Postmodern Canons and De-canonizing Function of Performance

Bahee HADAEGH¹,
Milad PASHAEI²

¹ Assistant Prof., Shiraz University,
Shiraz, Iran,
bhadaegh@rose.shirazu.ac.ir

² M.A. Graduate, Shiraz University,
Shiraz, Iran,
Pashaei.milad186@gmail.com

Abstract: This study attempts to investigate the process of canonization that Ionesco's initial play went through by means of Martin Esslin's famous work of theater criticism that labeled the unknown plays of the 50's "absurd". The present study argues that Esslin's attempt to canonize these plays under the label of The Theater of the Absurd did not do justice to the ethical perspectives that these plays set forth. My contribution to this topic will be focusing on a postmodern performance by Jean-Luc Lagarce to try to elucidate how his performance of The Bald Soprano challenged the pre-judged attitude of the audience through challenging the previously established beliefs concerning the Theater of the Absurd. The semiotics as the study of the way meaning is created will be drawn on. In The Semiotics of Theater, Erika Fischer-Lichte outlines the internal theatrical code at three different levels of system, norm and speech. Here, the emphasis will be on speech to illuminate the staging by Lagarce and explain how a classic work precipitates postmodern production from within the established canon.

Keywords: *Canonization; The Theater of the Absurd; Semiotics of Theater; Eugene Ionesco; The Bald Soprano; Jean-Luc Lagarce.*

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A Step toward Canonization

As the audience was bewildered by the plays of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco and Arthur Adamov, Esslin's (1961) categorized and defined this avant-garde movement and deciphered the structure and the themes of these plays by asserting that the audience is the better judge these plays not by the standards of traditional plays, but by the new norms set by himself. Esslin's attempt was to categorize and codify the new trend of "The Theater of the Absurd". To be able to achieve his goals, even from the outset, he identified eighteen dramatists whom he considered to be affiliated with this new trend. In addition, he divided the major dramatists of this trend from the minor ones so that one chapter in his book is devoted to Eugene Ionesco. In the preface of his book, Esslin (1961) posits that his aim for carrying out this project was to define the characteristics of "The Theater of the Absurd" so that it would not be jettisoned as snobbery or mere nonsense as it may be found unfit with the tradition of the theater. His was an attempt to bring these absurdist plays into recognition as Bourdieu and Nice (1980: 289) comments that: "The names of schools or groups...are pseudo-concepts, practical classifying tools which create resemblance and differences by naming them; they are produced in the struggle for recognition by the artists themselves or their accredited critics...".

As it can be noted, grouping similar theatrical works into a certain trend and differentiating them from other schools or movements were used as a technique by Esslin to create and make readers recognize this new trend. Furthermore, Esslin (1961) achieved to illustrate the meaning of these plays which resulted in their being canonized as he delimited the possible circle of interpretations made possible out of these plays that led to the dismissal of the heterogeneous meanings commented by different sects of the society. Moreover, Esslin wanted to demonstrate that these absurdist plays were the representation of the Western man and his predicament as he tries to cope with his unnamable existence. Esslin (1961: xix) made an effort to elucidate the philosophy and the convention of the absurd by resorting to Albert Camus's "The Myth of Sisyphus" as he quotes a passage from it: "...in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger...This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity". Thus, he introduces the concept of the absurdity in its philosophical base. In introducing this concept, he is inclined to coin the label of "absurd" as he borrows it from Albert Camus who was already a well-established and known author. His goal behind this

attempt is explained by Yael Zarhy-Levo (2011: 318): “he thus presents the new theatrical trend as continuing an already recognized literary trend, thereby extending the legitimacy attributed to the established literary works to the theatrical works in question”. Thus, Esslin tried to expand the existentialism and its concepts that were known through Camus and Sartre to the new generation of dramatists to give them their existence in a new trend. Bourdieu and Nice (1980: 289) explain that:

Words- the names of schools or groups, proper names- are so important only because they make things. These distinctive signs produce existence in a world in which the only way to be is to be different, to ‘make one’s name’, either personally or as a group.

It is apparent that Esslin played a major role in naming, defining, and categorizing these dramatists and their dramas so that it became possible to think them as following the same movement or trend in spite of their difference that were suppressed in order to highlight their resemblances. On the other hand, this categorization and codification through Esslin’s mediation made fertile ground for this specific kind of theater’s differentiation and then existence in the history of drama.

When a critic or a reviewer introduces a new play or a playwright into the established theatrical mode or when he is inclined toward constructing a new theatrical trend, comparison would serve as a method to find an affiliation between the author(s) and the already established conventions of the theater. Yael Zarhy-Levo (2011: 323) explains that “the critics appear to provide a familiar context from within which to view the new theatrical offering, whether a new playwright’s work or a new type of drama”. Esslin, in his attempt to enhance the theatrical reputation of the dramatists that he discussed and in his shaping of new theatrical model had recourse to the known philosophy of existentialism through “The Myth of Sisyphus” by Albert Camus (1955). As a matter of fact, Camus’s words in this book that are referred by Esslin (1961) in “The Theater of the Absurd” are fundamental in our understanding of the absurdist plays. Esslin quotes from Sisyphus that “...in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger...This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.” (p. xix) This passage was referred by Esslin to put forward the word and the idea of “absurd”. For an exact definition of “absurd”, Esslin alludes to Eugene Ionesco in the essay “Les Armes de la Ville” where Ionesco had an essay on Kafka. Ionesco (1957: 23) defines the “absurd” according to Esslin that “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become

senseless, absurd, useless". This sense of purposelessness that resembles nihilistic existentialism is what the readers, the reviewers and the directors have understood as it is further supported by Esslin's comment that the common theme uniting these dramatists is "their sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of human condition" (Esslin, 1961: xix). Therefore, Esslin argues that the dramatists of the "Theater of the Absurd" present a world which has no purpose and is absurd.

Reassessing Esslin's Theater of the Absurd

Although Esslin had a significant effect in the canonization of the "Theater of the Absurd" and he had not any main rivals to challenge his construction of a new theatrical trend, there are recent scholars who propose that these dramas are not about lack of purpose or meaninglessness, but they hold the idea that these plays are engaged mostly in the process of meaning-making. One of these scholars is Michael Y. Bennett (2011: 4) who comments that "the Theater of the Absurd is not about absurdity, but about making life meaningful given our absurd situation". He illustrates that Esslin (1961: xix), first of all, translates and contextualizes a quotation by Ionesco in a wrong way without understanding it in the right context. Furthermore, Bennet believes that the philosophy of Camus is conflated with the phenomenologist existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre that gave Camus a general appearance of an existentialist who contemplates on the "metaphysical anguish of the absurdity of the human condition". However, Bennett (2011) argues that these plays are not in reality absurdist plays concerning with the purposelessness of life, but they are plays that revolt against existentialism as he considers them to be ethical. Bennett (2011) puts forward three purposes for challenging the plays labeled as "absurd" by Esslin (1961). Therefore, he presents an alternative reading of Camus's philosophy that would lead to his emancipation from the label of "absurd". This kind of reading as suggested by Bennett would also result in reading the canonical absurdist plays in a different way that would help their being decanonized as well as reviving their avant-garde status.

Martin Esslin (1961) was right in his attitude that the playwrights of absurd do not comment on the absurdity of life and they don't elucidate the theme of absurdity. They just present absurdity as a situation that man has to confront. Notwithstanding this comprehension of Camus's thought, Esslin has regarded Camus to be a nihilist existentialist that has led him to translate Ionesco's words by miscontextualizing them. The mistranslation of Esslin that caused these plays to be labeled as "absurd" and to be canonized as the

legacy of the “Theater of the Absurd” stems from Esslin’s not giving the definition more context as he just quotes from Ionesco without setting the quotation in its proper context of Kafka’s story. Bennett (2011: 9) explains that “Kafka explores the fact that the people’s initial goal of building the tower got lost in the process and their pettiness. After a while, the people did not even remember why they even wanted to build the tower in the first place”.

Hence, it can be understood that what was forgotten was the goal which is similar to a target in the sense of completing a project which substantiate the idea that Esslin’s translation “devoid of purpose” is not a correct one. Through the contribution of this context, it becomes noticeable that for Kafka, Ionesco, and Camus, there are man-made goals in our lives. Pursuing them makes our lives meaningful in spite of the fact that the connection between man and his traditional roots is broken.

Bennett (2011: 10) supports the view that “for Camus and Ionesco, the absurd was a situation, but not a life sentence of destined meaninglessness or comment on the word”. It is apparent that although the situation is absurd, we can make our lives meaningful through our revolt and defiance. Following the argument, our focusing on the new readings of Camus will be fruitful. Marc Blanchard (1977: 667) in his article states that “the absurd we see today is the absurd from Beckett and Ionesco’s plays and that certainly was not the kind of absurd Camus had in mind”. Lawrence D. Kritzman (1997: 552) states that Camus is an “intuitive moralist” as he refers to “The Rebel” to show Camus’s confronting the nonsense in Marxist revolt. These new readings point to the idea that Camus’s thoughts were not inclined toward a bleak existentialism that centers upon the meaninglessness of life, but he appears to revolt against nihilistic existentialism related mostly with Sartre. Focusing further on this issue, it becomes evident that Camus’s philosophy is grounded upon reason as Bennett (2011: 14) argues “Camus couched his philosophy within reason” that separates him from nihilistic existentialism.

Challenging the Standard Production

This paper argues how the label of “absurd” contributed to the canonization of “The Bald Soprano” by Eugene Ionesco. Martin Esslin’s “The Theater of the Absurd” already established this play as an “absurd” drama that morphed it into a commodity visited by theatergoers at Huchette Theater. The study carries on its argument to elucidate how a postmodern performance by Jean-Luc Lagarce has challenged the canonized absurd play

by reviving the spirit of revolt and defiance against established canons in the play. Similar to Bennett's reassessment of the theatrical absurd, Lagarce's performance as a specific reading and interpretation of the canonical play-text presents us new insights demonstrating the meaningfulness of the play and its ethical messages.

The Bald Soprano is a pioneering theatrical work which was first set on stage in May 1950. Being Ionesco's first play, he was inspired by the Assimil methodology of learning English. Though its first performance was not a success, there were artists who knew the artistic value of the work and assisted in its staging process. *The Bald Soprano* does not comply either with linguistic system or other visual systems at work in the conventional bourgeoisie plays. That is to say that the postulates observed in a normal conversation is nullified or contradicted to enhance the absurdity of the play. Previous research on the case of the play have mostly regarded it as absurd in accordance with Esslin. As an instance, examining the cyclical structure in certain Absurdist plays, Hanife Nalan Genç (2017) emphasizes lack of communication, meaninglessness of the language, and the presence of non-sequiturs in order to indicate the absurd quality of the play. However, there are scholars who viewed and carried out research to challenge the absurdity in this play. In an article with a novel prospective, Julia Elsky (2018) in her rethinking of Ionesco's play contextualized *The Bald Soprano* in postwar France by resorting to the archives to support that his first French play is not nonsensical. She argues that "Ionesco incorporates into the Romanian version of the play elements of these kinds of manuals, in addition to those of Assimil, not to argue that language is meaningless but rather to demonstrate the strange and often chaotic process through which language learners creating meaning." (Elsky, 2018: 351). Still, many different kinds of research have been carried out on Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*. Lara Cox (2013) in her article worked on the case of the *Bald Soprano* by presenting its various productions as a means of contemplating on the death of avant-garde. Cristina Scarlat (2011) also addressed the issue of performance by Lagarce as a way of rewriting the play text. In addition, an article is written by Simeon Sandrine (2017) to analyze the intermediality between the filmic and theatrical forms of the play. Among these articles, Lara Cox (2013: 104) contributes in a significant way to the review literature on this issue as she reconsiders the death of avant-garde and she makes the statement that "the specific circumstances of this production history allow us to see the show not as a hegemonic, de-politicizing cultural institution...but as an impetus for aesthetic experimentation with *La Cantatrice Chauve* beyond the Huchette's walls". She argues in her paper how Jean-Luc Lagarce added a

supplementary color to the original play-text and Huchette production as an artistic choice in order to enrich the text and present a new perspective of understanding for the spectators. Her attempt plays a major part in taking issue with the canonized "Theater of the Absurd" so that she argues the value of avant-garde ever present in this play. Adding to the present researches carried out until now, I have made an effort to shed ample light on the issue to analyze a specific performance of *The Bald Soprano* by Jean-Luc Lagarce and to show how it can challenge the firmly established label of "absurd" and how it can take bold steps toward de-canonizing *The Bald Soprano*.

Hence, the focus of this study would be on the postmodern performance of *La Cantatrice Chauve* staged in 'Athénée Théâtre Louis-Jouvet' with the direction of 'Jean-Luc Lagarce' in 1991 which can be regarded as a creative performance that could challenge the institutionalized Huchette production. Jean-Pierre Han (2007. 112) observed in 2007 that "Lagarce worked against 'la mise en scène de référence, the Huchette production'". Lagarce's staging of *The Bald Soprano* is an example of experimentation with the canonized form of theater that could be possible through displacement of the performance and the renovations in the stage setting. Taking the play's original staging and the author's intentions as the "reputed source" of authority, we find it unthinkable for Lagarce to simply read the play text and perform it in accordance with Ionesco's clear intentions due to the historical and cultural factors intruding upon the process of performance. However, a dialogic relation can be assumed among the staged text, the institutionalized Huchette production and Lagarce's performance to support the interconnectedness of theatrical performance. Furthermore, it can be argued that the standard production inspired experimentation with Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* in the same fashion that Bennett's "reassessment of the Theater of the Absurd" considered Esslin's mentioned book as a source of inspiration. Therefore, a good appreciation of an experimental performance requires an understanding in relation to the standard production.

Postmodernism in the Theater and Lagarce's Performance

This part of the study tries to define the relationship between the modern and postmodern theater to justify the paradox that postmodern theater recovers itself by working anew the classical and modern heritage and needs the classical and modern norms to establish its own identity.

The authors have undertaken a task in Lagarce's performance to seek the traces of classical norms of the Theater of the Absurd that he used so

efficiently to establish his own performance. In addition, his performance as a text has become a signifying matter waiting for hypothetical meaning among many others which can only be realized in the process of performance. This would be the outcome of the intertwined efforts of the audience and the experimental stage setting as it is received by the audience. In this pattern, in the process of the post-modernization of *The Bald soprano*, the authors would not regard the performance and the stage setting as factors that revives the dramatic work. Instead, will consider Lagarce's mise en scène as a force that drives me to consider Ionesco's text in postmodern fashion.

Heading in the same direction, the novel contribution of the argument to the present topic lies in the semiotic study of the theatrical codes at the speech level used by Lagarce to be able to make sense of the manners in which his postmodern enunciations were successful in de-canonizing the classicized Huchette production in the same fashion that Bennett made an effort to de-canonize the Theater of the Absurd which was considered to be a starting point to support my own authentic contribution.

Internal Code of Theater

One can say that a new approach is needed for this example of the new kind of theater. Ionesco was an artist who paid excessive attention to mise en scène. Even in his primary works, he involved himself abundantly with the scenic composition and placed a great value to the movement of characters on stage. He did not confine himself to the boundaries of merely writing a play. For him the pictorial and kinesic aspects of theater were important as well. Consequently, it can be considered that due to the striking visual and auditory elements dominating *The Bald Soprano*, the semiotics of theater and drama appears to be a fruitful method of analyzing this play. The traditional method of criticism grounded on a thematic investigation seems barren in this field. Dennis A. Gilbert (2005: 196) comments that "theater semiotics attempted to correct the errors inherent in the emphasis of content and the neglect of form prevalent in drama and theater research at that time". Hence, this opinion can be formed that the semiotic reading of drama which is based on the comprehensive analysis of the internal theatrical code and the various sign systems constituting it which are involved in the process of communication in the theater is well-suited to understand *The Bald Soprano* with its emphasis on corporality and totality of performance including considerations of acting, staging, lighting and spectating.

The methodology applied in this study is derived from the semiotic theories of Erika Fischer-Lichte concerning the theatrical code. This code which is internal to the theater governs paradigmatically which sign-vehicles will be selected and applied and regulates syntagmatically which sign-vehicles will be combined selectively with one another. It is also up to the internal code to regulate which meanings will be attributed to these sign-vehicles and which meaning will be excluded from them in a syntagmatic or isolated way. Hence, the objective will be to describe, analyze, and interpret the specific theatrical text of *The Bald Soprano* in order to understand this play and its specific structures. At the level of “speech” which Lichte calls it, an effort will be made to understand the internal theatrical code by focusing on a theatrical performance. Therefore, at this level, it is needed to analyze and describe the performance in question in order to comprehend it.

It can be observed that the meaning is created in *The Bald Soprano* through attaining to theatrical essence and to express the reality in pictorial terms. This is a representation of the play in visual signs that came as a result of liberating art from mimesis and from imitating the reality. However, being performed for more than half a century made *The Bald Soprano* a fixed and obsolete performance that was repeating itself continually at the theater of the Huchette. Lagarce claims that being constrained to the theater of Huchette have made the performance rather a commodified product and a tourist attraction. From a different perspective, it will be argued that this institutionalized performance was a point of inspiration for Lagarce to show in Lara Cox’s words that “through a perpetual capacity for innovation in staging and performance methods, theatre can aesthetically contest the status quo from within the cultural institution and this may unsettle the position of a well-established play such as *La Cantatrice Chauve* in the sanctioned canon” (Cox, 2013: 113). Consequently, the internal code of theater will be at work to comprehend how Lagarce’s performance contested and was inspired simultaneously from the Huchette production. Therefore, the traces of meaning-making and defiance against the “absurd” that are present in this specific performance will be demonstrated by analyzing different sign-systems available in theater.

Costume

‘Costume’ is one of the most prominent means to define a character. Fischer Lichte (1992: 85) points out that “the costume points to the respective theatrical role played by its wearer and functions in this way as an important variable in the process that serves to establish or develop the

identity of this character". Therefore, it is evident that the costume worn by a character could indicate his or her identity. In Lagarce's staging, Mrs. Smith is wearing an elegant bright pink dress. Mr. Smith is wearing a bright dark blue suit with a yellow shirt and an orange tie. Mrs. Martin is dressed in the same fashion as Mrs. Smith. Mr. Martin is clothed as well in the bright coloured garments that Mr. Smith wears. This set of stereotyped costumes signifies that the characters belong to a bourgeoisie class. From the other hand, their costumes have strong resemblance to each other. This renders visible the idea that these characters could be merged and be mistaken one for another. In fact, their costumes show that Smith couple is no different from the Martin couple and their roles can be exchanged. In addition, the brightness of the colour of their costumes in comparison with the muted tones of previous production gives the performance a highlighted sense of artificiality. In his interview with Jean Pierre Han (2007), Lagarce explains that

The two women are dressed exactly the same. They wear costumes that make them appear like queens of England. Neither me nor the costume designer (Patricia Dubois) thought about it, but everyone noticed it! They have costumes in the style of Chanel, a little pink and wearing hats decorated with flowers[...] the two men are also dressed exactly the same with gray suits, it is however very colorful because they have orange ties!

The maid wears a brown skirt with a white top and a white apron which are stereotyped clothes for a maid working in an upper-class family's saloon. In Lagarce's staging, however, Mary, the maid, appears as a devil out of his box as her face is bruised and her clothes are all filthy. Lagarce in the interview asserts that "Regarding the character of the maid, I took literally a replica of the beginning of the play that says I'm not Mary: "My real name is Sherlock Holmes"; so, she's Sherlock Holmes" (Han, 2007). While the set of costumes on the stage in Ionesco's description places us straightforwardly into the heart of the habitual, gray and ordinary bourgeoisie house life, Lagarce's production offers a more colorful and vivid picture of the stage. He mentions that "it is very colorful and it makes me think of the colors in "My Uncle" by Jacque Tati. We are between the cartoon and the American soap opera of the 50's" (Han, 2007). Hence, it is clear that Lagarce makes use of the costumes and their specific colors in order to shed ample light on the meaningfulness of the play and its revolt against the absurdity previously related to the play-text.

Stage Decoration

It is a sign system that makes a permanent impression on the spectators. Fischer Lichte (1992: 14) defines 'stage decoration' as "the objects that are present in a spatial segment in which the actors move for a relatively long time and remain there without changing". The sign system of 'stage decoration' is also significant in this play. While in the Huchette production by Nicholas Bataille, the action took place in the living room of the bourgeois Smith couple, in his adaptation of the *Bald Soprano*, Lagarce replaces it with a 'décor kitsch'. The word 'kitsch' is defined in Oxford Dictionary as "works of art or objects that are popular but that are considered to have no real artistic value and be lacking in good taste, for example because they are sentimental" (Hornby, 2005: 710). It can be observed that Lagarce's staging and particularly the stage decoration has a lot in common with the above definition due to its being made in a rush in which its collapse at the last scene is a testimony. It is assumed by Fischer-Lichte (1992: 105) that "decoration not only functions as the sign for a particular space, but also as a sign for the mood that prevails in this space". Hence, it is noticeable that the garden decoration of Lagarce with light shades of green connotes a mood of joy and happiness that was absent in the interior set of Huchette production dominated by dark colors. The opening stage direction refers to "a middle-class English interior, with English armchairs" (Ionesco, 1954: 12). However, Lagarce's stage decoration is in sharp contrast with Ionesco's stage description. Here, Lagarce challenges the senseless and discordant world of the play by taking the play outside, away from the bourgeoisie interior of the past productions. In the same interview with Han (2007), Lagarce talks about the "stage decoration": "A house or rather a façade of a house; everything happens on a very English lawn, a very simple English garden, with a white house and small windows [...]. Everything looks absolutely normal, but the house is a little smaller than it should be"

Hence, it can be observed that the avant-garde stage setting presented by Lagarce defies the senselessness attributed to the stage setting of Huchette production and the highly saturated colors of the other accessories maximizes the happiness as an ethical action for both the audience and the actors.

Stage Conception

The very appearance of the playhouse and its architecture is one of the primary elements that is significant for the spectators. Keir Elam (2002:

50) asserts that “the first factor that strikes us when we enter a theater is the physical organization of the playhouse itself: its dimensions, the stage-audience distance, the structure of the auditorium (and thus the spectator’s own position in relation to his fellows and to the performers) and the size of the awaiting stage”. Hence, as it is seen, the architectural elements do not function simply in a practical way but they are semiotically loaded.

The frame which surrounds the stage can be conceived as an element of ‘stage conception’ considering that it gives us the impression of a two-dimensional picture as the starting point of the play. The proscenium-arch conception of the stage gives an impression to the spectators that they are seeing an artistic tableau that at any moment may come to life. From that respect, Ionesco as the dramatist uphold the tradition of bourgeoisie theater in which the spectators are not mingled with the actors on the stage. On the contrary, they are comfortably distanced from the stage. However, in the performance directed by Lagarce, the actors come on the stage to inform the audience of the possible endings of the performance. Lagarce remarks that “all the actors come back in the middle of the rubble to do a kind of group photo. They explain to the public that it ends up like that, but it could have ended otherwise, that they could have done this or that” (Han, 2007). Furthermore, he continues that “Mr. Martin and the Maid go in the middle of the spectators to tell that there are some stooges in the auditorium; they encourage them to get on the stage, but the actors who remain on the stage launch: “when they arrive, we will kill them with machine guns”” (Han, 2007). It gives us the impression that in performance by Lagarce, the characters now escaped from the hands of their puppeteer gain autonomy and begin to act on the stage before the spectators and later with them. By breaking the artificiality of the frame and uniting themselves with the audience, Lagarce wanted to see that the audience is attempting as well to find meaning during the performance. While their idle talk seems to soothe the character’s suffering and bring them happiness, seeing the performance entertains the audience as it generates delight and pacify their pain.

Gestural Signs

These systems which comprise of mime, movement of the bodies on stage and the gestures is vital in our comprehension of the thematic concerns of the play. The characters of *The Bald Soprano* except the fire chief move on the definite stage area in a very eccentric fashion that resembles the marionettes. To discuss the movements and the gestures of these couples separately would be meaningless as they are double and they reflect each

other. Their movements in general are done clumsily. They move mechanistically and jerkily. As they move, their style turns out to be unrealistic. Unlike Huchette production, Lagarce desired his characters to act so seriously. In supporting his view, he comments that “this work is evidently a play about absurdity, but my staging is not that much absurd. On the contrary, it is logical. The public will be surprised of its coherence” (Han, 2007). His perspective can be traced back, at the same time, to Ionesco himself as far as he considered a coherence at the level of the characters from inside the play. Nevertheless, the common point between Ionesco and Lagarce is the last scene in which Lagarce remained loyal to the original staging by depicting the puppet-like and disjointed gestures of the characters as he explains that “Everything ends, moreover, after the departure of the Fireman, in a battle in which the couples snatch their clothes, bawl at each other very loudly” (Han, 2007). He attempted to exaggerate their acting style by pushing it to the extreme. The desire of Lagarce to create an emphatic and excessive spectacle out of the last scene makes us reflect on the article of Roland Barthes (1972: 21) “The World of Wrestling” where he compares theater to wrestling, he comments that:

“The emotional magniloquence, the repeated paroxysms, the exasperation of the retorts can find their natural outcome in the most baroque confusion. Some fights, among the most successful kind, are crowned by a final charivari, a sort of unrestrained fantasia where the rules, the laws of the genre, the referee’s censuring and the limits of the ring are abolished, swept away by the triumphant disorder which overflows into the hall and carries off pell-mell wrestlers, seconds, referee and spectators”.

It can be seen that at the last scene, the characters in Lagarce’s staging take off their clothes as if they are wrestlers on a ring. From another perspective, this is a model which one comes across often in humorous TV series. It can be seen that in the staging by Lagarce the forced, burlesque play of the actors challenge the apparent lack of meaning attributed to the text and updates its reception. Delight is magnified with the friends as an ethical principle during the spectacle both for the actors and the audience.

Characters as Signs

Up to now, different sign systems at work have been discussed. From now on, we will consider the characters of *The Bald Soprano* as signs too. In this respect, a character performed by the actor can be considered as the minimal unit of meaning regardless of the different sign systems at work. Fischer Lichte (1992: 228) claims that “the character can be chosen as the level of isotope in the case of any performance. It is not dependent on

certain structural features. Since theater always takes place where actor A represents a character X while spectator S looks on". Consequently, by considering the presence of a character as a minimal necessity of theatrical process, one can select and define the character as an isotope. One can easily notice that nobody is moved from the part of the audience by any of the couples in the Huchette production. The reason is that the characters are not endowed with will and thus are not capable of choice or action. They are incapable of decisions and change. In philosophical term, they are objects. Dagobert D. Runes (2001: 217) in his dictionary of philosophy defines object as "that towards which consciousness is directed, whether cognitively or conatively", and he comments that "subject of knowledge is an individual knower considered either as a pure ego, a transcendental ego or an act of awareness" (Runes, 2001: 303). These definitions could be compared to these characters that do not resemble the real human beings in real life. Quite similarly, Martin Esslin (1972: 93) mentions that "the people in *Bald Soprano* have no hunger, no conscious desire; they are bored stiff. They feel it vaguely [...] the characters and situations are both static and interchangeable". Under the influence of such argument by Esslin, one can say that the Martin and the Smith couples do not denote any human beings. Rather they connote marionettes which appear to move autonomously yet are activated by another force. The idea of the puppet-like human is reified on the stage that leads to the concept that these couples are not signs of human beings.

It is evident that the characters in the standard production of *The Bald Soprano* do not own any psyche. However, Lagarce achieves to personify the characters through donating them some characteristics. Characteristics means here a set of dominant tendencies that form a character. It is interesting that the characterization specific to Jean-Luc Lagarce enriches the characters of the play-text in a supplementary manner in order to discard the "absurdity" and the meaninglessness ascribed to the play. Mrs. Smith appears confident in her public gaze in a brutal and decisive way in which she asserts her convictions. Mr. Smith turns out to be a character who gets carried away quickly, capable of bloodshed about minor details. He reveals himself to be a coward, anxious and capable of moments of panic. Mr. Martin appears to be the most instinctive of all the characters. He does not hesitate to illustrate with a sexual gesture the impulses which animate him. Mrs. Martin appears to be unsure of herself and embarrassed throughout the play.

Lagarce comments that "while reading the play, it appears that the characters are interchangeable but taking a closer look, one can perceive that

each one has a particular character and that the power relation already exist in the play” (Han, 2007). It is clear that Lagarce invented different stories and behaviours for his characters so that the spectators react with laughter as the joy increases to a greater amount. He came to the conclusion that “the people do not know this play very well of which they have a pre-conceived notion. In the performance that I have produced, the audience laughs so much. They are surprised of their laughter because they think that the climate of an absurd play is always gloomy” (Han, 2007).

Conclusion

In the present study, an effort was made through the application of Fischer-Lichte’s semiotics of theater to analyze the lively performance of the actors, their colorful costumes, the innovative decoration of the stage and other stylistic elements that were used by Lagarce to open the way to the experimental reinvigoration of the standard Huchette production by defying the elements of absurdity that had been attached to the play. In contrast with the portrayal of the purposelessness of an absurd world, the performance was presented to the public as a new perspective and a new way of reading *The Bald Soprano*. Lagarce presented us in his performance with the idea that meaning-making, not meaninglessness, is integral to the plays characterized as absurd. Therefore, his performance supported Ionesco’s long suppressed attitude that the Theater of the Absurd is not about absurdity and the Sartrean view of nothingness, but about giving life meaning by considering our absurd situation.

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