

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924. The company's first production was the now little-known *The Tide* by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945. In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

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PROSCENIUM

“The Bald Prima Donna” and “The Real Inspector Hound”

PROSCENIUM

The Bald Prima Donna

Eugene Ionesco

The Real Inspector Hound

Tom Stoppard

29th, 30th, 31st May and 1st June 2002
Travellers Studio, Harrow Arts Centre

“The Bald Prima Donna” and “The Real Inspector Hound”

The Bald Prima Donna

Mrs Smith	Izzie Cartwright
Mr Smith	Julian Wood
Mary, the maid	Denise Bone
Mrs Martin	Angie Sutherland
Mr Martin	Rod Moor-Bardell
The Captain Of The Fire Brigade	Paul Davis

The action of the play passes in the living-room of the Smiths' house in a London suburb.
Time - the 1950s.

The Real Inspector Hound

Moon	Colin Hickman
Birdboot	David Watkins
Mrs Drudge	Crystal Anthony
Simon	Julian Wood
Felicity	Emma Burton
Cynthia	Janet Harrison
Magnus	Alan Glover
Inspector Hound	Rod Moor-Bardell

The action of the play passes on the stage of a theatre, set for a performance, and part of the auditorium.
Time - the present.

Directed By	Charles Anthony
Stage Manager	Michael Gerrard
Assisted by	Pauline Patterson
	Rob Hurcrum
	Anne Gerrard
Lighting Design	Barny Daley

Sound operated by Arts Culture Harrow

The Bald Prima Donna

Theatre of the Absurd

Absurd: Out of harmony with reason or propriety; incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.

Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.

Ionesco 1957

The Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. It has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being that is, in terms of concrete stage images.

Martin Esslin: Theatre of the Absurd

The action in a play of the Theatre of the Absurd is not intended to tell a story but to communicate a pattern of poetic images.

Martin Esslin

Eugene Ionesco : Early Life

Ionesco was born in Slatina, Rumania, on 26 November 1912. His mother was French and shortly after he was born the family went to live in Paris. French is his first language - he had to acquire most of his Rumanian after his return to Rumania at the age of thirteen. His earliest memories are of Paris - *My mother could not tear me away from the Punch and Judy show at the Luxembourg Gardens. I could stay there, enrapt, for whole days. It was the spectacle of the world itself...underlining its grotesque and brutal truth.* He developed anaemia and was sent to the country to recover and spent a particularly happy time in the village of La Chapelle-Anthenaise. The family returned to Bucharest in 1925 and he encountered a rawer, more brutal world: *Shortly after my arrival I saw a man, still young, big and strong, attack an old man with his fists and kick him with his boots ... I have no other images of the world except those of evanescence and brutality, vanity and rage, hideous hatred. Everything I have since experienced has merely confirmed what I had seen.*

Ionesco studied French at Bucharest University, taught at the lycee, wrote poetry and literary criticism. In 1936 he obtained a grant to go to Paris to write a thesis on Baudelaire - he is reputed never to have written a single line of this

work. He remained in France during the war; *I am writing, writing, writing. All my life I have been writing; I have never been able to do anything else.* But it was not until 1948 that he wrote his first play.

The Inspiration

In 1948 he decided that he ought to learn English and so acquired an English course book. *I set to work. Conscientiously I copied whole sentences from my primer and learned not English but some astonishing truths - that there are seven days in the week, something that I already knew; that the floor is down, the ceiling is up, things I already knew as well but seemed to me suddenly as stupifying as they were indisputably true.* Then two characters were introduced. *To my astonishment, Mrs Smith informed her husband that they had several children, that they lived in the vicinity of London, that their name was Smith, that they had a seroant, Mary - English like themselves Then the Smith's friends, the Martin's, arrived and the four of them began to chat.* The comic situation of two couples solemnly informing each other of things that were obvious to all of them developed; the cliches and truisms gave way to pseudo-cliches and pseudo-truisms and these disintegrated into wild caricature and parody. Ionesco read his play to a group of friends, who found it funny, although he believed himself to have written a very serious piece, 'the tragedy of language'.

The Title

During a rehearsal of the long and pointless anecdote 'The Headcold' in which there is a reference to an *institutrice blonde*, a blonde schoolteacher, the actor playing the fire chief made a mistake and said *canatrice chauve*, bald prima donna. Ionesco thought this a much better title than any he had already thought of - *Big Ben Follies*, for example.

The Ending

Originally, after the quarrel between the couples, plants in the audience would start booing and the theatre manager and the police would come on and start 'machine-gunning' the audience - too many extra actors and so too costly. Then Ionesco planned to let the maid, at the height of the quarrel, announce 'The Author', at which he would appear shake his fists at the audience and shout, *You bunch of crooks I'll get you* - too polemical. So eventually it was decided that there would be no ending and the play would start all over again.

The First Performance

Billed as an 'anti-play', 'La Canatrice Chauve' opened at the Theatre des Noctambules on 11 May 1950. There were one or two favourable reviews but it was coldly received and played to sparse houses. However, a revival, in a double-bill with 'The Lesson', at the Theatre de la Huchette in October 1952 was enormously successful and remained a feature of the Paris theatre for decades.

The Explanation

In 1958 Ionesco described 'The Bald Prima Donna' as a vision of a kind of universal petty-bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie being the very incarnation of the common-place, of the slogan, of conformism; and it is by the automatism of his language that the inherent conformism of the bourgeois is betrayed. *Conversation is made up of threadbare platitudes, talking and saying nothing because there is nothing to say, illustrating the absence of any inner life, the mechanical soullessness of daily routine. The Smiths and the Martins have forgotten how to talk because they have forgotten how to think; and they have forgotten how to think because they have forgotten the meaning of emotion, they are devoid of passions; they are nothing but other people, they belong to an impersonal world, they are interchangeable.*



Eugene Ionesco

The Real Inspector Hound

It is as if 'The Mousetrap' had been re-written by Ionesco.

Michael Billington

The Background

Tom Stoppard wrote his first play 'Enter a Free Man' while working as a journalist in Bristol in 1960, though it was first performed on the London stage in March 1968. In the meanwhile 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead' had been a great success at the Edinburgh Festival and in London in 1966. Stoppard's next play was eagerly awaited, though he was not really the typical sixties playwright - no agitprop, no explicit political agenda, no four-letter words. *I used to feel out on a limb, because when I started you were a shit if you weren't writing about Vietnam or housing.* 'The Real Inspector Hound' opened at the Criterion on June 17th 1968. Although, perhaps, a less ambitious play than its predecessor, like 'Rosencrantz and Guildenstern' it is about two outsiders drawn into a puzzling, confused story which they only half understand.

The Response

Some critics found it a slight work, but Ronald Bryden in 'The Observer' enthused, *As near perfect in its kind as a P.G. Wodehouse plot: tiny, ludicrous and beautiful as an ivory Mickey Mouse.* And Helen Dawson wrote in 'Plays and Players', *In an age of earnest Happenings and the cult of the improvised Stoppard is courageous enough to continue to cultivate the reactionary talents of the craftsman.*

The Play-within-a-Play

George Nathan, the American critic, compiled a list of infallible signs by which playgoers may know, after the first ten minutes, that they are in the presence of a stinker. These include

- If, shortly after the play starts, one of the characters, usually an old woman with a quaver in her voice, shakes her head ominously and remarks with symbolic import, 'there's a storm brewing'.
- When Annie, the Irish serving girl, palpitatingly confides to a member of the household: 'A man broke out of the penitentiary last night and they haven't found a trace of him yet.'
- Any mystery play in which, at the very start, someone remarks that the nearest house is two miles away.

Stoppard uses all these - and more - in constructing his very funny parody of an Agatha Christie like country house thriller, which is strangely like 'The Mousetrap'.

The Structure

By the device of having two critics watch, comment on and finally join in the thriller Stoppard brings two worlds into collision: that of the critics and the play. But Irving Wardle pointed out, *Stoppard's two critics are as unreal as the characters in the thriller ... Stoppard regularly establishes different planes of action and then negates the contrast by showing up every plane as equally unreal. His work is a series of looking-glass adventures: with the difference that his mirrors reflect nothing but themselves. There is no starting point in reality.*

Stoppard himself says that it is not a play about critics and that originally he simply had two members of the audience getting drawn into the action. He finally chose critics only because they're defined and easy to parody. This made it even more a joke about style: about critics who talk like parodies of themselves and cliché -characters who converse in inverted commas. The structure is a kind of Chinese puzzle that makes a fiendishly well-constructed play out of a parody of a bad one. Michael Billington



Tom Stoppard



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