

Staging the Surreal in excess of Absurd Theatre: an Exploration of Echoes of Surrealism in Select Plays by Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994)

Ananya Mukhopadhyay

Abstract

The paper engages with Eugene Ionesco (1909-1994), conventionally labelled as a playwright of absurd drama, and attempts to exceed the boundaries of absurdism to explore elements of the surreal in plays of his initial years, namely *The Bald Soprano* (1950), *The Lesson* (1951) and *The Chairs* (1952). The presence of inhuman violence associated with the enigmatic, fluid, inseparable characters engaging in autistic dialogues and laughing defiantly at death in the dramatic universe of Ionesco bear striking resemblance to the seminal works of the practitioners of surrealism across genres, like Andre Robert Breton, Salvador Dali, Rene Magritte, Antonin Artaud. Ionesco's dark humour exposes the "dead truths" (*Notes on my Theatre* 142) of bourgeois ideologies. It tends to surmount to what Andre Breton and Jacques Vache claim as surrealist black humour which vehemently laughs at death that theatre of the absurd often succumbs to. The plays focus on "mental images" (Breton *Manifestoes of Surrealism* 125) so that readers find Ionesco's characters often oscillating between states of dreaming and wakefulness, something Andre Breton has spoken about profoundly in 1924 in his first *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, long before the idea of the absurd came into being. While absurd drama exudes certain affinities with some of the major tenets of surrealism, it cannot always be used as an all-consuming signifier to define certain playwrights, one of whom is Ionesco, whose drama continues to exhibit a distinctive surrealist edge.

Surrealism, which began to take shape in the inter-War years much before the arrival of absurd drama, dealt with the inner recesses of the human psyche and drew upon the psychoanalytical ideas of Freud without which surrealism could never have blossomed to its full potential, as Breton himself claims in "The Situation of Surrealism Between the Two Wars" (1948). In this paper I have tried to trace how Ionesco, who remained mesmerized by surrealism (as he himself admits in an interview in *The Paris Review*), is one of the playwrights whose oeuvre can challenge the misconception about the incompatibility of surrealism with stage and hint at the potential of much neglected surrealist theatre which cannot always be subsumed, limited within the category of the absurd.

Keywords

Theatre of the Absurd, Artaud, Breton, Dali, Freud, Magritte, Humour and Surrealism, Manifestoes of Surrealism, Surrealism and the Stage