something which he had direct experience of). I think the writer he'd like to be is not quite the writer that he actually was: he couldn't help but be quite personal in his writing. He's a very spontaneous writer: a lot of it is like a first draft that hasn't been revised, so you go through a scene and it will sustain, and then there will be glitches that make you wonder why something is there. But then he didn't really believe in logic, so applying logical processes to the play will always find a limit.

to be discovered. It's like a science fiction play: it's an idea of what might happen, or could happen, or could have happened. It takes a huge imaginative leap from everyone involved to make it credible, and I do think the credibility's important. The play gets harder as it goes on. The middle scenes are simpler: the scene in which Jean turns into a rhinoceros is so clearly charted, and the office world is so well observed. The first and last scenes are the hardest.

What are the challenges of directing this play?

I think that one of the challenges is trying to get beneath the clever, controlled quality of the writing to something much more felt (which I think is within the play). I think there's a challenge in realising the rhinoceroses. It's one thing realising the rhinoceroses on stage, but realising them offstage is very important. For the audience to buy into the play, because it's such an unlikely thing to be taken over by rhinoceroses, you have to create the possibility that there could be a herd of animals running through the town, using sound and light. You come up against questions about realism—how real should you be? How much should you gesture something? That's all





Interview: Benedict Cumberbatch

How has the research you have conducted helped you to understand more about the play and your character?

If you look at Ionesco's own life, you find a correlation between what he experienced and the character he wrote: they were both isolated, they both feel a deep sense of despair. Ionesco had a very oppressive father, he was an immigrant in two countries, and I think because of that he knew what it was like to be an outsider (he was viewed as a rather alien Eastern European type in France). They were both drinkers, they're both riddled with melancholy and they both feel a sense of distance from the world that they're trying to inhabit without really knowing why. The play finds a parallel in Vichy France and in the Nazi occupation which the French people experienced: the total isolation brought about by everyone falling into a goosetep and a dogma and a way of being that is incomprehensible to Berenger. And that goes beyond research—everyone can empathise with the feeling of being alone, or imagining that they are the only person who feels something, whether it's making a comment in class then feeling like an idiot or taking a conviction that you hold into another group and being looked at in a strange way. The idea of isolation in the play is pretty much universal. More and more, we're discovering that the world of the play isn't absurd at all: Ionesco creates a very ordinary world in which a unique and extraordinary thing happens. Whatever Ionesco experienced during the Second World War must have seemed equally as surreal as rhinoceroses running through a town square. That's why we're trying to play the scenes as normally as possible, to create real dilemmas happening to real people.

Do you feel that Berenger is heroic?

At the beginning of the play, Berenger really doesn't seem like much of a hero: he's an unlikely hero, an accidental hero. But the way in which he stands up and resists everything that's going on around him is heroic. For someone to take a stand when others are surrendering to a majority view is almost impossible to understand. I would find it almost impossible—I'd probably try and find an intellectual justification which helped me to ignore it. It's easy to be cynical and difficult to disrupt the status quo. Berenger becomes utterly isolated from all the people he loves and respects. For someone to abandon logic and to operate from pure feeling is heroic. To die for a cause you believe in is heroic, and in that sense, by the end of the play, Berenger is definitely a hero.





Why doesn't Berenger turn into a rhinoceros?

He is very apathetic. Throughout the play, though, his need is to belong (which should really make him a front runner for rhinocification). But he also has an anxiety which he's unable to articulate, which results in low self esteem and alcohol abuse. He doesn't think that he's good enough for the people he loves or respects. Because he has a deep rooted need to question his existence, he can't find an immediate way to identify with these rhinoceroses. He's not terribly involved in the first appearance of the animals—he's very slow to evolve opinions about them. He's free from dogma and belief because he's constantly questioning everything. He has a goodness in him which gives him a certainty about the way he behaves.

Why were you attracted to the role?

I read it and began to wonder how the character gets to a point where he finds the strength to resist the rhinoceroses. The idea of someone standing up for what he believes in in an apocalyptic world, where all hope has gone, was really appealing to me. I spoke to Dominic [the play's director] and his take on the play was so clear and well thought out that I became really intrigued with the play. There has to be a good reason to do a play—theatre's a struggling art form and there's got to be a reason to get together and put on a play. Beyond being an allegory of occupied France, the play speaks to modern concerns about fundamentalism, totalitarianism and the pressures of conformity. It's got a lot to say about trying to escape orthodoxy, be that the orthodoxy of commodification or branding.



Interview: Zawe Ashton

What sort of research have you undertaken to prepare for the role of Daisy?

I like to approach the play by creating a timeline of the character's life—when they were born and what sort of events they would have seen. In this case, I've been researching the Second World War, the changing roles of women in society and the beginning of the civil rights movement. It's important to immerse yourself in anything that would affect the temperature of your character. I found some office training videos from the 1950s on YouTube. One of them was called *The Trouble With Women*, and it was about trying to integrate women into the workplace, into a man's world. This little film was about a boss who worked in a factory: he says that the trouble with women in the workplace is that they're too emotional and can't get on with the job. You can relate this sort of thing straight back to Daisy's role as a secretary in an office filled with men. I've also been looking at some advice for young women about how to please your future husband which I found in a Home Economics textbook of that period.

How is *Rhinoceros* relevant to a modern audience?

The play is very relevant in terms of its paranoia, in terms of life as you know it being invaded or infiltrated, the shattering of everything that you hold dear. People's ideals are turned upside down—which is very relevant today. Today's we're so conditioned by advertising and big business and we tend to ignore the real issues going on around us. It's a play about conformity and displacement which is really prevalent today—war breaks out and all we can do is go to IKEA.

Do you have sympathy for Daisy's own domestic retreat in the play?

You can't play a part if you judge your character's motives: even if you're playing a psychopath, you need to find some point of identification and some kind of empathy. Daisy is simply reacting to her fear: we all deal with fear in different ways, and Daisy tries to plaster over anything that goes against her idea of the world she wants to inhabit. When the balance shifts in the play, she begins a huge act of displacement.



Why do you think Daisy eventually turns into a rhinoceros?

The running theme of the play is that if you deny the rhinos' existence and refuse to accept what's happening, then you turn into one. I think she finally turns because she is Fascistic in the way she wants her life to be. She doesn't want to accept any kind of disruption or threatening behaviour. In the final scene, she accepts the fact that she can't fight it, and chooses to accept it instead.

Ionesco has been accused of misogyny in the way that he writes his female characters. Do you think this is true of Daisy?

I can see that argument because in the office scene, all of the male characters are described really full. He introduces Daisy with the words "young" and "blonde". That reveals something about Ionesco! But I don't think that Daisy has been written in a chauvinistic way. She's quite a hysterical character, but the women of that era were under all sorts of pressure from society. He's put a magnifying glass over an aspect of female behaviour and Daisy is the result. Daisy really runs the office where she's employed as a secretary.

Do you find any aspects of Daisy's character admirable?

She has a clear picture of what she wants from life, and as mad as that gets towards the end of the play, she pursues her ideal as far as she can. I can't judge her just because she wants something simple from life. She's the one that calls the Fire Brigade when her colleagues are in danger—she's immensely organised and really knows how to utilise her skills.

What have you learned about your character from the movement sessions that you've participated in?

Women held themselves differently in the 1950s. Long strides were seen as ungainly so they took very small steps, you would never wear flat shoes into the office! The cinched in waists mean that you can't slouch—if you did, it would cut off your breathing. At secretarial college, students would be awarded marks for their posture, their walks, the way they stand. When you stand, you need to hold your knees together so that there's no chance that anyone could look up your skirt! I'm still trying to explore the difference between the way Daisy behaves in the office in comparison to the way that she behaves when she visits Berenger.



Writing activities

The Rhinoceros Quiz

Challenge students to compile a personality test based on the quizzes commonly found in teen magazines. After watching the play, ask pupils to discuss the reasons why each of the characters seems to transform into a rhinoceros. Read the following quiz answers:

Mostly A: You are Daisy. You enjoy solving problems and getting on with life.
Special skills: picnic making, typing

Mostly B: You are Dudard. You find it easy to see both sides of the story.
Special skills: sucking up to the boss.

Mostly C: You are the Logician. You use logic and reason to make sense of the world. Special skills: deductive reasoning

Mostly D: You are Botard. Only you can see the world as it really is.
Special skills: shouting

Mostly E: You are Jean. You are the very model of a sober modern citizen.
Special skills: wardrobe maintenance

Ask students to divide quiz questions in the form of moral dilemmas. After devising a moral dilemma, students should provide 5 possible courses of action, reflecting the likely behaviour of Daisy, Dudard, the Logician, Botard and Jean. An example of a possible quiz question is given below:

While at work, you receive an email from Senior Management informing you that, “effective immediately, the eating of chocolate biscuits will be banned in the office in an attempt to reduce the harmful effects of crumb-damage on company computers”.

Do you:

- (a) Bake a tray of flapjacks in an effort to cheer up your biscuit-deprived colleagues?
- (b) Send an email back to Senior Management, congratulating them on their rigour and suggesting that the ban is extended to yoghurt.
- (c) Argue that biscuits are essential to the strength and well-being of your department, and that a ban will inevitably result in a loss in productivity which may well cost the company more than the net cost of annual computer repair.
- (d) Send a group email to your colleagues inviting them to stage a sit-down protest between 4.00pm and 4.15pm.
- (e) Stash a secret packet of biscuits in your bottom drawer and munch your way through them when no one is looking.

After compiling the quiz questions, ask students to take each others’ tests to find out which of the play’s characters they most resemble.



Metamorphosis

Ionesco and his fellow avant garde writers were influenced by the use of 'literalisme' within literary writing. The technique involves driving a non-naturalistic premise or conceit to its logical conclusion. For instance, in Kafka's *Metamorphosis*, Gregor Samsa awakes one morning to find himself transformed into an insect. Kafka never suggests the reason for Samsa's transformation, nor does he allow the other characters to doubt that the metamorphosis is genuine. Instead Kafka sets out to follow his illogical premise to its logical conclusion, describing the difficult his character has in eating, washing, walking and connecting with his family.

Similarly, in *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco starts from the premise that it is possible for a man to transform into a rhinoceros, using this idea to power the narrative of the play.

Ask students to discuss the symbolic significance of Ionesco's choice of animal before choosing an animal of their own. Challenge students to list the words or images that come to mind when they consider this animal. What aspect of human nature might this animal symbolise?

Encourage students to write a short play, or a scene from a longer play, which begins with a character waking up to find themselves transformed into their chosen animal.

Ask students to consider the following:

- Where might the scene take place?
- What does the central character want to do this morning?
- How does the central character find out about the transformation?
- What is his / her reaction to the transformation?
- Who might intrude on the scene and what might their reaction be?
- How does the transformation affect the character's objectives?





Design challenge

Jean's transformation

During the course of Act 2, Berenger's best friend, Jean, transforms from man to rhinoceros. Working out exactly *how* he transforms is a job for the Royal Court's Production Department. The play's Assistant Director plotted Jean's transformation in order to help the Production Department work out how to deliver the stage effects that Ionesco wanted.

Using the 'transformation plot', design a way of staging the Act 2. You might like to consider the following:

- Will you use make up, prosthetics, the actor's physicality or masks to illustrate Jean's transformation?
- What equipment will you need?
- How will you make Jean's final entrance 'spectacular'?

Pre show

- Jean's entire body is 'green' and 'leathery'
- Jean has a small lump on his forehead

Exit 1

- Jean is offstage for a maximum of 10 seconds
- When he returns, his face is slightly more 'green'

Exit 2

- Jean is offstage for a maximum of 20 seconds
- When he returns, he is 'very green' and the lump 'over his nose' is 'a bit bigger'

Exit 3

- Jean is offstage for a maximum of 35 seconds
- When he returns, his entrance is 'terrifying', he is now 'totally green', the lump on his forehead is 'almost a rhinoceros horn'

Exit 4

- Jean never reappears on stage
- A rhino horn pierces the bathroom door along with Berenger's jacket



Movement exercises

The Cafe

- Walk around the room in rigid straight lines
- Only change direction when you reach a wall
- Keep your movements efficient and your face expressionless
- When you make eye contact with someone else, give them small, formal nod
- Walk towards another person in a perfectly straight line
- When you are close enough, say 'bonjour'
- Use the word as a formal exchange rather than an expression of pleasure or welcome
- Find an appropriately formal distance between yourself and the person you are speaking to
- Find a chair and, one by one, bring it into the centre of the space with great formality
- Sit on the chair making sure that your clothes are arranged properly
- Watch the other members of the group arriving, nod at them and say 'bonjour'
- Imagine that the last person to enter the space is late for an important gathering and react in a manner that demonstrates your disapproval
- When you are all sitting, begin an activity which might be appropriate for a provincial French cafe in the 1950s
- Ask all the girls to leave the cafe
- One by one, the girls should arrive and the boys should stand until they take their seats
- Imagine that you have discovered that something unpleasant is stuck to your backside: stand up, remove it and sit down again in such a way that nobody would find your behaviour odd or vulgar
- Imagine that there is a disgusting smell coming from the cafe and react accordingly
- Begin to engage each other in conversation about the source of the smell
- You should try and use French words or English words spoken in a French accent
- Decide as a group who might be responsible for the disgusting smell
- Express your displeasure with this person and get them to leave the cafe without creating a messy scene or an argument



Becoming a Rhinoceros

- Lie on your back and find a slow steady rhythm for your breathing
- Locate a mental image of a rhinoceros
- Begin to exhale with a snort
- Feel your body getting heavier
- Start to get up off the floor as if your limbs were made of stone
- Find a way of getting up off the floor that doesn't involve using your hands
- Keep breathing deeply and heavily, snorting on the out breath
- Stay on all fours or rise to your feet
- Experiment with rhinos at rest, leaning against a wall or playing with an object
- Don't try and achieve anything, don't try and be a rhinoceros, simply find a language of movement that expresses something about rhinoceroses
- Remember that rhinoceroses have terrible eyesight and brilliant hearing
- Herd together in the centre of the room
- Without talking, decide which is the 'alpha rhino' and treat him or her accordingly
- Bring a chair into the centre of the space with the clumsiness of a rhinoceros
- Feel yourself becoming a little more human, but keep the sensation of being part rhinoceros
- Find another way of sitting on your chair
- Imagine that you are sitting in a cafe and start making eye contact with the other customers
- Experiment with different ways of greeting them
- Pick a chair that someone else in the cafe is occupying, and without using any words, try and occupy that chair
- Select somebody to be the waiter or waitress and send them back into the scene
- Ask the rhinos to order food and drinks and to make their displeasure known if they aren't served promptly



Useful links

Stagework

www.stagework.org

Read the full rehearsal diaries, watch video clips of rehearsal and explore the technical wizardry behind the production at this interactive education site

Info.com

reference.info.com/reference

Search 'crowd psychology' for a useful introduction to modern theories of crowd behaviour and mass hysteria

Sparknotes

www.sparknotes.com/drama/rhinoceros

A detailed study guide for Ionesco's play containing articles on the major themes of *Rhinoceros*, a commentary on each scene and a list of essay questions

BBC Devon

www.bbc.co.uk/devon/rhino

Follow this online rhino conservation project, browse photographs and meet the zookeepers dedicated to preserving the UK's population of black rhinos

International Rhino Foundation

www.rhinos-irf.org/rhinoinformation

Find out about the differences between the black rhino and the white rhino at this detailed and informative conservation site

Ionesco Home Page

www.ionesco.org

Lovingly created Ionesco 'fan site' which includes a list of the writer's plays, a biography and a information about the plays in performance

BBC History

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/worldwars/genocide>

Accounts of the Final Solution and an interactive timeline detailing the history of persecution and genocide in World War 2

