

THE ZEN OF IONESCO: A PRODUCTION

OF VICTIMS OF DUTY

by

CRIS LANE EDWARDS, B.F.A.

A THESIS

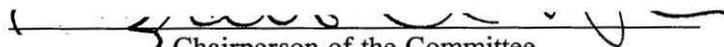
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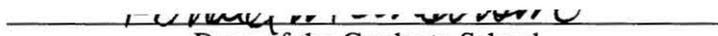
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a graduate student at Texas Tech University who is pursuing a Master of Fine Arts in Acting and Directing in the Theatre, I wanted to direct my thesis production early in the process of working on my degree. Many of my fellow students save their thesis productions for one of the final semesters in their careers as graduate students, and they are left to churn out a thesis which comes across as rushed when read. It was to my delight that I was approved to direct Eugène Ionesco's *Victims of Duty* at the beginning of my second year of study in a typically three-year program.

Initially, I proposed three plays for consideration. In addition to *Victims of Duty*, I submitted Michael McClure's *The Beard* and *Kiss of the Spider Woman* by Manuel Puig. The faculty did not choose *The Beard*, and this decision did not surprise me. The play is notorious for its frank dialogue and graphic depiction of sexuality. I am unsure why *Kiss of the Spider Woman* was overlooked. Jonathan Marks, Head of Acting and Directing at Texas Tech, commented that the faculty "just wanted to see some Ionesco" (Marks interview).

To my benefit, I proposed plays which I had an equal love for and, because of their thematic depth, fear of. I think all three works are beautiful plays which present truthful challenges to anyone who would attempt to produce them. More important, I feel that all three plays have a certain Zen-like nature about them, which would be of benefit to me in my quest to experiment with theories about Zen as a directorial approach. In Chapter III, I will explain why I decided to experiment with a Zen-influenced approach to directing a theatrical production. In general, the three plays depict characters finding a kind

of solace amid cosmic chaos. This theme also, as I will later show, explains, to a degree, my ideas of producing a Zen-based rehearsal process.

In my mind's eye, there are many facets to the Texas Tech production of *Victims of Duty* which lend themselves to in-depth study and explanation. My goal in this thesis is to focus on only one such facet — a thread which I see running through my approach as a director and Ionesco's approach as a writer and commentator.

I wish to follow through on this thread — that of Zen elements which manifested themselves during my research and in the process of production — and to document a way of looking at not only the work which Ionesco has created, but also the art of directing for the theatre as it was realized in this production of his *Victims of Duty*. My scope is broad, but, I believe, a goal of theatre is to spread before an audience their own ontological struggles. My purpose here is to record and evaluate the myriad findings of my experimentations with Zen practices during my direction of *Victims of Duty*. I will begin with some brief background passages on the history of Zen and the life and works of Eugène Ionesco. Following this, I will merge these two topics by, first, examining the script of *Victims of Duty* as it depicts Zen ideas and, secondly, explaining how Zen can be useful when directing a play as tumultuous as *Victims of Duty*. The final two chapters will cover some specifics of the production which I directed.

I spent the month of July 2000 in Angel Fire, New Mexico as a member of the Angel Fire Mountain Theatre Repertory company. During this month, I had a lot of free time which I spent studying *Victims of Duty*, shopping, sleeping, cooking, and, notably, getting to know my condo-mate, Jia-hua Chin, who was a graduate student studying lighting design. Jia-hua and I spent many afternoons

and evenings sitting in our condominium — often with a bottle of local wine and a table of food — in deep discussions on women, dining, the Tao and Buddhism, theatre, and too many other things to imagine. While I had been Jia-hua's friend before this time, during our stay at Angel Fire, I feel that we became very close comrades.

I had given Jia-hua a copy of *Victims of Duty* to read. He was interested in the idea of designing lights for our production, and, knowing his wonderful talents, I was thrilled that he was interested in working with me.

A few days later I asked him if he'd read it. He said he had.

"And what do you think?"

"It is Zen," he replied.

This moment was an epiphany for me in my work on this production.

For years, I had studied Chinese philosophy as an avocation. I am not specifically Buddhist, and I have only cautiously declared myself a Philosophical Taoist, since I claim no organized religion in my life at this time. I seek out works which, I feel, fit into my love of Zen ideas. I had discovered that *Victims of Duty*, along with many of Eugène Ionesco's other works, represented a very mystical and almost nihilistic view of life which was congruent to what I knew of Zen philosophy. I had even written a major paper on the correlations between Ionesco and Zen for a script analysis class during my first semester as a graduate student. But there, in the mountains of New Mexico, was Jia-hua, a life-long Buddhist, confirming my ideas without my provocation.

The similarities between Zen concepts and the themes of *Victims of Duty* became a topic of debate between Jia-hua and me for the two months between our arrival in Angel Fire and my starting on the direction of the production. We went out for drinks and dinner numerous times and discussed Chinese beliefs

and *Victims of Duty*. He answered some very important questions I had about Zen (What is the actual difference between Zen and Tao? Is Zen a kind of faith?), since books can only cover so much.

As it turned out, Jia-hua did not design lights for the show. He was, instead, asked to design *After the Fall*, a play which was directed on the Mainstage by George Sorensen several months after *Victims of Duty* had closed. This production would become Jia-hua's masterpiece and swan song.

On 30 March 2001, Jia-hua was killed in a terrible accident on the Mainstage while working on lights for *The Day Room*, our final play of the season. The specifics of the incident are mostly unknown to me, but it sent shockwaves through the department and, promptly, across the world to his friends and loved ones in Taiwan, his home. I found myself unable to function for a while.

There is a famous Zen saying about death: "The apple falls when it is ripe." This notion is not exclusive to the Orient: It is communicated in *King Lear* — "Men must endure/Their going hence even as their coming hither./Ripeness is all"(V:ii:9-11) — and countless other works. It says, in other words, that there is nobody — especially the apple — who knows when they will fall. When it happens, however, the world must realize that it was "the right time" and that the fall will happen according to the nature of the apple. Jia-hua died in a holy place: the theatre. He was doing what he loved, and he was surrounded by friends who loved and respected him. Jia-hua fell when he was ripe.

In the weeks which followed this event, our department became unified in a way I cannot yet describe. We were shown many things which were alien to Lubbock, Texas: Buddhist shrines, cleansing prayers, and chanted sutras. The incense on the shrines was kept burning for over a week and maintained as such by Buddhists, Catholics, Baptists, Atheists, and a host of other beliefs which don't

lend themselves to convenient labels. As a department, we traversed so many things which might, under different circumstances, have divided us. The enormity and chaos of the loss brought so many people out of the metaphorical "woodwork." Though my studies of Buddhism come from my own research and are lacking in many respects, I became a resource for people who did not want to offend the traditions or who had questions about how Buddhists view life and, by consequence, death.

Now, as I sit to write this thesis, our department is just beginning to recover, to a degree, from the loss of Jia-hua Chin. I am not so sure I am. It just seems like a sad bit of synchronicity that, while I was beginning an attempt to note my Zen studies via this thesis, I would become involved in a Buddhist memorial for a man who was very dear to me and who gave me so much insight regarding my work. Jia-hua let me know that I should not be afraid to be strong in my beliefs. He let me know that I was on a good path with *Victims of Duty* and with my life. It is so rare to befriend such a compassionate and brilliant person.

This thesis is my attempt to relate my experiences with a Zen approach to directing a production of a wonderfully bizarre play. I will begin with a brief history of Zen, followed by a short outline of Ionesco's life and works. Then I will analyze *Victims of Duty* as a work which I feel communicates Zen themes. Following this, I will outline my views on manifesting Zen in the process of directing in general, and, finally, I will include two chapters on how I experimented more specifically with these Zen ideas in a production of *Victims of Duty* at Texas Tech University.

This thesis is also a document of thoughts I never knew I had bouncing around in my mind. The process has been nothing but discovery.

CHAPTER II

INTRODUCTORY ANALYSIS

Introduction to Ionesco

Eugène Ionesco was born on 26 November 1909, in Romania, to a French mother, Thérèse, and a Romanian father, Eugen. During his childhood, young Eugène was, for various reasons, shuffled between parents, grandparents, and boarding schools and often found himself unattended and lonely as an adult. Ionesco was always fascinated with his childhood and often used his tumultuous younger years as the basis for the themes he repeatedly explored in his later writings: loss of innocence/discovery of mortality; shunning of authority (especially paternal power); the limitations of language; and the joy of being randomly creative in the face of loneliness.

Ionesco lived in Paris with his parents, who had a very chaotic relationship, until 1916 when his father left the home to study law in Romania. Mme Ionesco was abandoned — her husband said he was going to war, when in fact he married another woman — with young Eugène, who was then placed in a children's home due to his mother's inability to provide for Eugène and his sister. "I don't bear (my father) any grudge for having left us and separated from my mother either. [. . .] What I hold against him is having done this in the rottenest sort of way" (*Present Past, Past Present* 95). This would be the first of many traumatic moves the boy would be making between homes.

While Eugène was initially shocked at being separated from his mother, he found comfort when he and his sister were moved to a rural boarding school 130 miles outside of Paris. The lush scenery and freedom he found in the

countryside was recalled by Ionesco as the most wonderful period in his life (Lane 2). This "Edenic" period was highly influential to young Eugène. The feeling of pastoral contentment he felt, as a child who was allowed to roam the hills and woods, must have been extensive, especially when compared to the depressing years which followed (Lamont, *Eugène Ionesco: A Modern Classic* 6).

Because of his father's legal requirement to raise the boy, Eugène was sent to Romania at the age of thirteen, . Due to the clear dislike the two had for one another, Eugène developed a skepticism for authority and a permanent distrust of his own father, two themes which are later manifested in *Victims of Duty*, as well as his many other writings. In his published memoirs, Ionesco recalled his childhood experiences with his father. These memories haunted Ionesco:

I have the feeling that it is because of this memory (of my father) that I hate authority, that this is the source of my antimilitarism, that is to say of everything the military world is and represents, everything that is a society founded on the male's primacy over women. (*Present Past, Past Present* 16)

While living with his father in Romania, Eugène perfected the native language and began to write. He enrolled at the University of Bucharest in 1929; and, with a job as a French instructor, he began to publish poems, essays and stories in various literary journals(Lane 3).

During the late 1930s, Ionesco began to question certain Marxist governmental actions which, at the time, included war. He noticed a kind of blind faith in government among his peers; this sickness he termed "rhinoceritis" (Lamont 7). This "automatic conformism" frightened him and awakened him to the loss of reason which so readily grips citizens when there is political propaganda involved. This theme of conformity and mass hysteria would also

become a recurrent aspect of his many writings. “[. . .] even though I know the mechanisms of propaganda, (still) I suffer like a man in the street, like a man in the crowd” (*Present Past, Past Present* 122).

In 1938, Ionesco began to write a thesis on French poetry, but he abandoned the project after writing not one line of text. Instead, Eugène spent much of the time in Marseille. In 1944 his daughter, Marie-France, was born (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 108).

Ionesco had occasionally written essays and short stories, but never a play. In fact, Ionesco had always had an animosity towards the popular theatre, preferring instead avant-garde playwrights such as Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Appolinaire. He felt that the popular theatre presented “apparently serious people making a spectacle of themselves” (qtd. in Esslin 108). This mistrust of the medium of the stage had initially prevented Ionesco from writing for the theatre. That is, until 1948, when he began to study English and ended up writing a pioneering dramatic work quite by accident.

Having spent some time copying exercises from an English language book as part of his studies, Ionesco noticed a certain ridiculous quality to the manner of dialogues in his textbook. Instead of learning English in the process, he discovered “astonishing truths — that, for example, there are seven days in the week [. . .]; that the floor is down; the ceiling up, things I already knew (but) that I had never seriously thought about [. . .]” (qtd. in Esslin 109). Ionesco twisted and adapted these mundane conversations into a short script which depicted such absurd situations as a married couple sharing information they probably already know; a fireman asking for news on fires; and a degeneration of language from coherent sentences to pure gibberish. Ionesco had discovered something larger than the mere exercises he was studying: that the utterance of

basic truisms created a new kind of drama. The characters in his first play were so enraptured by purely mundane bits of information that they hardly saw the absurdity of their own existence:

Mrs. Martin: I can buy a pocketknife for my brother, but you
can't buy Ireland for your grandfather.

Mr. Smith: One walks on his feet, but one heats with electricity
or coal. (Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano* 38)

Ionesco saw that the nihilistic thoughts he had about a society devoid of spirit could be embodied by these essentially characterless personas. Ionesco found the "tragedy of language" by adapting his language book into a play, *The Bald Soprano*, which would become one of the most important dramatic works of the century (Lamont 8).

Staged first in Paris in 1950 by Nicholas Bataille, *The Bald Soprano* was almost ignored by audiences. Several avant-garde writers took notice, however, and the one-act "metaphysical farce" began to attract an audience (Lamont 8). *The Bald Soprano* was initially considered a parody of upper-class society, but Ionesco insisted that he wanted to communicate the failure of language. This inadequacy of language would become the means by which Ionesco would depict his fear of death and longing for childhood, his concerns about totalitarian governments, and his exploration of detachment in the face nihilism. At the core of human experience, he felt, is a dread which defies words. Like Alfred Jarry (1873-1907) before him, Ionesco would accentuate the faults of humankind through farcical language and pathetic situations. While theatre during the late 1940s was using these methods merely to entertain, Ionesco strove to use these same tools to question the ridiculousness of existence.

His next three plays, *The Lesson* (1950), *Jack, or the Submission* (1950), and *The Chairs* (1951), all built on these themes. *The Lesson* depicts an erotic obsession

with power; *The Chairs* uses the proliferation of furniture to depict the overwhelming presence of death; and *Jack, or the Submission* presents a parody of Ibsen-esque family dramas through paradox and, like *The Lesson*, the breakdown of upper-class institutions into erotic and animalistic images.

His fifth full-length play, *Victims of Duty* (1954) was the first play to be a clear departure from Ionesco's previous works. While the play included such Ionesco staples as nonsensical language, the multiplication of objects (in this case: teacups), and ridiculous situations, *Victims of Duty* also brought some new elements. There is a clear communication of autobiographical moments, which create several scenes depicting true sorrow, as opposed to a parody of emotion as in his previous works. *Victims of Duty* is also much more specific in its metatheatrical modes by having the play comment upon itself outright. *Victims of Duty* is not as farcical as the earlier *The Bald Soprano* or *Jack, or the Submission*, as an exaggerated homage to Strindberg's *A Dream Play*. *Victims of Duty* is also the first of Ionesco's plays to be a dramatization of his short story, "A Victim of Duty," which was subsequently published in *The Evergreen Review* in 1963.

Ionesco's later works would build upon the foundation of *Victims of Duty* by representing a hatred of militaristic power, an inadequacy of communication, and a longing for innocence. *Exit the King* (1963) and *Hunger and Thirst* (1968) were meant to confront the truth of mortality while his most popular work, *Rhinoceros* (1958), illustrates the meme of power in society.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Ionesco published a wealth of plays, essays, memoirs, and short stories. During the last decade of his life, perhaps heeding his own call to abandon language, Eugène Ionesco stopped writing, preferring the visual arts of painting and printmaking (Lamont 24). He passed away in 1994.

Introduction To Zen

In the previous section, I have given a brief overview of Ionesco's life and the themes he continued to use within his writings. These themes — the faults of language, the faults of power-hungry leaders, the need to detach from a desire to understand the universe — are also common to the teachings and writings of Zen Buddhists, which fascinated Ionesco throughout his life.

Zen has been called many things: a religion, a philosophy, a mystical science. These assessments are, to a degree, correct, but I feel they fall short of convenient accuracy, a thing which is largely unnecessary in Zen, but is necessary for this thesis. Scholars often link Zen with various religions or philosophies, but it is mostly independent of such trappings, and thus easily adaptable to almost any religion or philosophy. In general, Zen could be considered a way of life — a manner of looking at the world and letting the processes of the universe take their own course.

Nobody is really certain when Zen began. It probably predates the written word, since a world without formalized language has to exist without much overanalysis, and, therefore, in a truly Zen fashion. Alan Watts mentions, "(Western knowledge is) *conventional* knowledge, because we do not feel that we really know anything unless we can represent it in words (or symbols) such as the notation of mathematics or music" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 4). Hence, one very basic precept of Zen — that nature can not be represented accurately with words — can be a major obstacle for the Western mind. Zen is concerned with a kind of wisdom which can not be put into formalized systems of communication. Fittingly, the term 'Zen' is itself a poorly translated version of the Sanskrit word *dhyana*, which means non-dualistic thinking or an awakening to the cycles of guilt and desire (*The Elements of Zen* 4).

Zen, as we know it today, finds its roots in the combination of Taoist, Confucianist, and Buddhist ideas. Like Zen, these three terms are often thought of as naming religions, yet, for the sake of Western understanding, they might be more fittingly referred to as philosophies (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 11). There is no traditional God — an omnipotent being who is the personified crafter or controller of the universe — in these ancient practices, and their scopes are more like philosophies that followers stick to religiously instead of being truly “religions.” As methods of thought, Taoism and Confucianism are considered contemporaries of one another, but ideologically, they are very much at opposite ends of a spectrum.

Taoism originated in China c3000B.C. with the writing of the *I Ching*, an ancient text which is part oracle, part poem (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 13). Yet, it was not until c479B.C. that the foundation of traditional Taoist thought was created with the writing of the *Tao Te Ching* by Lao-tzu (“old child”). This collection of 81 poetic verses outlines the nature of the Tao (“Way of Nature”) and Te (“Use of Life”) which, in general, call for the freeing of desire and acceptance of the processes of the universe (Bynner 21). The many passages in the *Tao Te Ching* are written in such a profoundly simple manner that their general meaning emerges wonderfully despite thousands of attempts at an “accurate” English translation. Lao-tzu communicates a mystical manner of living within acceptance and harmony with nature and society.

Confucianism, on the other hand, is somewhat unlike Taoism, in that Confucius, in his *Analects*, delivers notions of personal conduct and virtue (Bynner 19). Whereas Lao-tzu asked for a shunning of moral codes, Confucius, a Chinese contemporary of Lao-tzu, dictated societal modes of behavior. His formalized structure is not so much a means of despotic commands, but, in

keeping with the tone of the *I Ching*, Confucius delivers his rules with a clearly mystical tone. Confucius dealt with proper manners when among others, whereas Lao-tzu spoke of being in league with nature.

While the basic approaches of Lao-tzu and Confucius seem at odds, they both have at their core the concept that "the natural (person) is to be trusted [. . .]" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 21). Strict rules are things to be enforced, and neither of these beliefs preach enforcement. Lao-tzu "knew the value of loafing" and Confucius, though more specific in his teachings, ultimately trusts in human nature and its contradictions (Bynner 7).

Buddhism finds its basis in India, in the traditions of Upanishadic Hinduism. The man who would eventually become Buddha ("awakened one") was born in the sixth century B.C. to a wealthy Indian leader (*The Elements of Zen* 9). Named Siddhartha, the young boy grew up as a pampered child. He was trained as a warrior and had many young women at his side (*The Elements of Zen* 10). Siddhartha grew tired of the constant riches which brought him no lasting happiness, and he ventured into the country where he became a wandering sage. After studying under a variety of mystics and teachers, Siddhartha concluded that true enlightenment was not to be found in formalized thinking, either. One day, reminded of a moment of childhood peace, Siddhartha sat beneath a large tree and vowed not to move until he had achieved enlightenment. After a night of meditation, he found it (*Elements* 11).

In general, the Buddha realized that people are constantly suffering because they desire things which are unattainable or are impermanent. When people have unrealistic goals, or they live their lives without compassion, they will suffer from dualistic thinking, a division against the self (*The Way of Zen* 46-50). What a person wants and what they are actually able to get are often two

different things. This leads to grief. Ionesco explains it rather lucidly: "If you take desire to pieces you abolish desire. This is the aim of Buddhism, as is well known" (*Fragments of a Journal* 74). To free oneself from suffering, a person must inhibit desire and attachment to things. This means that anyone can become a Buddha if they simply awaken to the never-ending cycle of gain and loss.

Buddhism thrived in India for "twenty-eight generations" and in c520AD, Bodhidharma, an enlightened man, traveled to China to spread the teachings of Siddhartha (*Elements* 15). While various aspects of Buddhism had previously found their way into China, the travel of Bodhidharma to the palace of Wu-ti (AD 502-40), a Chinese Emperor, marked the clear arrival of Buddhism to China.

As Buddhism was adopted throughout China, many found that their own indigenous Taoist and Confucianist practices fit nicely with the teachings of Buddha, and thus Zen was created (*Elements* 16). The integration of Taoist harmony, Confucianist dedication, and Buddhist simplicity and freedom from desire made a very practical and dynamic unity. Like Taoism, Zen is marked by what Ionesco called a "metaphysical 'couldn't-care-less' attitude [. . .]" (*Fragments of a Journal* 51). By 800AD, Zen had made its way to Japan and in 1184AD the first Japanese Zen temple was constructed.

In 1223AD, Dogen, a Japanese Zen monk, decided to travel to China to further study his path. Dogen had been schooled in Rinzai Zen, which uses *koans*, or nonsensical riddles, as a tool for reaching enlightenment. After some time in China, Dogen became enlightened to the necessity of daily rituals and meditation as means of attaining enlightenment. A new branch of Zen study — called Soto Zen — was created (*Elements* 20). Soto Zen thrives today and is still based on ritualized practices and meditation as its means of journeying towards Buddhahood for the individual.

Rinzai Zen, which is somewhat more germane to this thesis because of its embrace of nonsensical ideas, also exists today and, along with Soto Zen, has become increasingly popular in the west with people who have grown skeptical of the supposed absolutes upon which western science and philosophy are based. Disagreements between Soto Zen and Rinzai Zen practitioners occur, but, in general, Western Zen followers practice some combination of the two. This practice mixes regular meditation with regular study of *koans* and *sutras* (teachings of the Buddhas). While formalized Zen Buddhism continues to gain support in America, Zen-influenced living has been adopted by many people in the West as a supplement to their existing religions and philosophies.

Ionesco was one such person. His life-long search for a reason behind human suffering lead him through many philosophies and religions, but it would be the combination of Pataphysics, a fictional science of nonsense created by Alfred Jarry, and Zen which would give him, if not answers, then some mode of contentment through detachment. "(Pataphysics) was an enterprise dedicated to nihilism and irony, which in my view corresponded to Zen" (Ionesco qtd. in *Playwrights at Work* 133).

In the following chapter, I will explain some of the basic philosophical elements of Zen as they have been manifested in the text of Eugène Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*. This will be succeeded by several chapters outlining my experience of directing a production of *Victims of Duty* as a form of Zen practice.

Viewing *Victims of Duty* as a Work of Zen

Eugène Ionesco clearly had more than a casual interest in Zen Buddhism. He wrote a lucid comparison of Zen and Freudian psychology in his *Fragments of a Journal* (51-84). He also has mentioned Zen Buddhism and its relationship to

Absurdist theatre in various interviews, notably in *Playwrights at Work* (133). *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* was a major source of inspiration throughout his life (Lamont interview). Although we may never know the extent of his interest in Zen, we can see how his experiences with Zen manifested themselves within his writings. As a dramatic paradigm, *Victims of Duty* represents an uncanny depiction of a basic Zen premise: the inadequacy of language and other human constructs truly to provide meaning to the continuous process of nature. (Ionesco, *Fragments of a Journal* 61).

I am, of course, not the first to suggest such a connection. Martin Esslin ends his genre-defining *The Theatre of the Absurd* with the conclusion:

[. . .] Zen (is congruent to) the Theatre of the Absurd¹ –a preoccupation with ultimate realities and a recognition that they are not approachable through conceptual thought alone. Ionesco has been quoted as drawing a parallel between the method of the Zen Buddhists² and the Theatre of the Absurd³, and in fact the teaching methods of the Zen Masters, their use of kicks and blows in reply to questions about the nature of enlightenment and their setting of nonsense problems, closely resemble some of the procedures of the Theatre of the Absurd. (376)

Esslin knew, as did Ionesco, that the seemingly nihilistic world shown by Ionesco and other Absurdist was in harmony with the views of Zen Buddhists. Therefore, within this chapter, I will explain the specific themes which are common in both *Victims of Duty* and Zen literature. In turn, this examination will segue into a discussion of the theories I have developed regarding my directorial approach to the production.

¹ It should be noted, Since Rosette Lamont asked me to, that Ionesco hated the term "Theatre of the Absurd."

² Here, we assume that he means the Rinzai Buddhists and he refers to the shocking and illogical nature of the *koans* which these Buddhists use to gain enlightenment.

³ Esslin notes here that he refers to a quote by Ionesco in *Spectacles*, a French arts periodical, from July 1958. I was unable to find a copy of this article, so the citation is Esslin's.

In my early research on Zen and Absurdism, I realized that *Victims of Duty* has the tone and purpose of the Zen *koan*, which is a nonsensical story or riddle intended to depict the chaotic nature of the world and thus short-circuit the analytical tendencies of the listener. Ultimately, after confronting many such illogical tales and experiences as part of Zen training, people receiving the stories will detach from their need to “understand” in a logical sense and will reach an enlightened state wherein they accept and learn to appreciate the pure unpredictability of existence. This is certainly the structure of Choubert’s journey throughout the action of *Victims of Duty*, and, along the way, he encounters many other elements of Zen experience: an abandoning of desire, a realization of interconnectedness with the universe, a contentment with the present activity instead of a future goals, and the faults of language to depict truth.

Esslin has shown that Absurdist works such as *Victims of Duty* and Zen *koans* belong together in the tradition of nonsense literature (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 293-301). While nonsense literature in the western hemisphere has often been relegated to the realm of children’s stories like *Alice in Wonderland*, its aim — to depict a world wherein attempts at logic are met with ridicule or frustration — is important as a model to adults who wish to free themselves from burdensome constructs such as language and social rules of conduct. In fact, *Alice in Wonderland* has been used in western Zen practice as a culturally-accepted *koan*-like work (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 166). It is not unreasonable, as I will show, to think that *Victims of Duty* is also suited for use within Zen study.

Nonsense literature sets up specific paradoxes of existence through self reference, the use of non sequiturs, and an appreciation of events over answers — that is, of process over product — in order to accent the uncertain nature of language and other matters of civilization which tend to be taken for granted:

science, governmental rules, and religion, among other things. At the heart of nonsense literature, including the *Zen koan* and *Victims of Duty*, is a need to cultivate a kind of "detached committal" (Chambers), to the universe by seeing the faults in goal-based desires: that every question must have an answer, that everything is a means to some future end. Nonsense literature sparks a need to cultivate understanding of uncertainty in the universe. Not all problems will have a solution. Not all effects will have a cause.

One congruency between the *koan* and *Victims of Duty* is the inadequacy of language to depict the truth of existence. This is the first teaching of the *Tao Te Ching*:

Existence is beyond the power of words
To define:
Terms may be used
But none of them are absolute.
In the beginning [. . .] there were no words,
Words came out of the womb of matter;
And whether a man dispassionately
Sees to the core of life
Or passionately
Sees the surface,
The core and the surface
Are essentially the same,
Words making them seem different
Only to express appearance. (Lao-tzu 25)

Throughout the teachings of Zen, there is frequent mention of how words are highly inaccurate in communicating the truth of the world. Often, a Zen master will ask a student to describe the sweetness of an apple. Of course, it is much easier just to eat an apple to understand its sweetness. Words can not come close to communicating the essence of sweetness, or anything else. The truly futile part is when we try to use words to express how ridiculous words are. In Zen, words are merely a tool of humankind, and thus are very prone to inefficiency and fault. Words, as a human construction, cannot begin to get to the

nature of truth as it really happens to be. We seem to make an assumption that a thing and its name are somehow the same. "[. . .] a child has to be taught not only what words are to stand for what things, but also the way in which his culture has tacitly agreed to divide things from each other [. . .]" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 5). As modern semiotics is quick to show, the word or sign for something is not the thing itself (signified), so language gets very confusing (Chandler).

Within nonsense literature, there is a desire to depict "language [. . .] as an instrument of power" (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 117). Indeed, language gives the false impression of being able to control the universe, of which we are truly only a small and fairly unimportant part. In his *Annotated Alice*, Martin Gardner describes the universe as needing to be seen "apart from symbol-manipulating creatures who label portions of it (because) it's useful to the people that name them. The realization that the world by itself contains no signs — that there is no connection whatever between things and their names except by way of a mind that finds the tags useful — is by no means a trivial philosophical insight" (227). As in many of his other works, Ionesco consciously and brilliantly uses this "dislocation of language" in *Victims of Duty* (Ionesco, qtd. in *Playwrights at Work* 130).

The names of the major characters, for example, have dual meanings and thus lead to confusion when they are referenced in the dialogue. Ultimately, the whole action of the play is set into motion when the Detective enters and wants to know exactly how the previous tenant of the apartment spelled his name: Was it Mallot with a 't' or a 'd' at the end? The idea is, of course, that the government is concerned with matters "down to the letter." Tellingly, the one character who is so concerned with names — the Detective — does not have a name of his own,

but rather is referred to according to his governmentally-appointed position in a totalitarian society.

As the play progresses, the names of the characters prove ineffectual at depicting the person they are meant to specify. Several times, the names, as they sound when spoken, lead to confusions of identity:

Madeleine: [*to Detective*] What's the name of the actor playing this part?

Detective: Choubert.

Madeleine: [*to Detective*] Not the composer, I hope!
(142)

In fact, the name Choubert is a play on the French term *chou*, which means 'cabbage.' Another French pun, which doesn't translate easily into English, is based on the phonetic similarities between "Nicolas Deux" ("Nicolas the Second") and "Nicolas d'Eu" ("Nicolas of Eu"). This leads to similar confusion of identity when Nicolas d'Eu enters:

Choubert: [*to Detective*] It's Nicolas d'Eu.

Detective: [*looking rather wild*] The Tsar of Russia?

Choubert: [*to Detective*] Oh no, Monsieur, d'Eu is his surname: d apostrophe, e, u. (155)

This confusion of names is a typical example of how societally-borne systems, such as language and government, which are implemented to gain some depth of understanding and control of the universe and its many actions, will ultimately prove to be terribly deficient in getting to the core of life.

The problems of language — along with problems of self reference and logic — are typical of not only Ionesco's plays, but of traditional Zen writings. Note this famous Zen *koan*:

Nansen, a Zen master, encountered several monks arguing over possession of a cat. Nansen grabbed the cat and held it high above his head. "If you can say a word of Zen, you will save the cat. If not, I will cut it in two," said Nansen. No one could speak. Nansen removed a sword and quickly the cat was killed. Later in the evening, Joshu, a young student, returned from a long trip and Nansen told Joshu about the cat. Joshu, without a word, removed his sandal from his foot, placed it on top of his head and pranced out of the room. "If you had been here, the cat would have been saved," muttered Nansen. (Scott, *The Elements of Zen* 33)

A Zen student who is preoccupied with the fact that the tale relates a violent act — clearly in opposition to the Zen precept of compassion — would not be able to understand the important part of the *koan*: that the master realizes how an absurd action is a manifestation of Zen. Though the story is not considered to be true, it is self-referential because it relies on Nansen's telling a student about the story itself, it introduces non sequitur in the act of a student placing a shoe on his head as an act of enlightenment, and it illustrates the inability of language to provide answers by telling of a group of Zen students who are unable to answer their master's request verbally — even when the life of a cat is on the line — with the realization that the answer the master was looking for was an illogical action, not brilliant words. As Ionesco states in his *Present Past, Past Present*, "The only answer is still to answer by a nonanswer [...]" (94).

In *Victims of Duty*, Ionesco prepares us for paradoxes like this in the first scene of the play. Choubert and Madeleine are lounging in their living room. Choubert is reading a newspaper while Madeleine mends a sock. Choubert mentions that there is not much important happening in the world, only "a few comets and a cosmic disturbance somewhere in the universe. Nothing to speak

of. The neighbours [sic] have been fined for letting their dogs make a mess of the pavement . . . " (*Victims* 117). In only the first few lines of the text, the absurdity of existence is presented as a world where a catastrophic event in the cosmos is as notable as "dog poo."

The scene continues. Choubert reads in the paper that the government is asking the citizens to "cultivate detachment." The "Detachment System," which Choubert speaks of, seems to be a systemic edict by a totalitarian government. Here, we assume that the detachment being spoken of is one of denial. The joke is that a government is imposing a system of apathy, which would suit a totalitarian government just fine. Yet the detachment which Choubert later encounters in the play, and which Zen practice allows, is a detachment of awareness or contentment.

Madeleine, who rarely questions authority, says, "[. . .] the law is necessary, and what's necessary and indispensable is *good*, and everything's that [sic] good is *nice*" (*Victims* 118). Already a paradox has been established. How is a citizen to stick strictly to a law of detachment? If it is detachment, then one can not be strongly attached to rules. It is as absurd as the famous puzzle which states: This sentence is false. It can be neither true nor false. Likewise, a citizen can not possibly follow a rule that asks to not be followed. As Choubert notes, "It's political and mystical at the same time" (*Victims* 118).

Barely a page of dialogue has been delivered, and the characters are clearly in a conundrum. They are attempting to obey the laws of society, even when they do not understand them, and they are using language in a meager attempt to grasp what seems like an impossible request by the government. Choubert and Madeleine soon find that a governmental system, as a human construct, is often faulty in its attempt to impose order upon human nature. As

Ionesco said, "[. . .] no political system can deliver us from the pain of living [. . .]" (qtd. in Esslin 101).

In their obvious confusion, Choubert and Madeleine change the subject to something seemingly more concrete: the theatre. Yet, since we, as spectators, know they are characters in a play, this subject only provides more paradoxes of self reference. "All the plays that have ever been written, from Ancient Greece to the present day, have never been anything but thrillers," laments Choubert. "Drama's always been realistic and there's always a detective about. Every play's an investigation brought to a successful conclusion. There's a riddle and it's solved in the final scene" (*Victims* 119). Of course, his lament is not just a criticism of the theatre, but of the collective Western philosophy which assumes there is a formula to which everything must conform and there is a resolution to each problem.

Choubert explains that all works of Western theatrical literature, especially the Classics, are merely "refined detective drama" and that there ought to be something new in the theatre. Not a page later there is a knock at the door. It's the Detective.

The Detective is polite enough at first, "I'd never have knocked on your door, if I'd found the concierge, I wouldn't have dared trouble you like this [. . .]" (*Victims* 121). But, he soon comes to exhibit the unpredictable and contradictory quality which is at the heart of human nature according to Absurdism and Zen. Once he is invited into the flat and his problem — the letter at the end of the the previous tenant's name — is expressed, he becomes remarkably abusive without provocation, thus introducing the absence of a cause-and-effect nature in the behavior of the characters. Thus begins Choubert's journey.

The path of Zen enlightenment which Choubert unwittingly finds himself embarking upon comes about initially because of the Detective's forcefulness, though one would be ill-advised to bestow the title of Zen Master upon the Detective because the Detective has a desire to control instead of enlighten. The Zen essence of Choubert's action throughout the text of *Victims of Duty* is brilliantly mirrored in a passage of *The Way of Zen*:

The preliminary (purpose of the) *koan* begins [. . .] to obstruct the (traveler) by sending him off in the direction exactly opposite to that in which he should look. Only it does it rather cleverly, so as to conceal the stratagem. Everyone knows that (truth) is "within" oneself and is not to be sought outside, so that no student would be fooled by being told to seek it by going (far outside of the self). On the contrary, he is told to look for it within himself! Worse still, he is encouraged to seek it with the whole energy of his being, never giving up his quest [. . .]. He is encouraged, in fact, to make a total fool of himself, to whirl round and round like a dog trying to catch up with his tail. (Watts 164)

Ionesco speaks to this idea in *Notes and Counternotes*: "We need to be virtually bludgeoned into detachment from our daily lives, our habits and mental laziness, which conceal from us the strangeness of the world" (25). The Detective berates Choubert about the single letter to such an extent that Choubert gets physically lost in himself and the importance of finding this pointless bit of information.

While Madeleine is in the kitchen, the Detective begins to interrogate Choubert. A portrait of Mallot is produced: the man has a bruised face, a torn collar, and he is unshaven. Within the production I directed, a projection of this photo was introduced for the audience to see what Mallot looked like. It is Choubert himself, but because the man in the photo — a man who, as it is later

revealed, murdered his own father to avenge the death of his mother, thus giving the Detective reason enough to want to find Mallot — is alien to Choubert, he does not recognize himself. The truth of Mallot's identity — that he is, in fact, Choubert — is not directly addressed in the script. My decision to bring it to light was intended to add to the self-referential portions of the action. Choubert is forced to find his true self: the self he lost when he became a man who has sinned against nature.

What follows is a series of scenes wherein Choubert finds himself exploring the frightening and misty world of his inner self in order to capture the esoteric. These scenes accentuate the bizarre paradoxes of existence and memory through self-reference. They also depict Choubert's awakening to existence as an eternal process where answers are not usually found, but the struggles with questions remain.

Hereafter, Madeleine and the Detective become doppelgangers at the bay of Choubert's conscience. Madeleine is transformed into a heightened version of her younger self as, we assume, Choubert remembers her. The Detective uses his never-ending bag of disguises to become people in the imagination of Choubert. In reaching into the depths of his memory in order to find the Detective's trivial nugget of information, Choubert is assisted by Madeleine and the Detective as they adopt new personas.

The first scene, wherein Choubert and Madeleine are beginning a romantic encounter, is cut short just as Choubert seems to be finding the joy in his past and not the answer to the Detective's riddle. Clearly this is a parody of modern psychoanalysis where the organic stream of a personal psyche is ignored by the analyst when the actions of the mind are not getting to a quick answer. "Certain [. . .] Buddhists and [. . .] psychoanalysts have foreseen [. . .]

the problem of the 'why' of our desires. [. . .] The 'why' that certain Buddhist disciples sought, [. . .] or that the person analyzed by the psychiatrist was required to produce, became one with the 'how,' [. . .]. When psychoanalysis succeeds absolutely, which is practically impossible, desire is totally neutralized; it is 'not willing' that ensues" (Ionesco, *Present Past, Past Present* 94). Using force as a means of trying to control the mind and emotions seems the mode of operations for the modern psychologist. As Ionesco shows, the human mind must first be sparked out of complacency before it can be enlightened.

As Choubert begins to obey the commands, the Detective says, "He's down the first steps all right. Now he must go right down. He's not doing so badly so far. [. . .] You've got to go deeper, Choubert" (*Victims* 129). Madeleine, who assists the Detective though he is clearly abusing her husband, reminds Choubert of his duty. "Look for Mallot, Mallot, Mallot..." (129). Choubert is quickly stuck in the mud of his own mind. He plods along the ground as if sinking literally and metaphysically in mud. Slowly he sinks until he vanishes from sight.

What occurs next is a shocking episode for Choubert. He finds Madeleine in his mind again, yet now she is old and her face is sunken and weathered. Moments before, it seemed as though the joys of youthful love had been frozen in time, but now his lover is a "poor faded doll," and Choubert is terrified. Here, Choubert gets his first glimpse of the world as a never-ending process where all things are being born and all things are decaying.

In Zen thought, "our world is a collection of processes rather than entities" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 5). That is, from a Zen standpoint, nothing is a means to an end, for that which we call an "end" is just a specific point in a larger process. We place importance on an event, but it is not separate from any other

events in the grand scheme of the universe. The dichotomy of scenes is important in the memory of Choubert. He relives a moment of youthful innocence, and, within a few moments, he is finding the same woman to be aged. She is still the same woman, but these two specific moments are etched in Choubert's mind in such a way that he does not realize how the world is a single, endless event. He wonders why Madeleine was a beautiful girl one day and an unattractive, elderly woman the next. "We don't grow old when we are in love. I love you, grow young again, throw away that mask and look into my eyes" (*Victims* 130). His initial denial is understandable, but these two scenes startle Choubert into beginning to come to terms with the fact that the universe is not a mix of random points in time, but is a smear of occurrence. "Life on its way returns into a mist,/ Its quickness is its quietness again:/Existence of this world of things and men/Renews their never needing to exist." (Lao-Tzu 51).

A later scene also brings to light Choubert's cognizant finding of the interdependence of all things in the world. Here, Choubert confronts his father, played by the Detective, and the two men reach an understanding of each other. After all, they are so very much alike, but they each refused to see the other with compassion during life. Now the father is dead, and Choubert regrets not being able to make amends. "Let's make up! Let's be friends! [. . .] If you would look at me, you'd see how alike we are," Choubert pleads (*Victims* 136).

The Detective/Father proceeds to give an eloquent speech in which he explains his inner motivations for the actions of his life. We understand that Choubert misinterpreted much of his father's intentions. The Detective/Father ends his monologue with what amounts to a keen-eyed summation of a Zen view of the oneness of the universe:

[. . .] I was overcome with delirious joy, for you, dear child, existed, you a flickering star in an ocean of darkness, an island of being surrounded by nothingness, and your existence canceled out the void. [. . .] I was grateful [. . .], because if the creation had never been, if the universe had never had a history, century after century, then *you* never would have been, my son, and all the history of the world has led up to you. You never would have been here, were it not for that endless chain of cause and effect, not forgetting all the floods, the wars and revolutions, and every social, geological and cosmic catastrophe that ever was: for everything in the universe is the result of a whole system of causation, not excepting you, my child. I was grateful for (all of the sorrow throughout history) since at the end there was your birth, which justified and redeemed in my eyes all the disasters of history. I had forgiven the world, for love of you. Everything was saved, because now nothing could ever wipe out the fact of your birth into the living universe. Even when you are no more, I told myself, nothing can alter the fact that you have been. You were here, for ever inscribed in the archives of the universe [. . .] (*Victims* 138)

Compare this passage to Alan Watts' lucid detail from *Buddhism: The*

Religion of No Religion:

No thing, no event, can exist without every other thing or event. Very simply: without your parents, you would not have come into being. For you to exist, it was necessary for your parents to exist. That necessity doesn't change when they die. Therefore, you depend on your parents even when they have gone. In the same way, the universe will still depend on you, on your having been here, even when you disappear. [. . .] The fact that you exist tells us something about the kind of universe we are living in: it once produced you. You are a symptom of the kind of universe we are living in, just as an apple is a symptom of a certain kind of tree. It tells us something about that tree, what its function is. A world that produces a John Doe, who is nobody in particular, who is not even remembered by anybody,

nevertheless depends on him, despite his obscurity, for its existence, just as it depends on every fruit fly, every gnat, every vibration of every gnat's wing, on every last electron in every last gnat's wing — on every one of its manifestations — however brief those manifestations may be. [. . .] However short or long it may be, everything depends on your life. If you did not happen, nothing would happen. The whole world bears your signature, and it would not be the same if you were not in it. (44-45)

This passage, which is reminiscent of Ionesco's *Fragments of a Journal*, gives credence to the congruencies between how Zen practitioners and Ionesco saw the workings of the world: as a unity where distinctions between things exist only because humans have a need to impose notions of difference.

In this same scene, Choubert, at last, must confront another man he has forgotten: Choubert the murderer. Previously, the Detective and Madeleine had a brief scene reenacting the poisoning of Choubert's mother by his father. With this memory fresh in his mind, Choubert pleads with his father to forgive him for the trouble he had caused in their lives together. Now, both men are murderers. "I was wrong to despise you. I'm no better than you are," Choubert explains after telling of his need to carry out the revenge of his mother's death (*Victims* 136). Just as he found that the old woman who is his wife is also the young girl he fell in love with, Choubert begins to recognize that the man he currently finds himself to be is also the man the Detective has a photo of: a man who is wanted for murder. But the process of life goes farther back, and Choubert is also an extension of his father, a man who also begs to forget his own sins.

Within the speeches of the Detective/Father, we find many paradoxical phrases which seem contradictory, and yet represent a certain truth. "[. . .] I always had to spend October through March in the northern hemisphere, and

April to September in the southern, with the result that in my life it was winter all the time," and, "The good I did turned into evil, but the evil done to me never turned to good," and, a genuinely Zen phrase, "I'm no longer capable of hate. I can't help forgiving" (*Victims* 138). These statements show how opposition and contradiction in the world seem to defy logic and yet exist as reality. By accentuating polar themes which exist together in truth rather than negating one another, Ionesco begs us, as did Lao-Tzu ("A sound man, by not advancing himself/Stays the further ahead,"), to question the very nature of progressive logic (28).

Like these simple phrases of opposition, the scenes inside of Choubert's psyche are filled with typically Zen (and typically Absurdist) paradoxes of self reference, where the vantage point of the observer determines the degree to which truth seems fictional and fiction seems truthful. Choubert wanders in the cavernous darkness of his memory and finds himself alone on a stage. In the audience are two heckling spectators — Madeleine and the Detective who have adopted new personas — who berate Choubert. Already, the paradox of self reference is defined by the existence of a stage upon a stage and spectators who are meant to be watched by the actual spectators who have come to see the play. As in the first scene between Madeleine and Choubert, Ionesco again toys with metatheatrical methods and blurs the line between spectator and performer; imitation and reality; truth and fiction. From a Zen perspective, this very questioning of differences aides Choubert — and likely the audience — in realizing the nonexistence of such lines of distinction in reality.

Choubert, while on the miniature stage, struggles to remember a moment from his past. His struggle to come to grips with his own inadequacy to remember is truthful, but Madeleine and the Detective, as observers, think it is

false. "He's an old ham! It's ridiculous! Unthinkable! He's a liar!" cries Madeleine (*Victims* 143). Though they are seeing true drama on stage, they do not believe it.

As a play within a play, the scene seems to have countless facets which shock the spectators themselves. Madeleine and the Detective are actors playing spectators who seem to be parodying the very play which is being presented:

Madeleine: What's happening now?

Detective: [to Madeleine] He's remembering his past, I suppose, dear lady.

Madeleine: If we all started reminiscing, where would it end . . . We'd all have something to say.
(*Victims* 142)

There is a sense of infinite regression to the scene. By referencing itself so fully, it would not seem out of the ordinary for two spectators to appear in the scene and begin commenting on the spectators who are being observed by real spectators. Like the first scene of *Victims of Duty*, we have a scene in a play which is about the scene itself. It is a play which says something about itself, and thus a cycle of self-reference ensues: the play is about a play about a play....

Such is the problem with self-reference. Once we begin to refer to our selves as being separate from the rest of the universe, it leads to a constant struggle to find exactly how much we are different from what we observe; how much we are like what we observe. The notion that we can step outside of life and comment on ourselves from afar leads to a never-ending struggle to always be apart and always remain a part, too.

As Choubert finds, and as the path of Zen dictates, he must awaken to the fact that, to become enlightened, the individual must resign to the universal "suchness" which, in Zen terms, is called *tathata* (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 67). Choubert's journey within himself has only confused him with paradoxes and

inconsistencies of memory and desire. Choubert's search has been revealed as nonsense. The chaos of these scenes of Choubert going deeper within himself are countered by a scene of transcendence, which finds Choubert becoming enveloped by the cosmic unity outside of himself. Choubert, in his Zen journey, is "brought to his wits end — at which point he is beginning to get on the right track" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 165). There is a clear shift from his frustrating inner trek to his relinquishing of desire as he becomes awakened to all that is outside of himself.

While struggling to remember where he last saw Mallot, Choubert recites a series of place names, "Honfleur [. . .] No . . . At Mont Saint-Michel [. . .] Cannes" (*Victims* 144). Choubert is beginning to gain a sense of the worldly, but he still attempts to grasp it through names and comes up short. Yet, in the next few moments, Choubert finds "To have a goal [. . .] is a sickness of the mind" (Deshimaru, *Questions to a Zen Master* 57). This sickness causes the common person, such as Choubert, to forever live in the past, through dwelling on memories, and the future, by constantly striving for some goal which may not be reached.

"Stop this silly playing with words!" demands the Detective (*Victims* 145). Choubert abides, to a degree.

Here, Choubert's travels shift from a focused scavenger hunt through his memories to a brilliant awakening to the oneness of all things. "For, according to the teachings of Zen, all that has a finite and positive existence (such as, political systems and desires) is the obstacle which prevents man's reunion with the timeless, dimensionless not-being (*wu-wei*) of God," claims Richard Coe, author of *Eugène Ionesco* (qtd. in Hayman 121). Choubert, thus, breaches the walls of his perception and is in awe of the wondrous cosmos.

"One must look at things from a great height. One must not let oneself be caught in the trap of ideologies [. . .]," claims Ionesco in *Present Past, Past Present*, (42) and Choubert obeys this theory. Having exhausted the inner search, Choubert, by way of a ladder which he climbs, finds himself high above the world where his psyche skirts the Stratosphere. Choubert has found his way into the realm of enlightenment, which was described by Lieh-tzu, a famed Taoist:

Internal and external were blended into unity (and) I was wholly unconscious of what my body was resting on, or what was under my feet. I was borne this way and that on the wind, like dry chaff or leaves falling from a tree. In fact, I knew not whether the wind was riding on me or I on the wind. (qtd. in Watts, *The Way of Zen* 22)

Choubert, likewise, is mesmerized by it all. At the peak of his ascent into the realm outside of himself, he likewise mutters:

The air I breathe is lighter than air. I am lighter than air. The sun's melting into light that is mightier than the sun. I can float through solid objects. All forms have disappeared. [. . .] I am bathing in the light. The light is seeping through me. (*Victims* 150-151)

When he realizes at last that his goal-based search is in vain, he abandons it, and the world opens up to him. Choubert starts to see the unity of all things and is not concerned with the past or future. This stage is called *sanzen*, and the student, Choubert, is appropriately "perfectly dumb" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 166). He is, in a sense, transparent to the world because he has become absorbed by it. Here he can "look at the earth and sky and all without any sense of there being a problem (of the mind seeking the mind, since he is) in the midst of (all things)" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 166). Choubert, free of his burden to find understanding, vanishes for a moment into the void of being. "The alternative to matter, in fact, is emptiness; and man, released from the meaninglessness of

objects (and material constructs), is totally free — to merge with the meaninglessness of space!" (Coe 64). As Martin Esslin reveals:

(Traditionally), the great mystics experienced a sense of exhilaration and liberation. This exhilaration also springs from the recognition that the language and logic of cognitive thought cannot do justice to the ultimate nature of reality. Hence a profoundly mystical philosophy like Zen Buddhism bases itself on the rejection of conceptual thinking itself. (*The Theatre of the Absurd* 375-376)

No sooner has Choubert glimpsed the eternal wonder of the world than he crash lands back in his living room. As he emerges from the beyond, he finds himself stuck in a giant wastebasket; the whole search for Mallot reaching its fruition in the garbage.

The Detective ushers Choubert out of the trash and chastises him for failing in his task. Though Choubert has transcended the boundaries of spiritual and physical existence, he is a failure in the eyes of the Detective, who is a representative of society's ruling bodies. The Detective complains that Choubert has either been "too heavy or too light," though he is not sure which (*Victims* 152). In the eyes of the controlling society, one is wrong when he should be right and right when he should be wrong. "It's a vicious circle;" and clearly, if one is a law-abiding citizen, it is a circle one can never escape from unless one detaches from the need to abide (*Victims* 153). The citizen of a controlling government becomes so scared of breaking laws — of being judged — that soon the governmental enforcement itself becomes unnecessary. Citizens will police themselves and their neighbors until paranoia becomes epidemic. By detaching from this constant fear of not "doing his duty," Choubert is a glorious nobody.

Upon his return to earth, Choubert's living room is suddenly occupied by another figure, the Lady, who sits quietly in a chair and simply observes the

goings on of the rest of the play. Upon first impression, the sudden and unremarkable appearance of the Lady seems very random — a clear non sequitur — until it becomes evident that the Lady is a totem: a monument to detachment (Chambers 29). Her presence, whether as a byproduct of Choubert's previous journey or as a catalyst for his final awakening to contentment in the face of torture, marks a very important phase in the action of the story. Like an animal who sits quietly for a very long time, not being bothered by the ebb and flow of her surroundings, she depicts Choubert's goal — to gain the Zen practice of "sitting quietly, doing nothing" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 134). She is an incarnation of *wu-shi*, "nothing special."

As the Detective begins to berate Choubert once more, another character, Nicolas d'Eu, enters rather unexpectedly. As mentioned previously, his name is a pun on the name of Nicolas II, the Russian Czar, and this new character, as described in the text adds to the allusion by being a Rasputin lookalike.

Nicolas begins a conversation which seems to pick up on the opening dialogue of the play between Madeleine and Choubert. They discuss the theatre. Nicolas wants revolution in the theatre whereas the Detective really enjoys the formulaic theatre — such as that of Andre Antoine — which is easily understood. Here again, the play relies on self reference to bring the theme of nonsense back to the forefront of the action:

Nicolas: You see, my dear fellow, the contemporary theatre doesn't reflect the cultural tone of our period, it's not in harmony with the general drift of the other manifestations of the modern spirit . . . (*Victims* 158)

The Detective and Nicolas continue their conversation, and Nicolas clearly becomes a megaphone for Ionesco to present in plain speech the concepts of self reference which are inherent in *Victims of Duty*. "The theatre of my dreams

would be irrationalist," claims Nicolas (157). Clearly he wants a theatre which disrupts the human desire to understand instead of experience an event. "We'll get rid of [. . .] unity of character and let movement [. . .] take its place," he states (*Victims* 158).

Meanwhile, the Detective asserts his comfort in relying on the need for reason. "As for me, I remain Aristotelically logical [. . .], faithful to my duty, and full of respect for my bosses [. . .] everything can be comprehended in time [. . .] thanks to the achievements of human thought and science," the Detective claims (*Victims* 159). The Detective does not realize that, like the search for Mallot, the achievements of science have been a never-ending search where each answer only brings more questions. The scene is not only an example of the type of theatre which Nicolas desires — a theatre of detachment and chaos — but, it is also self-referential in regards to the difficulty of freeing the mind from reliance on rules. The Detective, unaware that the search for Mallot is a metaphysical pipe dream, still relies on his comfortable rules even when those rules prove to be faulty.

While Nicolas and the Detective chat, the Detective removes a large crust of bread from his briefcase and demands that Choubert eat it "to plug the gaps" in his memory. With forceful mode, the Detective commands Choubert to ingest the bread. "Chew! Swallow! Chew!" (*Victims* 157-166). While this prescriptive method for assisting Choubert in his search seems ridiculous, no measure is too absurd for a government agent in search of an answer. "Those who would take over the earth/ and shape it to their will/ never, I notice, succeed," (Lao-tzu 43).

In the midst of the conversation, Nicolas's ideas of a new theatre — a theatre which depicts effects with no logical cause — are realized within the play itself. The Detective, a pushy, but no less mature, individual suddenly goes

berserk and wets his pants. Choubert begins to behave like a child. Nicolas, whose laissez faire attitude hardly seems threatening, walks to the Detective and kills him. Nicolas, who was a vocal opponent to the Detective's demands, picks up the bread, pushes Choubert back into his chair, and chants the mantra, "Chew! Swallow! Chew!," as the lights fade. Choubert resigns himself to the demands and, as he patiently devours his bread, he is, like the Lady, living *wu-shi*, or thinking without thought — contentedly behaving on instinct.

Richard Coe explains, "(A fundamental assumption of modern Western philosophy is that) every effect was known to have a rationally ascertainable cause [. . .]" (*Ionesco* 23). In societies where Zen or similar mystical traditions are a part of the general physiology, the need for answers to all questions or clear-cut effects from all causes is looked upon as nonsensical in itself. In these final moments of *Victims of Duty*, Ionesco depicts characters and events which defy consistent answers or reasons. "How do you explain this?" he seems to ask. One does not and that is the point.

Martin Esslin claims in *The Theatre of the Absurd*:

In expressing the tragic sense of loss at the disappearance of ultimate certainties the Theatre of the Absurd, by a strange paradox, is also a symptom of what probably comes nearest to being a genuine religious quest in our age: an effort, however timid and tentative, to sing, to laugh, to weep — and to growl — if not in praise of God, [. . .] at least in search of a dimension of the Ineffable; an effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, to instill in him again the lost cosmic wonder and primeval anguish, to shock him out of existence that has become trite, mechanical, complacent and deprived of the dignity that comes from awareness. (351)

Victims of Duty belongs in this tradition of using ancient methods — those of the *koans* of the Zen Buddhists — to give westerners with a *koan* of their own.

An over reliance on logic leads to pain and frustration because the ways of the world defy formulas. Why are we born? When will we die and why? Such basic questions of existence will forever exist beyond the grasp of mankind despite its science, religions, and governments. Though it may be desirable to seek out answers, any kind of solution will remain eternally elusive:

To confront the limits of the human condition is not only equivalent to facing up to the philosophical basis of the scientific attitude, it is also a profound mystical experience. It is precisely this experience of the ineffability, the emptiness, the nothingness at the basis of the universe that forms the content of Eastern as well as Christian mystical experience. (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 375)

Choubert is an Everyman in a world of paradoxes and riddles. By being shocked out of his comfortable apathy, he finds not the answer to a petty governmental problem, but a realm of understanding that is beyond seeking.

Victims of Duty, like the Zen *koan*, operates by taking advantage of the weaknesses in human thought:

Instead of being provided with a *solution*, the spectator is challenged to formulate the *questions* [. . .]. The spectator's suspense consists in waiting for the gradual completion of this pattern (of images) which will enable him to see the (complete) image as a whole. And only when that image is assembled — after the final curtain — can he *begin* to explore, not so much its meaning as its structure, texture and impact. (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 366)

In the face of the frustratingly impotent task of communicating through language, *Victims of Duty* presents a series of images, like a dream — like life.

Though we will never know if Ionesco intended to write a statement of Zen, he has. In fact, there is an argument to be made that anyone who truly

wishes to make a Zen statement will fail because there is goal-centered thinking involved. *Victims of Duty*, therefore, is all the more Zen for his not trying.

CHAPTER III

A ZEN APPROACH TO DIRECTING

Three years had passed since I had directed anything. Prior to being chosen to direct *Victims of Duty*, my experiences with directing for the stage had been rather varied. As an undergraduate at Tarleton State University, I had directed several productions, the final one being a children's show, *My Name Is...Rumplestiltskin*, which was presented on the largest stage at the university. I was rather proud of the production. After graduating with my BFA, however, I lived in San Antonio for two years and sold pottery and futons and did no theatre whatsoever. To return to directing after a three-year hiatus with a production of a complicated Ionesco play was, needless to say, very frightening.

My views on the role of the director had changed during my break from the theatre. I could not help wondering why the directorial process always seemed to be burdened with conflict. I often noticed some kind of inflated interpersonal conflict among the various artists involved in each production. I became so disenfranchised with the social games and power plays which plague the theatre that I had to take two years off before deciding to return to study for my MFA. I loved the process of creating a theatrical production, but quickly became burned out by what seemed to be extraneous stress.

As an undergraduate, I had become a bit self-possessed without knowing it. Yet, within a month of graduating, many things happened in my life that showed me how little I knew and certainly how little I had control over. I had plenty of time while in San Antonio to reflect, and I realized that, as a director, the problem had been partly within me — that the actors and designers with

whom I had worked sensed within me a force of opposition. While I had not done anything blatantly controlling, my focus had been needlessly stubborn. My fear of being seen as a faulty director had led to my desire to be overly manipulative.

This problem came from my misunderstanding of the role of the modern director. Originally, I learned that the director was the "great controller" of a production. In my studies, I had been shown the traditional western model of the director which is based on Harley Granville-Barker and the Duke of Saxe-Meiningen. Here, the director creates the final product with a single vision. This director knows exactly where the actors are to stand and move. This director knows just what the costumes and scenery should look like. This director has a command of the production which borders on despotism. I clearly needed to adopt an outlook on directing which was not based so much on the need to control. I had a hunch that a non-western philosophy might provide a start towards accomplishing this.

Though I had studied Eastern philosophy for years, I had never really figured out how to apply Zen ideas practically to the process of creating theatre. Part of the problem was that I had a goal-oriented idea of the application of Eastern philosophy to the Western concept of directing for the theatre. That is, I was preoccupied with the typically western notion of building to a future product — the performances — more than enjoying the moment-to-moment process of rehearsing. During my hiatus from the theatre, I discovered that this goal-oriented view was contrary to the philosophies of Zen, which sees the universe as a continuous process without a specific end product.

Strangely, I had slowly been applying Zen ideas to my life over those years without really knowing it. There had been a slow shift in my outlook on

the world. I had, as a means of reducing stress in my life, distanced myself from the need to control situations and people. I started by consciously asking myself if a particular situation was within my control to change. If it wasn't, I would detach from my desire to alter that which I couldn't affect. Over time, I began to do this more subconsciously and I found that I didn't get unduly upset about situations which were not in my power to alter. My desire to control was assuaged. The uncertainty of human actions and the ebb and flow of events in the world — things which are antithetical to logic — became sources of curiosity and interest instead of frustration. By incorporating these incidentally Zen moments into my daily activities, I realized, in hindsight, that I had been practicing Zen. My thoughts came full circle to a point where I understood more clearly how directing a play could be a Zen experience and not a conflict-laden nightmare.

By finding the value of "holding back" my need to control, the notion that the actions of a director include the *inactions* of a director became clear to me as a solution to my control problems in the theatre. The motion of Zen is called *wu-wei*, or "not doing" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 16). For the artist, I see *wu-wei* as a state of not imposing artifice, while not denying nature. In my earlier experiences of directing for the theatre, I had not considered the idea of allowing the play to reach its fruition through a collaborative, organic process which did not have an iron-fisted person at the helm.

During the process of rehearsing, there are too many variables to control (mood of actors, comprehension of direction, agreeability of fellow artists), and the director who wishes to control will only lose sleep and become very upset because something will always defy that desire to command. Like the farmer who lets her fields lie fallow every few years, the act of doing nothing — that is,

stepping aside to allow the collective nature of things to take their course — is as important as taking strong actions. From moment to moment, the Zen director must choose to let all elements flow together as they befit the production itself.

Zen is generally frustrating to western scholars because one aspect of Zen is to elude codification and thus avoid typical intellectual analysis altogether. There are no "Ten Commandments of Zen." The closest thing to a guide is probably the *Tao Te Ching*, which contains poetic observations which are more like laws of nature than regulations to be adhered to by people. Rules, in general, do not exist in Zen. For the Western director, who is used to delineated methods like the Stanislavski system of actor training or enumerated methods of script analysis, Zen seems too esoteric to be practical.

I did not write down my notions of a Zen directing environment as a series of maxims to apply. So often in the world of the theatre we fall prey to idol worship, and we take the written manifesto of someone other than ourselves as law. This problem of life — and I extrapolate it as a problem of the theatre — is related in a passage from *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts. "(People) who have dehumanized themselves by becoming blind worshippers of an idea or an ideal are fanatics whose devotion to abstractions makes them enemies of life,"(30). This dedication to methodical artistry is a slippery slope for the artist, and I was not blind to it. Artists study the works of their ancestors and tend to fundamentally adopt these methods as their own instead of figuring things out for themselves. However, the Zen approach to directing is essentially a lack of a system and more of an adoption of an outlook. Zen, as an artistic outlook, is a thing which few westerners have been able to understand with an amount of truth. For the director of a play, following a rigid "system" often produces a work which seems steeped in artifice, whereas, for me, Zen directing is almost a

reaction against systematic methods. While it is important to know of one's artistic ancestors, Zen, for a director, also provides an antidote to the epidemic of artifice. Zen could, perhaps, be assimilated into some western "systems" of direction without compromising the benefits of such systems.

That is not to say that there were not certain phrases and textual excerpts which came into my head and became, more or less, influences on my work. On the contrary, several sayings from various sources kept creeping into my head throughout the process. Notably, a quote from Shunryu Suzuki, from *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, became very important to me:

The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous. Then they will be in control in a wider sense. To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him. So it is with people; first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy. To ignore them is not good; that is the worst policy. The second worst is trying to control them (by force). The best one is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them. (32)

This maxim suggests to me, as a director, that there must be trust involved in all aspects of the process of production. If a director trusts his actors and designers, and they have a certain trust in the director, then there is an implied need to live up to each other's trust, and everyone does their best to not upset that trust. In addition, Suzuki seems to be saying that a director, or any leader, has a certain amount of control over situations merely by being a visible observer. That is, the actors will find within themselves the needed inspiration if they are not being commanded. However, they should also not be allowed to go in any haphazard direction. Sometimes artists — actors, designers, directors — will attempt to overcompensate when asked to step outside of their "comfort zone." Their actions again are commanded by their purposefully overstepping

moderation and going blindly in *any*, seemingly random direction. In so doing, they create a work which is as artificial as if they had stayed in their "box." There are many directors who do not understand this need for moderation. They try to overcompensate one way or the other in their quest to achieve a preconceived vision, and they lose sight of the need to stay true to the nature of the process of working. The irony, however, is that the more they try to command the flow of the creative process, the more apt things are to go wrong.

This idea is communicated in chapter 17 of the *Tao Te Ching*:

A leader is best
When people barely know that he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him,
Worst when they despise him.
'Fail to honor people,
They fail to honor you;'
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will say, 'We did this ourselves.' (Lao-tzu 34)

Using this passage as a primary cornerstone for my Zen notion of directing, I merely had to conduct rehearsals and meetings which had a certain temper of trust and cohesion among the various people and events involved. I did my best to behave in a manner which was conducive to natural and spontaneous activities. I would promote someone's chain of freely-associated ideas or I would sit back to allow an actor a moment to get to her own personal "a-ha!" I always had to find moderation between averting conflict and not being railroaded out of my own ideas. That is, one possible concern for the Zen director would be his becoming a "yes man" in his attempt to avoid conflict. By doing this, the Zen director cheats himself out of his own happiness at being a facilitator. Being a "yes man" is a way of dealing with conflict which is as fraught with problems as the desire to control. They are opposite ends of a dangerous

spectrum. "[. . .] the final position of Zen is that it does not take any special viewpoint, and yet is free to take every viewpoint according to the circumstances" (Watts, *The Way of Zen* 168). Sometimes, the greatest thing a person can do is *wu-shih*, "nothing special."

I often reminded myself that the term "director" means one who *directs*, not *commands*. Sometimes the word "catalyst" came to my mind. Scientifically speaking, a catalyst is not actually a part of a chemical process. It facilitates the chemicals involved in their working together, but does nothing itself. That is *wu-shih*. I wanted to be a catalyst for brainstorming and spontaneous discoveries among the artists instead of a figurehead who readily provided answers.

Children at play are empowered by this method of working together. Each child builds on the imaginations of the others and they arrive, in a few minutes, at the truth of their game. But, they also understand the mutability of the game because, tomorrow, their imaginations will have a fresh set of ideas to bounce around. Like these children, the Zen director must be aware of the second cornerstone of my approach: the artist as the eternal beginner.

In his essay "The Act of Possession," Peter Brook makes a very Zen observation about the process of creating theatre:

Rehearsals don't lead progressively to a first night. This is something very hard for some actors (and directors) to understand — especially those who pride themselves most on their skill. (The mediocre artist) 'discovers' a way of doing each section (of the play and) he battens it down [. . .] But, the really creative (artist) is compelled, by the honesty of his search, endlessly to shed and start again. (423)

Here, Brook speaks to the Zen idea of always being a beginner. Shunryu Suzuki repeats this observation: "If your mind is empty, it is ready for anything;

it is open to everything. In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities; in the expert's mind there are few."

This idea — that we are always learning, we are always beginners — is important, I think, for theatre artists, especially directors. It is now my belief that nobody truly knows what it takes to direct a play; to create art. In the past, there have been times when I was pretty certain that I knew how to direct a play. I had adopted strict rules of conducting rehearsals. In time, however, I would find the faults in these methods. Shunryu Suzuki said, "If your practice makes you worse, it is ridiculous," (*Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* 58). My directorial practices had made me become a frustrated artist. I had desired comfort in certain knowledge, even if the knowledge was flawed. I realized, along the way, that each production, each rehearsal, each hour, each minute bears something new. I have seen artists discover something which feels so truthful though it does not fit into a prescribed method. As life unfolds, we are always naive. "A man who knows how little he knows is well, / A man who knows how much he knows is sick" (Lao-tzu 71).

A director, or any artist, should thus pay close attention to her own ignorance of the workings of the many processes of creation; because an artist who sets her method in stone is ignoring the beauty of being naive. Learning, in both the theatre and life in general, is an unending journey. There might be a performance someday. In fact, it is likely. But the performance will itself be framed by many factors — weather, cast and crew moods, audience reactions — which we can not plan for. During each rehearsal of *Victims of Duty*, I wanted to find out what we could discover and have fun with *at that time*. As actors, as designers, as artisans, as directors, as humans, we are beginners again today, so "let's play."

Upon deciding to experiment with a Zen approach to the rehearsal process, I wanted to make several things very clear for myself from the beginning. First, I wanted to avoid taking what I saw as an obvious path of making the production decidedly "Asian" in its staging. The concept of Zen exists throughout the world by many terms; and, while we associate it with Oriental countries, I did not want to fall into the unsubtleness of giving it a specifically Kabuki or Noh staging. While I did introduce a few small elements of these traditions, I used them mainly for technical reasons, and I wanted to try a little experiment to see if Western audiences would accept these conventions. My inclusion of the *kurogo* ("man in black"), which is an ancient convention of both Chinese and Japanese theatres, may seem related to the Zen approach because there appears to be a correlation to Asian themes in the production, but I did not intend for the *kurogo* to be a facet of the Zen approach, per se. Instead, I was curious if a performer could appear on stage, and, because of her lack of identity in the action of the play, be essentially ignored by spectators. Oriental audiences have grown to accept the fact that there might be people on the stage who are dressed in black, and who perform technical functions for the actual performers. Would such a figure distract Western viewers? That is what intrigued me since *Victims of Duty* required certain technical elements which would have been nearly impossible otherwise.

Also, I wanted to avoid making any defining reference to my approach. My choice not to tell the designers and actors specifically about my ideas was conscious. Some directors spell out the philosophies of their directing methods to the cast and crew at the beginning of their rehearsal process (*Stoicism and the Actor* 64-65). I knew that the production would present the actors and designers with enough of a challenge. If I had merely mentioned 'Zen' to any of them, I

know they would have used valuable time searching through the internet and library looking for books about the "rules" of Zen. The irony would be that, had they done this, it would have flown in the face of what Zen is all about — clearing the mind of over-analysis. A Zen director, I feel, performs best when the participants are blind to the actuality of the process. As Lao-Tzu has said, "Those who know do not tell, those who tell do not know" (60). In other words, claiming to be a Zen director proves that the director is not truly a Zen director. The truly Zen director practices her philosophy instead of speaking about her philosophy. As a director who incorporated Zen into the process of production, I felt I had to foster a production environment which permitted truthfulness in a free and cohesive manner. Within this rehearsal environment, the actors and designers could behave in a more honest, and thus more Zen, fashion than if they had actually researched Zen and tried to consciously 'apply' it.

Through my studies of Zen and of the theatre, I discovered that the key to directing a play as a Zen experience is to take each moment of the process as its own entity: to be true to the nature of the production and all of the elements therein on a minute-by-minute basis. Sometimes the director has to do the opposite of what seems necessary, like avoiding giving clear answers to facilitate discoveries in others. At other times, he must make strong decisions and actions which become a catalyst for others to have a basis for new directions in themselves. In all, it is very beneficial to avoid thinking so much about how things will turn out later. It is best to take care of right now.

In the following chapters, I will take the theories discussed above and explain how I orchestrated the process of producing *Victims of Duty*. I will detail certain successes in, and certain obstacles to, my first attempt at a Zen production.

CHAPTER IV

THE PRODUCTION OF VICTIMS OF DUTY

Problems in the Process

In previous chapters, I have discussed how *Victims of Duty* lends itself to a decidedly Zen analysis and directing style. Within this chapter I will communicate how my views of incorporating Zen ideas into the process of production helped avert some potentially overwhelming problems. In hindsight, I can see three areas which were causes for concern during the period of rehearsals: troubles with nonlinear thinking ("getting outside of your box"), issues with the costume shop, and, finally, a few minor miscalculations.

Troubles With Nonlinear Thinking

Since *Victims of Duty* relies on nonsense and illogical events to get its point across, there were times within the process of producing this play that I found a few of my fellow artists in a conundrum. They were having difficulties with the weird concepts of the play itself. Most notably, Rhinehart Pierce, the scenic designer, and Geoffrey "Geoff" Howard, who played the role of Choubert, had unique experiences with thinking nonlinearly.

The process of production began long before auditions. I spent a couple of months just trying to grasp *how* this bizarre play could be staged. The script demands things which seem largely unstagable: The actors must shift from one persona to another very quickly, Choubert is required to crawl through the cosmos, people appear and disappear spontaneously.

Before a cast was decided upon, I already had a clear idea of who the designers would be and what the design elements might encompass.

During July of 2001, I was in Angel Fire , NM, working for the summer stock company. Toward the end of our stay there, I cornered Fred Christoffel, the Director of Theatre and Head of Design, to beg him to reveal who the designers would be for *Victims of Duty*. In a brief, but highly intimidating, meeting in his condominium, Fred revealed that Rhinehart Pierce would design the scenery, Danielle Peacock would design the lighting and Sandra Payne, my girlfriend, who was an art major, would actually design costumes. This list seemed like an all-star team and the addition of Sandra marked the first in a series of beneficial events in the production. Sandra is a fabulous artist and her previous work in costume design at other theatres had been exemplary. Prior to this point, she had, however, been reluctant, because of her busy schedule, to infiltrate the Texas Tech Department of Theatre and Dance with her talents.

During the month of August, I met with the three designers several times at local restaurants and coffeeshops to have informal brainstorm sessions. A part of my process as a Zen director was to garner a comfortable rapport among the designers and me as early as possible. I began this aspect of my process by having relaxed sessions in locations other than the campus.

Initially, nobody really had a clear idea of what kinds of things could be done with the show, so we hammered out some basic technical elements. We wanted to experiment with projections, and we all decided that the lighting and scenery could be more mood-based instead of indicative of the superficial reality of the world. Sandra, because she lives with me, was able to have more frequent contact with me, and we were able to come up with a clearer design for the costumes during this time than the other design elements.

These coffeeshop meetings seemed to go really well. I eventually stepped in as sound designer for the production. All of the people involved reached clear

discoveries, and I felt that this period was very fruitful for me and the other designers. Jason Cook, who would be the stage manager, attended several of these get togethers, as well. After only a few such informal meetings, I realized that this five-member group would work well as a production team.

Rhinehart Pierce did well at researching the influence of Freud on Ionesco and he usually came to our informal meetings not with sketches, but printouts of pictures from the internet. This seemed slightly odd, but I decided that he was creating a "collection" of inspirations and ideas and that these printouts were part of that. Indeed, the pictures he found were very impressionistic and seemed to capture the mood and colors that the designers had discussed. I was getting excited to see him filter all of these ideas and images into some renderings of his own.

A few weeks later, as the rehearsals were beginning and we needed a design, Rhinehart came to my office with his first rendering. It was nothing like I expected. First, the color drawing was very unrefined. I understood that Rhinehart is a young designer, but, due to the very positive things I had heard about his work, my expectations were high. The rendering he showed me did not exhibit the great artistic skills I had heard about. Second, the colors he used were totally different from the colors we had decided upon as a group. Third, it was very realistic and plain. It was a normal, interior box set. I mentioned that it would lend itself very easily to a production of *Hedda Gabler*, but not our Ionesco play. I was hoping for something with an amount of abstraction and interpretation as opposed to mere representation.

I quickly found that Rhinehart is very defensive of his germinal ideas. I expressed my confusion about the nature of his design immediately. I asked him where all of his research had gone. All of the research he had previously shown

me had been surrealistic or impressionistic, either of which could work for *Victims of Duty*. Rhinehart launched into a defense of his early drawing. In essence, his argument was that the design was good because he was the scenic designer and that his drawing was the design for the scenery. Because he was the designer and the drawing was his design, I, as the director, needn't question it. I would later find that this sort of attitude — that the director shouldn't question designers — is common among the designers in our department. I felt that this could be an challenge to my Zen direction. Rhinehart's defensiveness seemed to be caused by his conflicted conscience. Because he was not comfortable with the design, he didn't want to be shown its flaws. I consider myself a fairly knowledgeable scenic designer, and I feel that he should have been a little more open to my request for him to challenge himself.

We decided to meet several days later in the Lab Theatre to brainstorm. I expressed my concerns to him. I suggested he should expand his concept to include moods, impressions and otherworldliness. The scenery had to express the deconstruction of language and ideas which formed the themes of the play. I wasn't intending to tell Rhinehart what the set should look like. I trusted him as a designer to come up with the specifics. The scenery, however, clearly had to be in harmony with the temper of the play and I don't feel I was doing any part of his job for him by asking him to redirect the design. Though I was rejecting aspects of his preliminary design, I wasn't compromising my Zen approach because I was open to any idea which seemed to be an extension of Rhinehart's previous research process, which included dream-like images and psychological themes.

"You want weird? I can do weird," he said as he began murmuring a long chain of ideas which *were* bizarre. They were, however, just random thoughts

without any correlation to the text and action of the play. They were strange "just to be strange."

"There are different kinds of 'weird.' There must be continuity in your weirdness. *Blade Runner* is a weird movie. So is *Edward Scissor-Hands*. But, take any element out of one and put it in the other and it would certainly be out of place," I mentioned. Designing a thing to be unusual is tough, because it must be believably and aptly unusual. That is, designing randomly "weird" elements creates a jumbled mess. The truly skilled designer can create new, believable environments which could never exist in reality. The key to this lies in the unity of the design among all of the elements. All of the pieces must believably fit into a well-designed whole. In Zen terms, the designer must glom onto the elements which are in harmony with the whole production and reject those which, for whatever reason, are not.

Rhinehart became frustrated. He clearly wanted to do only box sets (a term which, I feel, explains more than the shape of the scenery) as a designer, but he had been given only surrealistic plays to design. I told him there was probably a reason for that.

I was reminded of a passage from the *Tao Te Ching*: "Keep stretching a bow, you repent of the pull" (Lao-Tzu 29). After much stretching on my part to get Rhinehart to escape his artistic boundaries, I repented of the pull. I reached a point where I knew I could not push Rhinehart any further without beginning to impose on his position as scenic designer. We decided to use what he had given me with a few changes: the walls of the room would be disconnected like monoliths, the doors would be distorted, and the furniture would be covered in white sheets to represent a feeling of desertion. These new aspects, when worked into his early design, seemed to have possibilities I liked.

While all of these ideas were eventually incorporated into the final design, I was never very satisfied with the set once it was built. Rhinehart is an amazing person, a hard-working student, and I have seen him do wonderful lighting design. Each set that I have seen him design, however, seems to be a collection of germinal ideas instead of a polished unity. While the scenic elements he created "got the job done," I don't feel that Rhinehart really traversed his linear, structured tendencies during the production of *Victims of Duty*. From a Zen perspective, this is not a problem. Rhinehart is beginning his process as a designer. *Victims of Duty* was a phase during his process of becoming a great artist. So, if a verifiable "product" doesn't come about during each perceived phase of his career, that's perfectly acceptable. I know Rhinehart will continue to grow in the future.

Geoff Howard, however, seemed to make real strides as a non-linear artist during our rehearsals. I feel that, following *Victims of Duty*, Geoff had become a noticeably more-adept actor. There was a sense of "product" at the end of his process within this production.

This process of learning began with Geoff's somewhat-traditional approach to acting. Basically, as an actor, Geoff asks himself, "What does my character want?" and this leads him to have a goal to play on stage. The performance becomes a striving for an objective which is important for the character. Choubert initially has a clear goal as a character: to find Mallot. Yet this goal is illusory, and, within several scenes, this goal becomes muddled and, in time, the goal is completely forgotten about. Part of Geoff's acting theory — which is a modernized take on the teachings of Konstantin Stanislavski — includes determining *why* a character is saying and doing something at any given moment. Unfortunately, Ionesco wrote characters as collections of illogical

actions and contradictions, so Geoff encountered a pronounced challenge while playing the role of Choubert.

Initially, within the environment of rehearsals, we discussed "sticking points," or personal obstacles within the production. These obstacles included lines or actions which each actor was having trouble understanding. Then we, as a group, would justify the actions and statements being made. Sometimes this process would work nicely, but as the second week of rehearsals was underway and Geoff was unsure of how to say many of his nonsensical lines, I found that a different approach was clearly needed. His uncertainty as to why he was saying or doing certain things became evident in his delivery. When he reached a line such as "I can run without walking," which made no sense, he would either mumble his way through it or make a face which communicated his confusion.

Because of Geoff's concerns, I began to think about the nature of nonsensical language in the world. Children, Alzheimer's patients, people under stress, and drug users all make statements which, from an outsiders linear viewpoint, seem absurd. But, for the speaker, the words are clear and true. Like the characters in *Victims of Duty*, these people do not have the strict self-censoring filters that we expect in 'civilized' persons. They make truly genuine declarations of their own truth in the moment. When a child says that the dishwasher is a dragon, then, for a little while, the dishwasher is treated as a dragon as it befits her game. This is ultimately the nature of the theatre, too. When Geoff appeared on stage and was referred to as 'Choubert,' then, for a little over an hour, he was Choubert. There is already a basis for the illogical in the heart of the theatre itself.

I explained, "Whatever these characters say or do, it is their absolute declaration of truth. It is one-hundred-percent logic for that character at that

instant." Geoff liked this new direction. It took the stress of total justification — of always needing to know *why* — out of his work. I even came up with a kind of mantra that Geoff would use to great effect: "Just say it like you mean it." Of course, Geoff also repeated this phrase — often with a chuckle in his voice — for months after the production was finished. He seemed to admire the ridiculous simplicity of my idea.

This obstacle of acting outside of a linear acting theory — that your character always has a logical goal to strive for — was remedied by playing moments truthfully on stage. Geoff got a taste of my Zen ideas by redirecting his views to focus less on the future and more on the present.

Costume Shop Concerns

Since the Texas Tech Department of Theatre and Dance is an institution, there are many means of getting things done. Some of them are written, some are just assumed to be known by the members of the department. This problem had been made clear to me in my research of previous Texas Tech MFA Directing theses (Swan et al.). Before production began, I was prepared to deal with a host of miscommunications, power struggles, and frustrations among the various departmental entities and members. The problems I experienced were not as pronounced as I had expected. That is not to say, however, that the production process did not have a few missteps in understanding.

Sandra Payne, the costume designer, was the first designer to finish her designs, and, when I presented them to the cast at an early rehearsal, I think it truly helped the actors get a grasp on how each character might be visually represented. However, the process soon became a nightmare for Sandra, and much of it was outside of my abilities to influence.

The problems stemmed mostly from the workings of the costume shop at the time. The shop was in overdrive working on the costumes for *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* which opened a week after *Victims of Duty* closed. The shop had a new supervisor, Betsy Zumfelde, who was having some troubles getting acclimated to the department.

As it turned out, *nobody* was working on the costumes for *Victims of Duty* despite the fact that Sandra had excelled in getting renderings and paperwork to the shop early. Also, since Sandra was an art major, she had plenty of classes and work of her own outside of the department. That is, she was not a regular presence in the shop as part of some costuming class. Her time in the shop was *in addition* to her classes, not a part of it.

Also, the budget for our Lab Theatre show was less than meager. I found out at one point that a single pair of boots used in *Forum* cost more than our entire costume budget. Since a budget was never finalized for our production, I resorted to buying the fabric Sandra wanted with my own money. (I was eventually reimbursed.) Sandra and I felt that the conditions in the costume shop had reached a level of such absurdity that it was best to get the work done when we did not have to fight for space or time.

Ultimately, Sandra built several of the costumes by herself during the evenings when the rest of us were rehearsing, and the costume shop was closed. This was not only the time when Sandra was usually available, but the actors were immediately present for fittings. I happen to like this method of work, which I refer to as the "shoemaker's elves" work ethic. That is, you do your work when there are not any people around to get in your way and cause you unwanted stress. Then, in the morning, everyone notices all of the neat new stuff that was not there when they left the shop the night before.

Additionally, Tiffany Howard and Janeve Ellison, both graduate students who were painfully familiar with the problems of the costume shop, kindly volunteered their help during several of these evening sessions. Sandra greatly appreciated their help and support.

The problem was solved by making the most of the resources we were given. It was clear that the costumes were not getting done by the regular costume shop staff, and we found a way around it that was not too confrontational. Again, I feel that my Zen directing approach was not compromised because I did not ignore the problem, nor did I attempt to remedy the problem through force. While it was a moderate inconvenience to Sandra, it was the simplest solution at the time. I would, however, discourage others from volunteering to design costumes unless they are enrolled in a costume practicum class where they are a regular presence in the shop for credit.

Minor Issues

In addition to the problems with the avant-garde nature of the production and a few misunderstandings with the costume staff, there were a number of other issues which arose.

One aspect of the production which nobody really anticipated was the level of difficulty the cast would have in memorizing lines. To a degree, I expressed an early concern to the cast about the manner of the dialogue. In a more "realistic" script, the lines would have been easier to remember because, for the most part, each line would flow from the previous lines naturally. The conversations in realistic plays have a central topic, and they flow in a more-or-less logical progression. This is not the case in *Victims of Duty*. Some of the lines are just a series of random statements. Several of the monologues have a central

theme, but they seem to be more of a collection of sporadic thoughts on a concept instead of an explanation of something specific. So, this makes memorizing lines difficult. A line may have no precedent, and it is tough to know what comes after.

To my surprise, the task of memorization was much more difficult than I had imagined. As technical rehearsals approached, the actors had a very clear idea of their actions on the stage, and they seemed mentally prepared to go into "techs." Despite much work on lines, however, there remained a number of places in the script where the actors inevitably stumbled and switched up their lines with one another.

I could tell that the actors were ready in every other way, so several of the last rehearsals were used strictly for running lines without blocking. Tracy Stover and Tiffany Howard volunteered to come to rehearsals to be on book for the actors. They all sat on the "stoop" outside of the Lab Theatre, and, as the sun set, they went over and over the lines. To a large degree, since there was little I could do, I remained somewhat distant from these rehearsals. I did not want to waste their time by imposing my thoughts or ideas that late in the process. They just needed time. The principal actors, Lisa Comer, Geoff Howard, Matt Chauncey and, sometimes, Robby Burt, met outside of scheduled rehearsals to run lines. I appreciated their patience and willingness. Geoff found the glory in pneumonics, and these became his means of memorizing his very unusual lines. Since nobody knew what was in his head, he was free, as an actor, to come up with any device he needed to get from one line to the next. Lisa and Robby, the other principals, seemed to do well through simple repetition. In fact, I have no idea what Lisa did, but she was the first to memorize her lines and she knew them very certainly without apparent pneumonics.

In addition to line problems, there was one other instance during the rehearsal process which I felt proved that my Zen directing approach was tested. While Tracy Stover had been cast in a role which was not in the script — the *kurogo* — and was meant only to perform small tasks within various places in the performance, she was asked to attend many rehearsals. Since she was in quite a few scenes, even if only for a very short time, she had to be available to rehearse the setting of props or the removal of various costume items or the creation of some live sound effects. I did not readily see any way to make better use of her time during rehearsals other than to have her sit through longer scenes to find places where we needed her to do something.

However, after the first two weeks of rehearsals, she had missed three rehearsals without explaining why. In fact, I had cast her despite the fact that she did not even show up at the callbacks. I immediately began to think as the director I used to be: I wanted to let her know that such absences were not to be tolerated. I asked Dr. Jonathan Marks, my advisor at the time, what I should do. We both decided to ask Keith West, who was the Lab Theatre Producer.

I explained my concerns about Ms. Stover's missing several rehearsals for which she was called. I explained that I wanted to let her know that this was an unprofessional attitude. Mr. West and Dr. Marks both supported my decision to replace her as a way of "teaching her a lesson" about the nature of professionalism in the theatre.

That evening, Tracy came to rehearsals, and I mentioned that I wanted to speak to her while Jason Cook, the stage manager, went over some information with the rest of the cast. I had done this as an undergraduate. I had replaced actors who had trouble with attendance. I was notorious for it, actually. In the name of professionalism and, to a degree, to let the other cast members know

that I was strict in my views, I had, in the past, replaced leading actors just a week before opening. I was prepared to do the same here. In fact, I had asked Deanna D. Daniel, an undergraduate stage management student, to attend rehearsals that evening to take Tracy's place.

Tracy and I went outside, and I was prepared for confrontation. What I found myself saying took me a few minutes to comprehend. "Is everything all right?" I began. "Yes. Look I am sorry," she replied.

I then asked her to let me know if she was having troubles outside of the production which were preventing her from attending rehearsals. I told her that she was a valuable person in the production, and I did not want it to become a burden on her life. She said that she had been stressed a little about things in her life and that she had just not realized that she was called for the rehearsals she had missed. I thanked her and told her not to hesitate to let me know if she needed some time off or if there were issues in her life that needed to be resolved. I did not need specifics. She said she would not let it happen again.

Tracy remained in the show. This was far better than my original plan to replace her. In hindsight, I realized that, had I replaced her, I would have been reverting to the "controlling director" practices I was trying so hard to shed. I was a little struck with the way things turned out because I acted spontaneously. I had expected more confrontation, but, instead, I found an understanding based on trust with Ms. Stover. I feel this situation reached its fruition in a rather Zen-like manner after all.

She did a wonderful job thereafter. However, since her role in the production was never clear to me — the *kurogo* was more than a technician, but less than a full character— I can understand why she, out of all of the cast members, had reason to be frustrated (see her response in the Appendix).

Indeed, there were times that I realized that her presence at some rehearsals would be a waste of her time and I would send her home. Tracy, however, became, in time, a very valuable element of the production, but it was not always as smooth as she had probably hoped.

I feel very fortunate that these were the worst problems I confronted during the rehearsals. I am not so shallow as to attribute the smoothness of the process to my directorial approach, though some situations seemed to be mollified because of it. Mostly, I think the production excelled in being produced by a team of actors and designers who were very willing to work together and knew that everyone needed understanding and encouragement from one another. This is more of a matter of synchronicity for which I feel blessed to have had.

Reflections on the Process

I have spent the past few chapters notating my views on the text and production of *Victims of Duty*. I analyzed it as I saw it: as a work of Zen. However, am I concerned that others might not have seen this? Not at all. I am often annoyed at artistic works that spoon-feed a style or message. Samuel Goldwyn is famous for saying, "messages should be delivered by Western Union." I have to agree. The truly wonderful thing is that artistic works will carry a message whether it is intended by the creator or not. Every viewer, having applied their own requirements for a "meaning," will walk away from it with something different. It would be futile to worry about this because it is hardly within the realm of the artists abilities to force the same message on everyone. Since a creative work is informed by the opinions and desires of the artist, the final work will inherently reflect the artist's views. My direction of

Victims of Duty ultimately reflected my "style" of directing, even though I tried a fairly noninvasive directorial process. Several people who had seen other shows I had directed commented that *Victims of Duty* "looked like a Cris-directed play." Though I didn't force a style, it still manifested itself. There is something very Zen about this intangible aspect of creation.

Several days after *Victims of Duty* closed and the stage had been struck and all of the artists involved had begun work on other projects, a postmortem — an inadequate term since the production lives on as I write this thesis a year later — was held in the Maedgen Theatre greenroom. The meeting was open to all who had seen or participated in the production at any level. Dr. Jonathan Marks, Head of Directing at the time, welcomed all who attended. He then proceeded to give a quick lecture on Pataphysics, which is a fictional "science" created by Alfred Jarry (1873-1904), the first modern Absurdist (Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* 309-313). This speech, which was a mere five minutes in length, was a clever way of establishing the antecedents of the themes in Ionesco's writings. I was grateful for the history since, it seems, some of the people who attended the session were somewhat confused by the play Ionesco had created and the production we had staged.

The postmortem seemed to be largely about the nature of the play itself. Though many people enjoyed the performances, they were unsure of what it was "about." While I, who had studied the script at length, was fairly certain of what the play was "about," I was hoping that the unfamiliar audience would simply find something original, intelligent, or striking in the dynamic experience of the many images, words, and sounds of the performance.

During the postmortem, an interesting thing occurred. No sooner had one person shared a dislike for a particular part of the performance, others

would speak up to say that the exact same part was their favorite portion. One such incident, which sticks in my mind because both persons involved were so vocal about their thoughts, was between Dr. Louise Stinespring, a guest professor of acting, and Professor Polly Boersig, Head of Costume Design at that time. Dr. Stinespring felt that the lengthy monologues between Choubert and The Detective, portraying Choubert's father, were much too slow and that the pacing "took (her) out of the play." However, Polly Boersig felt that these passages added a rare moment of honesty and intimacy which drew her into the production more.

Some attendees responded with a dislike for the way Geoff portrayed Choubert in a somewhat realistic — that is, less presentational and caricatured than the other characters — style. This acting choice, which I felt was brilliant, was largely Geoff's decision because he saw Choubert as a fairly normal man who found himself in abnormal situations (see his response in Appendix A). A few other respondents, however, replied that the choice to depict Choubert as a kind of meek Everyman — a quality which Geoff possesses off stage, as well — was bold and clearly helped carry the attention of the audience from the ridiculous scenes to the heart-rendingly painful ones and beyond. Choubert, by not being as grotesque as the others, was able to be the one source of continuity within a play where nothing is permanent.

Much of the meeting consisted of questions for the designers, all of whom attended the meeting. They aptly answered questions regarding the design choices with various additional comments from myself. The lighting designer and the costume designer both received praise. There were some questions about the aesthetics of the scenic design. Rhinehart admitted that the scenic design could have been more developed. He also was commended on several

design decisions, such as the use of carpeting and the disjointed nature of the walls. I recall Patrick White, a graduate student, being upset over the choice of exit music: 'Snowbird' by Anne Murray. I liked this response since, as sound designer and director, this bizarre choice was mine. The song was so off-the-wall and, yet, so seemingly fitting that I have to chuckle. The song seemed to be so antithetical to the mood of the play that, even as the audience was exiting the theatre, the jarring action of the performance continued. Even now, a year later, I can not find a song which would be more suited to the event.

But, after the postmortem adjourned and *Victims of Duty* was, for all concerned, defunct, what did I learn?

I did not have a goal, per se, to teach the audience something or to prove myself worthy of anything. While I was interested in a new approach to directing, and I feel I made some great discoveries because of this approach, I was not using the production solely to test my approach. The Zen approach sounds good in a thesis, but ultimately my direction of *Victims of Duty* was about something much more personal. I wanted to have fun. In the end, I hoped, I would be able to sit in a theatre and watch a play I knew I would enjoy. By default, maybe other people in the audience would enjoy it, too.

I remember the rehearsals most clearly. I entered each rehearsal without a single concrete idea — with the possible exception of a few not-so-lucid 'images' which were merely notions of stage pictures — and by the end of each rehearsal, the cast discovered an unprecedented facet of the play. There were only about five or six such pictures in my head before we began rehearsals: The *kurogo* holding a flashlight above Choubert in an interrogation scene; Choubert, gasping in disbelief, kneeling beside his dead mother; Nicolas d'Eu entering from the lobby with his bicycle; The Detective, with his megaphone, prancing around

the stage like a televangelist; the entire cast pointing and yelling at Choubert as he sits in his baby chair while the lights fade to black in conclusion, and so on. I sought, as I have said previously, to enter each rehearsal with the idea that there would be more brainstorming than traditional 'directing' occurring. I wanted the ideas to be ours, not mine. There was not so much a censoring of 'unworthy' ideas, but rather an ensemble exploration of each idea until its nugget of 'worthiness' was discovered in some degree. Some ideas did not manifest themselves fully. Some were discarded due to clear budgetary, technical, or timing problems which would not permit us to fully explore the possibilities of the ideas. Occasionally, the group would banter around a concept and decide that it "just did not quite fit." Yet, each idea was given equal weight and, after a brief process of group investigation, some ideas reached their fruition on the stage, while others faded back into the background. I feel that an important aspect of the Zen process is the notion that an idea behaves like an organism — a meme — and it mutates as it is passed on. Sometimes it dies off. Sometimes it grows into something wonderful. The Zen director must understand the care and handling of ideas.

There is an old saying about directing: That it is all in the casting. While this idea is very open to debate, I have always had extremely good luck in casting the shows I have directed, and *Victims of Duty* is no different. Looking back over my notes from the auditions, I am struck by the remarkable synchronicity of the casting of this production. I recall the casting meeting where I had to adjust my "first-choice cast" to accommodate the Mainstage requirements. I cast a few second choices. I am so thankful that this occurred, since some of my first-choice actors, I now feel, would not have worked so well. I would like to think that the casting was because of some strong choices I made, but it is as

much the result of chance as anything. The process worked itself out, somehow, in such a manner that I ended up with a joyously gifted cast.

Lisa Comer, who played Madeleine, was really wonderful in the process. I cast her because, during callbacks, she *did* something with the role. She was making strong, informed choices about the part before she even had it. She was a freshman at the time and, prior to being cast in *Victims of Duty*, was fairly unknown in the department. Dr. Jonathan Marks said that casting a freshman in such a difficult and unusual role was a bold risk on my part. However, there was clearly something remarkable about her in the first place and I never even considered anything except a distinct vibe during her auditions.

Lisa was very professional and mature in her work. She was the first to have her lines memorized and she was not afraid to make distinct discoveries within the role of Madeleine. She was always on time. She did not fool around, as many students who are the same age tend to do. Lisa clearly understood that the role of Madeleine was difficult to even the most-seasoned of actors, and she lived up to it fabulously. I think she might have scared Geoff and Robby a little, too, by being the "new kid" who was always one step ahead of them in her work.

Robby Burt, who played The Detective, was also very strong in the process. I was always astounded at his ability to play the subtleties of the intimate moments of the production and, several moments later, switch to playing the absurd extremes and make it all seem perfectly normal. He, too, could make instant choices about his role and commit fully to them. Often, I would have no idea where these choices came from. These moments of simple, yet empowered, actions would just appear as though they were "meant to be." Robby had a very clear understanding that truly bizarre actions seem natural if

they are given urgency and dedication. I am so glad that I was able to work with him in his short stay at Texas Tech University.

In all, the cast members and designers were remarkable. They built off of what they sensed about my approach very well. They seemed to be an unending source of strong ideas and bold discoveries. I can not recall a time when they were not working to make the process an event in itself. The script frustrated and challenged them, and they seemed to know from the beginning that it was only going to work if they were allowed the latitude to plow through it with confidence and intelligence. I think that my role as a catalyst, and not a commander, helped them make decisions for themselves about the play. I never felt that I had to "pull" anything out of any of them as far as commitment to their discoveries.

I feel that my explorations of Zen as a mode of directing will continue. Indeed, since *Victims of Duty*, I have used this approach. It was furthered in my direction of a production of a short, original work titled *Every Other Wednesday* by William Roby, an undergraduate playwrighting student. Also, I am currently expanding upon the philosophies I outlined in Chapter III within the undergraduate Principles of Acting class which I am teaching. I am still finding myself in awe of how a collection of artists will find bold and honest discoveries if they are given a latitude of trust to do so. So often, their desire to create is squashed by rules and power-hungry leaders. It is a crime which seems to be perpetuated in the realm of educational institutions.

I seriously doubt that anyone left a performance with the thought: "Wow! What a really Zen play that was!" In fact, I would be a little worried if they did. I know what the production meant to me as a period of truthful work and of exploratory play. I know that I was given the opportunity to spend a certain

amount of time learning and creating with a group of talented people who are very dear to me. Many of my peers and colleagues still remark that they saw *Victims of Duty* numerous times and that it has been one of their favorite theatrical experiences. Others have forgotten it completely.

My Zen approach to directing is certainly not perfected. Such a thing is likely impossible, and mostly undesirable. I feel, however, that my technique was somewhat successful simply because when I look back on the production of *Victims of Duty*, I remember the process more than the product. I remember so many moments during rehearsals when something original was occurring; when we all found out something new together; when we were reaching realizations together. I remember Robby doing his "father" monologue and I wanted to burst into tears. I remember Lisa and Robby as Choubert's hecklers. I think I almost fainted from laughing. It was the actors who made these moments what they were. Having read the script, I could see the drama in the lines, but it was not until the actors made strong, but not forceful, discoveries that the text came to life for me. Now, even reading the script alone in my office, I hear their voices and I have to chuckle. What a joy to remember these times.

In an earlier chapter on my directorial approach, I quoted Lao-tzu. He said that, when all is said and done, a good leader should be invisible. I do not know if my approach was ultimately successful — whatever that might mean — but at the Departmental awards banquet at the end of the following semester, all of the major designers and the three lead actors in *Victims of Duty* won awards for their superior work on the production. I was the only one who did not get such an award. Strange as it sounds, I appreciated this. It makes me feel that I *was* successful. In the end, my role may have been *wu-shi*, nothing special. They did it all themselves.

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APPENDIX A
PERSONAL RESPONSES FROM
LISA COMER, GEOFFREY HOWARD,
AND TRACY STOVER

Upon arriving at Tech, I was cast in a leading role in a very difficult play and character. I was fortunate, but terrified. I didn't know the man who cast me and was so afraid as to what my first taste of college theatre would be like. But, I soon would learn my worry was in vain. In time I would meet a director that would end up being one of the best I have ever worked with. Cris Edwards was this person and taught me so much.

He did many things that were good but one of the most important for me was the fact that he created a safe environment where I felt safe to act and live. He did this many different ways, mainly by being open to our, the cast's, input. So many times a director is too intimidating or close-minded for an actor to feel like he has an independent thought. Cris was the opposite of this. He actually valued actor insight and if someone, anyone, made a suggestion he would always hear them out. Even when you knew he didn't like the idea he would let us try it. He was always praising, even if it was just for having the courage to try something new. When something didn't work, he would always take the blame. Even though it wasn't always his fault or it wasn't even his idea he would take the heat. He was also very good about praise and criticism. He made it a point to every night tell each member of the cast something he really liked about their work. It was always something different too. Far too often a director will solely focus on the bad things, telling the actor every thing he did wrong. While this is important, the actor begins to feel that all the good stuff is worthless, like no one is getting it. So, when Cris would mention small things it showed us he was really paying attention and was respectful of our contributions and effort.

Cris's insight into the language and script was amazing. His imagination and creativeness never failed to impress me. He would come up with an idea out of nowhere and could explain it so simply. His interpretations and directions were always clear.

As a whole, I enjoyed working with Cris very much. He taught me many things about theatre and acting that I will use for the rest of my career. He made my first experience one of extensive learning and growing as an actor in a safe environment at a very influential time in my career, and I am very grateful of him.

Lisa Comer

Date: Tue, 14 Nov 2000 16:48:53 -0600

From: Geoffrey Howard <sojourner@crosswinds.net>

Subject: Victims

To: Cris Edwards <credward@TTACS.TTU.EDU>

Well... let me start rambling here.... What did I enjoy?

I really liked the directing style. Very open. I liked how we all could contribute to a moment, but it was never chaotic. Your openness really came through when Tracy spoke up one day and she was not even in the scene. You didn't bat an eye, but listened to what she had to say. I love this kind of open style. It brings the cast together and everyone takes on ownership.

The script was hell to memorize. I wish that Robby could have had more time off from the shop to work with us afternoons on line work. I got occupied with playwriting for the RROAPS deadline and didn't focus early enough on my own memorization duties. My memorization work was total mnemonics since very little was said to make someone else say something... logically.

I really came to trust you that night we were working on the "theatre" moment. I can't remember exactly what happened. But you made a choice that brought out more contrast and made the whole moment more eerie. You have a good eye and good instinct which I hope you continue to trust.

The set and lighting elements really helped gel the show for me. I felt a lot better about it when I saw the design helping this odd script.

There were times I was surprised that you were not upset with us. We were so late in getting the lines down and I honestly thought you might let us have it. But you were always encouraging.

Costume design impressed me from the very beginning. She could teach our designers a thing or two. Wish the costume shop had been more supportive. But what the hell... lab shows are not as important as ANYTHING else in the faculty's life. Was that bitter? Don't quote me.

Lisa was good to work with. She was first with her lines down. Sometimes I felt like she might have forced a moment... but then it seemed as if everyone else in the play was a fragment of Choubert's mind and probably not all that realistic anyway.

Robby has a nice vocal quality and I enjoyed the simplicity he could bring to a moment and then turn around and play a bold choice. I would love to see him playing Jimmy in *Green With All The Dents*. But that's another thing.

Tracey impressed me with her trooper attitude. She had a small role, but never bitched once and actually contributed beyond what might have been expected of her.

I was troubled at times by the random quality of the script and was half-hoping that some lines would be cut. But I liked your admonition to just pretend you know why you're saying something and the audience will believe you understand it. ha ha ha

I really don't know what I would have done differently as a director. The process was very rewarding the entire time.

I think what I enjoyed most was the contrast. I endeavored to play

Choubert as an honest character forced into an absurd situation. It was fun watching the "parents" scene and taking it seriously while the audience laughed at it. It was fun watching the audience laugh and then look at me and then watching them deal with their laughter. Very weird. I liked having the opportunity to try out some acting theories I tend to push on my students. Most of the time I was just trying desperately to remember my next line, but there were times when I was able to relax and just listen and let stuff get to me. It was a fun challenge.

Damn, I wish I had something to criticize. I can't think of any choices you made or approaches to rehearsal that I could contend with. Maybe something will come up when we can all get together.

Geoffrey Howard
MFA Directing/Acting
Texas Tech University Theatre Department

Eudaimonia -- the pursuit of excellence is
its own reward.

Tracy Stover
Victims of Duty

I read *Victims of Duty* once before the auditions and I was very intrigued by the script. My character was not in the original script, but the Kurogo was added to help with the challenges. The principle actors were required to change on stage, and my character's job was to assist them without being seen. My character was derived from the Kabuki style of the Japanese Theatre. I was dressed in all black, and "in theory", the audience paid no attention to my character because of my total black costume. I had a hard time with that convention because I would walk on stage and off stage in full light.

I watched videos about Kabuki and I had some conversations with Cris, but I still struggled with my character's piece in the puzzle. At times I functioned as a movable prop giving the actors new props, and changing their clothing. Other times, the actors looked directly at me. I escorted Lisa and Robby to their seats at the theater, and they gave me a nod. Also, Matt made eye contact with me when he handed me the gun. I was unsure about my obtrusion to the play in the first place, and I was even more unsure about the inconsistency of the other actor's relationships to me. In the beginning of the entire process I was instructed to not connect with the other actors, and not to distract their focus from the action on stage. I felt that my small connection with Lisa, Robby and Matt during those particular scenes was appropriate for the situation, but it seemed inconsistent with the conventions of Kabuki Theatre.

From what I learned about the Kabuki, the "hooded stage hands" were to be ignored by the audience and the other actors. I tried to walk with gliding steps at a consistent rhythm to decrease my obtrusion, but at times I lost that. With this experience being my only one with Kabuki Theatre, walking with a glide was something that I had to think about. When I had a difficult costume or prop change on stage I was not able to think about my rhythm because I needed to think about the change. I did some studying about the roots of my character, but I needed a more clear explanation from Cris.

I understood that the script for *Victims of Duty* was a very difficult one, but I was really unsure about my place or motivation within the whole production. There were also a few times that I felt that my time was wasted. On two occasions, the actors were still working on their line memorization and I sat in the lab during both rehearsals. My part in the production was not complete without the actors moving through their blocking. At the time I was irritated, but looking back I could have spent that time solidifying my position in the production. I could have practiced my gliding step and movement patterns to make them more mechanical, and I could have discussed my questions with Cris.

I learned about the meaning of the play by watching the interaction between the director and the other actors, but I did not know how I fit into the meaning of the play. Cris helped me with some aspects of my character by pulling me back when I went too far, but for the most part I had to experiment on my own. One aspect that I really enjoyed about the process was Cris encouraging all of the cast to give suggestions to help troublesome scenes move forward. Because I sat around during the first weeks, I was able to be another set of eyes to help make sense out of actor choices.

I also thought that there was too much time spent at the table. As a cast we read through the script and discussed it for about two weeks. I thought that the first read through and two table discussions were necessary, but we should have moved onto our feet sooner. I understood that actors had difficulties with the script and their characters, but they should have had private discussions with Cris about problems. Large problems that affected more than one character should have been discussed with everyone, but each actor needed to take it upon themselves to discuss characterization with the director privately.

With such a difficult script and a limited amount of time, the rehearsals needed to be spent on the scenes themselves and the connection between them. Also, time needed to be spent on the difficult staging elements of the show, and how each actor deals with those elements. So much time was spent on characterization throughout the rehearsal process that Lisa and I still acknowledged each other during the run of the show, even though "in theory" I was not there. Cris' idea of adding a character was well thought out but it was not entirely defined to the other actors. I felt that I was not a part of the cast simply because the purpose of my character was not completely understood by everyone, inclusive of myself.

When I say not completely understood by everyone I simply mean the mechanical function of the Kurogo and my place within the action. The basis of my character was explained to everyone in the very beginning, but it was left there. There was not any further explanation especially when we began moving on stage, so I saw my character as an obtrusive object breaking the action.

Tracy Stover <traceintheface@yahoo.com>

To: Cris Edwards <edwardscris@hotmail.com>

CC: traceintheface@yahoo.com

Subject: Re: your RE

Date: Sun, 21 Oct 2001 18:48:50 -0700 (PDT)

Since I am just now responding to your email about my VOD response I hope that you understand that I really did enjoy myself during the show.

Tracy

Appendix B
Program And Reviews

 Texas Tech Lab Theatre

 Presents

Victims of Duty

by eugène IONESCO

produced by special arrangement with Samuel French, Inc.
October 2-8, 2000



SEVENTH FIFTH
SEVE
NT-
FIFTH

Figure 1: Program for *Victims of Duty*

Victims of Duty

by eugène IONESCO

directed by cris EDWARDS

Choubert	geoffrey HOWARD
Madeleine	lisa COMER
The Detective	robby BURT
Nicolas d'Eu	matt CHAUNCEY
The Lady	karla BASSETT
Mallot <i>with a 't'</i>	drew DRASCIS
Kurogo	tracy STOVER

scenic designer	rhineheart PIERCE
costume designer	sandra PAYNE
lighting designer	danielle PEACOCK
sound designer	cris EDWARDS

lab theatre producer	keith WEST
stage manager	jason COOK
dramaturg	keith WEST
technical director	jeremy LUNSFORD
properties head	carmen GOMEZ
light board	shelby BLAYDES
sound board	melanie BELL
projectionist	justice j FORBURGER
av advisor	keith WEST

Figure 1: Continued

Production Crews

Scene Shop Supervisor	Robert Gandrup
Scenic Crew	Robby Burt, Zachary Elms, Danielle Peacock, Rhineheart Pierce, William Roby
Lighting Crew	Christina Bauer, Melanie Bell, Shelby Blaydes, Billy Joe Chmielewski, Jia-hua Chin, Greg Nelson, Danielle Peacock, William Roby
Costume Shop Supervisor	Elizabeth Zumfelde
Costume Crew	BJ Ballard, Lee Elaine Bates, Lori Bivens, Jeffery Blatt, Lisa Comer, Amanda Dulin, Jeneve Ellison, Rosealine Fox, Kris Harrison, Ann Harrison, Tiffany Howard, Jodi Ingersoll, Shan- non Kirgan, Sandra Payne, Tracy Stover, Tracy Screws
Set Running Crew	Amanda Dulin, Molly McClure, Aaron Mastrianni, Sonja Ralston
Costume Running Crew	Deanna D. Daniel
House Manager	Michael Moore

make a note...

There will be no intermission during this performance. The taking of photographs, with or without a flash, and the use of video or audio recording equipment are a violation of copyright law and are strictly prohibited. Food and drink are not allowed in the lab theatre or lobby. Smoking is prohibited throughout the building. Late-comers will be seated by ushers at the first appropriate time. Please turn off all pagers and cell phones. Turn your memories over. Chew. Swallow. Eat.

director NOTES

Eugène Ionesco often claimed that *Victims of Duty* was his favorite among his many plays. Perhaps it is his most autobiographical. Perhaps it is because it was his first play to be more than "Absurdist." That is, it is cerebral, self-reflective, and even Naturalistic on occasion. Even if his specific reasoning eludes us, one can easily see why *Victims of Duty* is one of the classics of the twentieth-century theatre, though it is sometimes overshadowed by Ionesco's more popular works such as *The Chairs* or *The Bald Prima Donna*.

I think the play presents a masterful assemblage of styles and themes. We are to hear comments on theatre, Socialism, Freudian psychology, domesticity, familial miscommunications, Zen, nostalgia, cosmic entropy, random violence, and race relations. However, Ionesco has melded all of these facets into a compact work which is cohesive though not even lucid.

Like many works by Ionesco, *Victims of Duty* is a study in contradiction. This is even explained to us by several characters as we watch. The point to these contradictions is a matter of being human. We are greeted with a chaotic world where, despite what religion and science might suggest, things don't always follow a pattern. When we find contradiction, it is our nature to make sense of it in our minds, even if our conclusions aren't true. We can fight it, flee from it, or negotiate things. We can detach, even. But who is to say that there is any such thing as "character" or "truth"? Each of our ideas on these matters is merely a guess. We observe contradiction and try to make connections. Ionesco was fascinated by the process here. And he trusts us, as interpreters, to fill in the gaps.

special thanks

to Vintage Rose for assistance with costumes

to Mr. & Mrs. Edwards for assistance
throughout the production

dramaturg NOTES

Eugène Ionesco was born in Slatina, Romania, on November 16, 1909. He died in Paris on March 28, 1994. Between those two dates, Ionesco wrote 28 plays (among them *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs*, and *Rhinoceros*), along with a novel, short stories, dramatic theory, memoirs, and fairy tales for children. He wrote *Victims of Duty* in 1953. *Victims of Duty* is a wonderful example of Ionesco's trademark "anti-play" and Theatre of the Absurd (though Ionesco never liked that term, preferring Theatre of Derision).

In his early 20's, Ionesco wrote about his reasons for wanting to be a writer: "To allow others to share in the astonishment of being, the dazzlement of existence, and to shout to God and other human beings our anguish, letting it be known that we were there."

No one can claim that Ionesco wasn't among us.

glosSary

- Absurdism • A term coined by Martin Esslin.
- antagonism • When opposition is natural.
- Antoine, André (1858-1943) • Naturalistic director.
- Bourget, Paul (1852-1935) • French novelist.
- calvados • Apple brandy. Made from cider.
- concierge • Apartment manager.
- Ionesco, Eugène (1909-1994) • Author of *Hell of a Mess*.
- kurogo • "man in black" • A convention of Kabuki.
- Lupasco, Stéphane (1900-1988) Romanian philosopher.
- Naturalism • A little too natural, but not really.
- onerical • To be surrealistic.
- "own back" • To only concern yourself with yourself.
- Pataphysics • Science of necessary delusion.
- Surrealism • Onerical in nature.
- tao • the chaotic nature of things.
- water • A sound to make you want the w.c.

2000-2001 LAB THEATRE SEASON

Ellie and the Bear Man
by Michael Moore
Nov. 6-12, 2000

Woyzeck
by Georg Büchner
Feb. 5-11, 2000

*The Fourth Annual
Raider Red's
One-Act Play Spectacular*
Mar. 26-Apr. 1, 2001



2000-2001 MAINSTAGE SEASON

*A Funny Thing Happened on
the Way to the Forum*
book by Bert Shevelove
and Larry Gelbart
Lyrics and Music by Stephen
Sondheim
Oct. 13-15 & 20-22, 2000

You Can't Take It With You
by Moss Hart and
George S. Kaufman
Feb. 5-11, 2000

After the Fall
by Arthur Miller
Feb. 16-18 & 23-25, 2001

The Day Room
by Don DeLillo
Apr. 6-8 & 13-15, 2001

Figure 1: Continued

freedom for a new
THEATRE
the phalocentric
institution
has worn out its
purpose
REVOLT!
unity breeds art
when victims are
censored
from replicated
THEATRE
survives despotism
televised war-torn
consumer slavery!

Figure 2: Nicolas's Pre-Show "Propaganda" Handout

By Cory Chandler
Staff Writer

Nervous laughter occasionally disrupted the uncomfortable silence of the audience as Texas Tech students were introduced to the theatre of the bizarre.

Crammed with surreal images communicated through characters that manage to be as endearing as they are revolting, "Victims of Duty" attempts to convey complicated messages without the use of a conventional plot structure.

Written by Romanian author and playwright Eugene Ionesco, "Victims of Duty" revolves around a husband and wife who are visited by a mysterious detective, played by Robby Burt.

This detective soon reveals that he is looking for a man named Mallot and soon forces the husband, Choubert, played by Geoffrey Howard, to go through an introspective journey when Choubert reveals that he knows Mallot but cannot remember how.

The play centers around this inner voyage, as Choubert's wife Madeleine, played by Lisa Comer, and the detective attempt to guide him through the depths of his memory in an attempt to find the elusive Mallot.

Without using the traditional for-

mat of a play, "Victims" instead relies on symbolism and subconscious imagery to convey Ionesco's messages. Termed as an anti-play, "Victims" continually attempts to break out of the traditional molds of the theatre by contradicting itself and refusing to conform to the typical genres and plot structures used in most plays.

Review

The complicated messages in "Victims" are hard to grasp, even to those involved with the play.

"We are all trying to find the Cliff's Notes on this (play)," said Howard, who has been acting since the age 15.

Howard said this was his most difficult role because of the non-linear format and unrelated dialogue.

Tiffany Howard, a master of fine art acting and directing student, said everyone comes away with a different impression of the play.

"The thing about (absurdism) is that nobody comes away with the same message," she said.

Matt Hood, a sophomore mechanical engineering major from Midland, said he thought he got part of the play but felt confused once it ended.

"It was kind of a blur," he said. "I

got some of it because I read the program before the play, but it seemed like everyone up there was on crack."

"Victims of Duty" will be per-

formed in the Texas Tech University Lab Theatre through Sunday.

For more information, contact the Tech Theatre at 742-3603.

Figure 3: Review from *The University Daily* (5 October 2000)

Reviewer confused

To the editor: I am writing in response to what I deem is a poor review of Texas Tech University Theatre's production of "Victims of Duty." The reviewer stated, "students were introduced to the theatre of the bizarre." I feel that the review stems from a misunderstanding of Absurdist theatre. Please let me clarify. A reasonable definition of Absurdism theatre is theatre that creates "the sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition". (Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 1961.) The reviewer states that the message of the play is hard to grasp, which is typical of all of Ionesco's work. Every playgoer has the ability to receive something different from the experience. The challenge to understand the play, not just pan it, must come from within each person in the audience. Art can exist without understanding and frequently does exist without approval. Bravo to a cast, crew and director who tackled a brilliantly tough script. Thanks for exposing Tech to the possibility of learning something about themselves through theatre.

*Eric Skiles
graduate student
theatre and dance*

Figure 4: Letter from Eric Skiles to *The University Daily* (6 October 2000)

APPENDIX C
PHOTOGRAPHS



Figure 5: Robby Burt flanked by Jason Cook before Final Dress



Figure 6: Madeleine and Choubert discuss the "news." (photo: Rhinehart Pierce)



Figure 7: The Detective makes himself at home. (photo: Rhinehart Pierce)

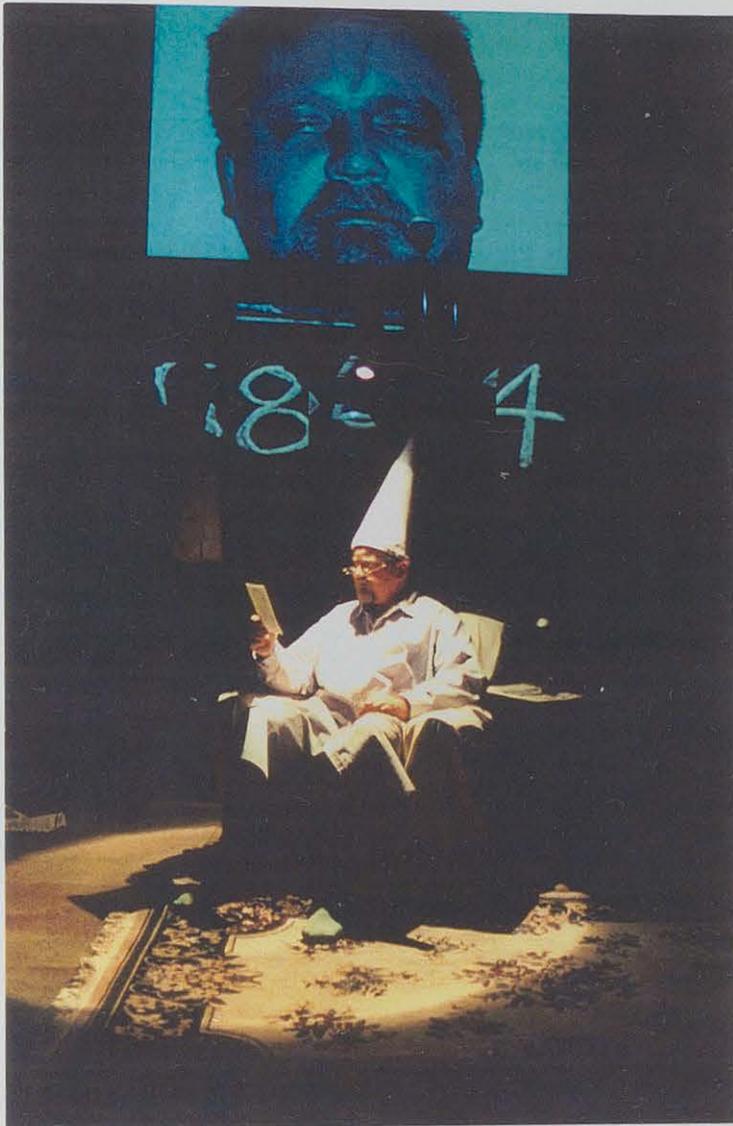


Figure 8: Choubert is haunted by Mallot. (photo: Rhinehart Pierce)

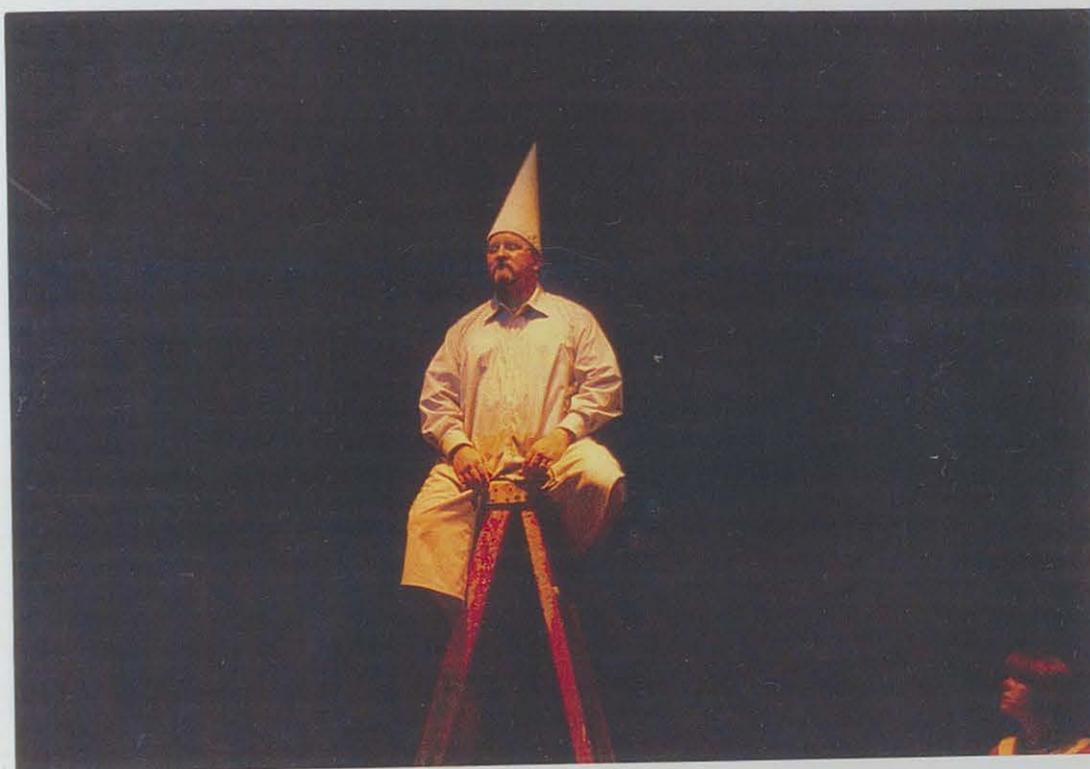


Figure 9: Choubert transcends. (photo: Rhinehart Pierce)

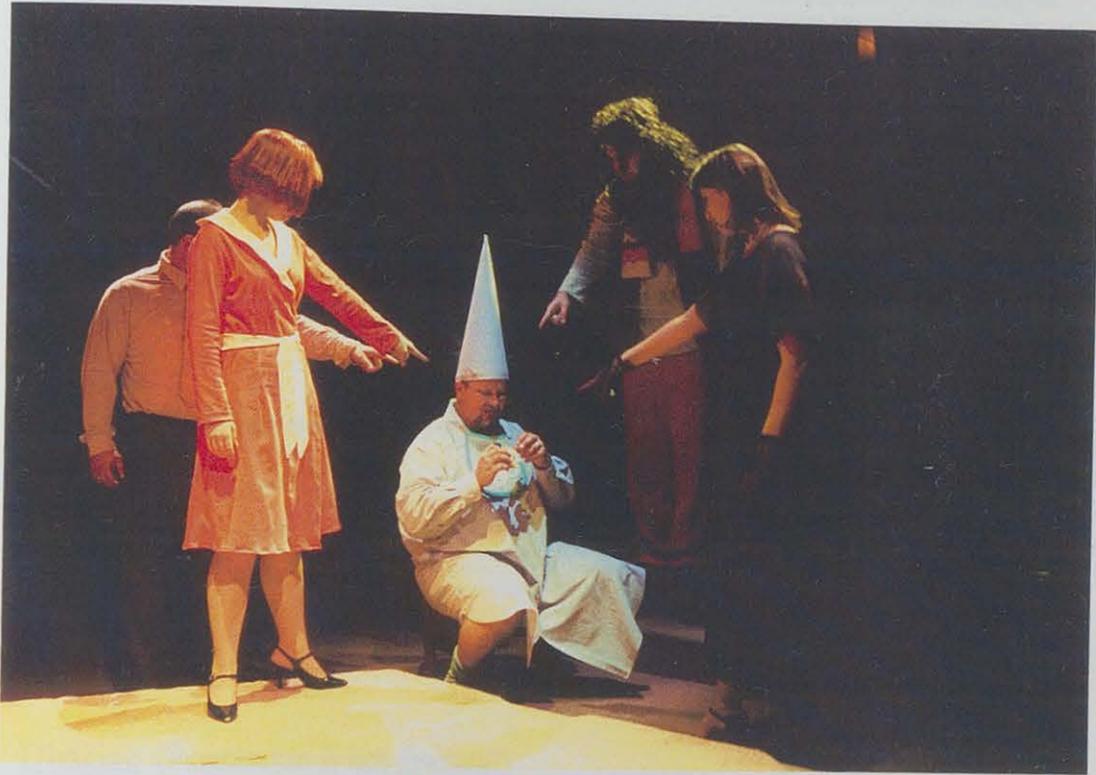


Figure 10: "Chew! Swallow! Chew! Swallow!" (Photo: Rhinehart Pierce)

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Agree (Permission is granted.)

Student Signature

Date

Disagree (Permission is not granted.)

Student Signature

Date