

THE PROCESS OF PRODUCING A PECULIAR PRODUCTION:
DIRECTING “THE BALD SOPRANO”

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

This thesis documents my thoughts, ideas, and experiences throughout the production of Eugene Ionesco's 'anti-play', *The Bald Soprano*. He referred to this work as an 'anti-play,' due to its complete disregard for established normality in theatre. Ionesco referred to it as "anti-thematic, anti-ideological, anti-social realist, anti-philosophical, anti-boulevard-psychology, anti-bourgeois, the rediscovery of free theatre" (Gaensbauer, 1996). I selected this play because of its divergence from the traditional dramatic structure that has become so ubiquitous with 'good' theatre. The play was gifted to me by my sister years ago, and after I read the opening lines, I couldn't help but imagine it up on a stage. With the rise of student productions at Texas State University, I saw the opportunity to produce this show as my thesis project.

Structure

This project, being a work of theatre, is ever-changing and evolving. For that reason, I wanted to document my process as it was happening. Much of the content herein is written before the production of the play had concluded, so that I may capture the fleeting nature of theatrical production. I have chosen to keep these sections minimally edited to preserve the ideas that I was playing with at the time. With the play concluded, many of the ideas that I had at the beginning of the process have grown or been entirely discarded. For this reason, the structure of this document will be as follows:

Section 1, an introduction into the project.

Section 2, the in-process writings mentioned above.

Section 3, my reevaluation of the ideas shared in section two.

Section 4, an analysis of the final production.

Section 5, a conclusion.

The final production of the play has been recorded, and the link to that recording will be attached to the bottom of this document.

What is Theatre of the Absurd?

Martin Esslin, in his essay *Theatre of the Absurd*, describes the titular genre as “out of harmony with reason or propriety, incongruous, unreasonable, illogical.” He shares a quote from Ionesco, saying “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.” The Theatre of the Absurd stems from the anti-literary movement which brought abstract art, paintings, and other similarly incomprehensible works. The Theatre of the Absurd is a broad description of a large movement, but what Ionesco was creating was not designed to fit into that mold. Rather, the definition was written with his works, and others, in question.

Ionesco called it many things. “Theatre of derision,” “theatre of protest and paradox,” or most aptly, “antitheater.” He had very strong opinions on the traditional forms of theatre in his day. He described a “new kind of ‘truth’ in the theatre: ‘Essential realities can only be found in the fantastic world that one carries within oneself, in the most intimate and cherished reality, in metaphysics. ...Does a play seem realistic? Then it is a bad play.’” In all of his work, he is interested in “diving into, disassociating, [and] purifying realities” (G. Ionescu, 1989, 160-61, as cited in Gaensbauer, 1996). In short, Ionesco created plays to combat the traditional tropes of theatre. He wanted to use theatre as a mechanism for presenting what he saw as the absurdity of the world presented through the lens of his own perception. The Theatre of the Absurd is a constructed idea made to define a number of similarly disruptive pieces of theatre.

2. IN-PROCESS WRITING

The following content had been written during the process, and I will leave it mostly unedited. Aside from grammatical errors and formatting, this section stands as a representation of my ideas as the project developed. Any edits made for clarification will be placed in brackets.

My Project

Throughout the next few months, I plan to take on the challenge of producing Eugene Ionesco's anti-play, "The Bald Soprano." This play is a masterwork of the Theatre of the Absurd. It holds no pretenses; it is not a play to be made sense of. The play follows Mr. and Mrs. Smith in their home getting ready for a dinner. Their maid arrives late, followed by Mr. and Mrs. Martin who also arrive late to the dinner. Later, the Fire Chief enters, potentially to put out the fire in the fireplace. The two couples bicker, nonsense roars, and the play ends in the same way it begins. Nothing really happens, no one has a fantastical "Hero's Journey," and it's genuinely challenging to find any consistency to grab hold of. I love it. Ionesco wrote the piece after he had been doing English homework, and the words on the page "detached themselves from the pages on which they had been written, changed places all by themselves, became garbled and corrupted." (Ionesco, 2006) I believe that this play speaks to something truly fascinating about the way that people receive stories, and presenting this play is a very exciting opportunity. [To clarify, I think this play presents the idea that the emotions and individual moments of a story are so impactful, that the actual narrative being comprehensible does not remove the inherent engagement of the experience.]

My Objectives

To begin, I would like to elaborate on the objectives I am setting for myself and for this production. I have whittled down a number of aspirations down to three main objectives: Produce an entertaining show and discover what meaning comes out of such a nonsensical play. While this project is mostly geared toward exploration and discovery, I find it's important to give myself not only these over-reaching objectives, but also a number of smaller landmarks to organize my process.

Objective 1: Produce an entertaining show.

My first priority in the development of this piece is to create an entertaining end-product. I believe that the primary purpose of theatre is to entertain, and that entertainment is a vehicle through which a number of secondary purposes can come to light. If a piece of theatre fails to entertain its audience, it will not retain their attention long enough to achieve any secondary goal.

I find that "The Bald Soprano" is a masterwork of absurdity, leaving no question to the fact that it was written with no deeper meaning. Ionesco has stated that the play parodies nothing, and I believe him. He even calls it an 'anti-play.' Before I can begin to explore other opportunities for exploration of themes, meanings, etc., I must first ensure that the audience is being entertained. I want to make sure they remain invested in what is happening, that they don't tune out when the show doesn't make sense and make them excited for what is coming next.

Objective 2: Discover the meaning.

As I've already stated, this play is meaningless. It has no true deeper meaning, no diamond in the rough. That is not to say every other play has a single take-away tucked

into an envelope that you could open once the play is over to see if you got it right. In fact, that's the beauty of art. The meaning is subjective. I think that "The Bald Soprano" is a great presentation of this idea. There are no handrails, just a vat of meaningless text that you are dropped into as you're told to find something to grab onto. Humans are storytellers, and if nothing else, we are good at finding meaning where there is none. That is what I want to try and do during this production.

I have no doubt that through the development of this play I will sift through a number of clever interpretations of the text. Some idea that feels like it ties everything together will be written on the whiteboard, and then erased and erased and erased. With a play such as this, finding that big idea will be important in helping the actors, and subsequently the audience, feel grounded during the show. My biggest concern about producing this play is that the final product will leave the audience disappointed and confused. If I can find a strong central idea that both me and my team will get behind, I hope audiences will leave with their own interpretations of that big idea. If people aren't theorizing about the meaning of the play after it's over, I've done my job wrong.

Defining the Landmarks

As an outline for myself, I have set up a few landmarks after which I plan to assess my progress on the show. When I have reached these landmarks, I will write about my thoughts, ideas, and feelings about the show in that stage of development. The landmarks are as follows:

1. Initial Reading
2. Auditions
3. First Rehearsal

4. Off-Book Date
5. First Full Run-Through
6. Dress Rehearsal
7. First Show

As the show develops, I hope this outline will be a good structure for logging its progress.

After the show has its first run, I will write my closing thoughts on the process and breakdown what I learned from the experience, as well as discussions with the audience and cast members. Then, I will update any parts of my analysis that I disagree with or have decided against once the process is complete.

Initial Analysis

Themes & Ideas

A major theme in this play is the cyclical nature of these people's lives. There is nothing surprising or unexpected to the characters, and they are perfectly stuck in their painfully repetitive lives. This leads into one of the most glaring and noticeable motifs in the play: the lack of substance to what the characters are saying. It's entirely hollow and irrelevant chatter, only used as a way to push their cycle onward. However, when Mary enters, she seems to break from this cycle and have a capability to explore her own ideas without the confines of the other characters.

Why This Play?

This play is increasingly important as it explores the lack of communication in modern society. Every event that seems to point to an inevitable apocalypse is subsequently glossed over for the sake of decorum. It's frightening to hear enormous, shocking news, followed by political pundits arguing over frivolous minutia. As we enter

the world of an endless pandemic, climate crisis, and economic dystopia, it's hard not to think that we are in end times. It feels like everything we do to keep the world turning is another step toward a future that doesn't exist. Ionesco, the ultimate author of existential nihilism, explores the ideas of meaninglessness in this play about hollow, cyclical relationships and the passion of the young to dispute this inevitability.

The Answer

One common tactic used in the analysis of plays is to find a 'Major Dramatic Question.' As I was searching for this, and discussing with colleagues, I came to the conclusion that due to the absurd nature of the play, it is not a question that I am looking for, but instead, an 'Answer.'

Essentially, a Major Dramatic Question is used to find something for the audience to look for, comprehend, and answer by the end of the play. Something that Ionesco intentionally did not allow for in this play. So, in order to find something for audiences to latch on to, I had to come up with an answer to 'what is going on in this play.' This is not something I expect the audience to pick up on immediately but having a concept that my actors can use to make the world feel more 'real', will in-turn make my audience comprehend some reality through which they can view the play.

Characters

The core of this play is with its brilliant and idiotic caricatures of high-society, chauvinistic, upper-class British people. The two couples in this play, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, and Mr. and Mrs. Martin, are essentially two sides of the same coin. They represent two eras in the cycle of such a performative relationship.

The Smiths, as a couple, represent the waning of a cyclical pattern of love. They are drifting apart, finding flaws and picking fights.

Mr. Smith is traditional, fragile, and uncertain. He is insecure about his own relationship with his wife and chooses to lash out as a way of coping with this reality.

Mrs. Smith is bold, sure-footed, upright. She knows what she wants, a connection, but is trapped in this cycle where she must continue on in a monotonous cycle of false love.

The Martins, as a couple, act as the waxing of a cyclical pattern of love. They are rekindling their interests and finding each other again.

Mr. Martin is a capricious, appeasing yes-man. He is a chaser, finding opportunity for romance, adventure, and excitement.

Mrs. Martin is a subdued people-pleasing follower. She is equally as excited as Mr. Martin but does not present the drive toward confrontation that he seems to hold. She serves as a supporting role for her friends and husband.

Then, you have the characters that I refer to as ‘the catalysts. I call them the catalysts because of their unique role of seemingly breaking from the central monotonous undertone of the show. They follow their own rules.

Mary, the Maid, is an obstinate, rebellious imposter. She plays her role in this home only as much as she must, and is otherwise fraught with angst toward her superiors, the Smiths.

The Fire Chief is a perfectionistic, lonely mediator. He represents the system of social review, an outsider coming into the home to analyze and critique their behavior, and put out any ‘fires’, which might instigate change and nuance.

Landmarks

Initial Reading

While I've read this play before, I wanted to write out my initial thoughts as I read it in the context of preparing to cast the show. Upon my latest reading of the play, I feel more puzzled than the last. Every time I've read this play, I've tried to wrap it up into a neat bow and give a confident answer as to what the play means to me. To Ionesco's credit, I am having trouble. It struck me this time that the dialogue, while incomprehensible at times, is ultimately well paced and comedic. Even if a line is unrelated to the previous, it seems to bounce off of its predecessor in such a way that my brain fills the gap. It almost takes a couple seconds to realize that what I've read doesn't make sense. I feel frustrated by the noise at the end, it feels fuzzy and uncertain. Visually, I currently associate this play with dark woodgrains, old brass finishes, the strange desk trinkets from the nineteen-seventies, and books. Auditorily, I would relate it to bees humming, a foot tapping against a chair's leg, and a slide-whistle. Overall, I found myself itching to look at another person's reaction to what I'm reading. I feel like this is a play that needs multiple eyes and ears to be properly appreciated.

Auditions

The audition process for Bald Soprano was my first insight into the process of directing [this show]. I put out a call for one minute video auditions to be submitted by email. In the end, I got nineteen submissions. The cast of the show includes a total of six characters, so I had to whittle it down. Luckily, I could omit a few due to scheduling conflicts. The rest, I had to select based on their performance, experience, and fit with the production. I took notes, made outlines, and ultimately landed on a smaller selection of

around ten individuals. From there, I took screenshots of their faces during performance, and created a collage of images that gave me the feeling of the characters they were meant to represent. After moving their faces around on a digital whiteboard for some time, I ended up with a final arrangement of characters.

Out of everything the audition process taught me, it's that the collaborative aspect of theatre is vital to its success. When I was selecting actors to participate in my thesis production, I was overwhelmed with choice, but ultimately it was reliability and confidence that brought me to my final cast. Had I picked any other arrangement, the rest of the process would be wildly different. I know that my cast, from my meetings with them, are excited and determined to make this production the best that it can be.

First Rehearsal

The first rehearsal was very interesting. It's always intimidating getting to know a group of new people, and the fact that I will be in charge of leading this group through the coming months makes that feeling even stronger. My biggest discoveries with the first rehearsal are that this play, as I suspected, comes alive the moment real people are exploring the words. When it was me sitting alone in my room, staring at these pages, I was immensely worried that certain scenes would fall flat. When we completed our read-through, I was already confident that the show is heading in a good direction.

Off-Book Date/First Full Run-through

As with any theatrical production, things don't always go as planned. In this case, that principal worked in our favor. The off-book date for the production was set for our April 6th rehearsal. As we got closer, it became clear that we were making headway quicker than anticipated. For that reason, April 6th became our first full run-through as well. My

outlook from this first run is that everything that I thought I knew about this play can be put into question. I had an analysis built and prepared before we got into the process, but what I'm learning from this production is that you can never set anything in stone until it has gone up on the stage.

3. REEVALUATION

I didn't manage to write my last two landmarks as they happened. While the play came closer and closer to the finish line, I found myself with more to do and enough to think about that the writing was the last thing on my mind. I think that is a good thing. I focused on the show, and on making it as great as it could be. In this section, I am going to go back through each of the subsections included in section two and reevaluate my thoughts about them.

My Project

This project was an incredible experience, and I'm so proud of my team for helping me put it together. Earlier, I said that it was challenging to find any consistency in this play to grab hold of. While I agree that it is difficult, I think what I learned from producing this play is that we didn't need consistency to find structure. Instead, we needed to recognize that the story didn't need to exist from beginning to end. The story existed in each tiny moment on the stage. When my actors were asking about consistency, about how to justify their current character's action with the actions in scene one, it took a while for me to recognize that that is not what drives this play. This play is driven by each actor existing in, and believing in, the world at that very moment. I think that is what I was trying to understand when I started this project: people receive stories in the moment, and that is one thing that this play brings to light.

My Objectives

Starting this project, I was desperate for structure. I wanted to create order out of chaos and find the known from the unknown. I set two objectives for myself: To produce an entertaining show, and to discover the meaning. I think that these were very useful tools for guiding my direction, but ultimately, I think I found a different way of viewing this project.

Objective 1

Did I produce an entertaining show? I think so. People were laughing, cheering, booing, and felt completely engaged. I got to watch a crowd of people roaring in laughter, and see people react in a myriad of ways. It was fascinating. I was so intrigued by the energy of the crowd, and I couldn't have asked for a better reception. The goal of entertaining a crowd is important, but it comes as a consequence of developing an energetic and exciting piece.

Responses

For this project, I asked my audience to provide anonymous responses in an online form, so that I could gauge my success in these objectives. Here is a selection of the responses to the form.

Question: What did you enjoy most about the show?

- I enjoyed how high energy it was
- The setting. The show really makes you feel like you're in the suburbs of London.
- The show was genuine fun, very well put on, and was deeper art to think about.
- the weirdness
- How audience interactive it was.
- The quick and abnormal exchanges reminds me so much of my own life. Really loved the interaction with the audience.

- The energy, intensity and the comedic timing of the actors. The meaning and interpretation of the script allowing the audience to follow the dialogue even though it was written to be nonsensical. You can understand a lot of the author's commentary.

Question: What is one particular moment you want to highlight?

- The multitude of bras being tossed into the air, the fireman continuously coming back from the back of the theatre, everyone looking at the fireman with heart eyes right before his story
- The realization that the prologue was occurring at the end when the maid was setting up the potato's again.
- The story telling session when the actors try to one up each other and tell stories. The reactions were instrumental in allowing the observer to understand the dynamics between the characters such as they were.

In the positive questions, I got a number of very engaging, interested responses. They seemed to enjoy being involved in the process.

Question: What did you enjoy the least about the show?

- Nothing
- Sometimes it took too long to get to the "punchline"
- Why did they all go crazy
- Wish there was more audience interaction.
- the beginning
- It was a little complex to follow at points
- Felt a little slow in the beginning.

Question: What is one moment you were confused about/frustrated with?

- Some of the bits towards the beginning were a little long.
- the ending was wildly confusing but amazing
- the whole thing
- I didn't find truly anything annoying with the show. Other than that the slight annoyance that I didn't really know what was happening but that's what made it so unique.
- When everyone was yelling at the same time but I know that's in the script it was just hard to make out what they were saying

For the more negative questions, I received some valid criticism. Fortunately, I did not see any responses completely disliking the experience. For the most part, criticisms were about the pacing and the fact that it was confusing.

Objective 2

The more abstract, and far more challenging objective was to discover the meaning of the play. This is where I believe I have diverged most from my initial concept. I was convinced that I would be able to discover some meaning in the “vat of meaningless text” that I so kindly referred to this play as, but I think that the more interesting, and more valuable takeaway is not to postulate about some idea for what the play means, but to consider why it needs to mean anything at all.

Responses

In the same response form, I also asked about the meaning of the play. Here are a few selected responses:

Question: What do you think was the meaning behind the show?

- There was none
- The meaning is that there is no meaning.
- Life is confusing all the time no matter the time
- I think it had a lot to perhaps unintentionally say about art, and life. That it is all quite ridiculous and the line between the normal and absurd can be quite thin. I also think with the choices to really have the actors interact with, sit with, etc. the audience it really helped remind the audience that the people up there are just people too, and art is more interactive than you think.
- the monotony of suburban life. or trying to find meaning in something that doesn't have any
- Time is weird and the way we act about time depends entirely on arbitrary context.
- Each scene had different meanings, but overall themes I saw included conversation with no purpose, mundane relationships, and class differences
- It's absurdist- meaning is what you derive from what you see. However- madness is something that can be brought upon by environment and company.
- To me the show pointed out the significance of the day-to-day mundane occurrences. The clocks illustrate how our everyday actions transcend time. Humans can conceive of their past and their future. We live in the present but are often disoriented by thoughts from other time periods. We often struggle to reconcile these different perspectives.

In general, it seemed that the audience had a lot to say about the show. Some saw the absurdity and stopped with that. Some accepted the idea that it doesn't have a meaning. Others focused on the reflection absurdism has on people and society. It is really fascinating to see these responses and understand an audience point of view.

Initial Analysis

The analysis I presented during the process was the “cyclical nature of people’s lives.” That hollow conversations lead to more hollow conversations, and ultimately the meaninglessness breaks down into pure chaos and dissolution. I discussed the idea that we are in end times, or at least it feels like that, and that this play is presenting the idea of the meaningless chatter that we use to distract ourselves from the apocalypse. Arguably, this is a gloomy take, and I think that the ideas this play puts into people’s heads have little to do with Armageddon.

I also talked about the idea that to develop this play, it is not very useful to create a major dramatic question, but rather to find an ‘answer.’ I still agree with this approach. The idea of a major dramatic question centers itself on the idea that there is one thing the audience asks at the start of the play that they need answered by the end of it. With a play that forces you to ask questions at every turn, finding that question is a futile endeavor. Instead, finding an answer for the actors to hold onto to make sense of the world for themselves and sticking to it was a far more useful exercise. I don’t think the audience, as a whole, tried to find that answer, but I think they found pieces of it, or found their own answer to take home.

I won't talk much about my character analysis, because I will be talking about that in-depth in my analysis in section five. Overall, I think that my character descriptions are very similar to our final conclusions, but with some necessary adjustments.

Landmarks

There are seven landmarks that I wanted to use as a point to stop and reflect on my process. I wrote five reflections in total, which I will discuss here. Then, I will write the remaining two reflections for the Dress Rehearsal and the First Show.

Initial Reading

I had read this play before, but this reflection was written after my first intentional analytical reading of the script with the idea that I would be producing the play. I had a lot of frustrations with the script, especially with the “fuzzy and uncertain” ending. I think that I saw the comedy in it, but I don't think I realized just how slapstick and comedic that this play would end up being. I am so proud of how the play turned out, but when I started, I feel that I was trying to make a mountain out of a molehill. This play's nonsense is what makes it fun, funny, and energetic. I still had a creeping feeling that this play was hiding a mythical meaning monster in plain sight, and I was just missing it.

Auditions

I think that the casting of this play made it what it is. The creativity in the rehearsal room was astounding, and the fact that all of it spurred from a few video auditions is still incredible to think about. I couldn't have asked for a better team, even if it had to be moved around.

First Rehearsal

I remember being so nervous when I went into that first rehearsal. I brought candy, and really tried to make the experience as easy as possible for everyone. We read through the script, and the responses were mixed surprise, delight, and confusion. Everyone seemed a little surprised that they liked it as much as they did. It really showed me that this play was actually happening, and I knew from that moment that it was going to be great.

Dress Rehearsal

Before I could get to the dress rehearsal, we had another unplanned event: The actress playing Mrs. Martin had to step down from her role. As soon as I got the news, I put out a frantic casting call looking for anyone to step in. When I got to the rehearsal space, I sat down and talked with my actors about the situation, and the actress playing Mary offered to step up and take on the role of Mrs. Martin. Being a smaller role, Mary would be far easier for a newcomer to step into. This actress had been here since the beginning and knew the complex dialogue well enough to learn all her lines in less than two weeks. Then, with a brilliant stroke of luck, I got a response to my casting call. After getting a resume, I quickly brought her on board to learn the role of Mary, and within two days we were back on track. Costumes miraculously fit with only minor readjustments, and the first dress rehearsal, though now with some scripts in hand, went exceptionally well.

First Show

The nerves leading up to the opening night were astronomical. I was sorting out technical issues, getting last second supplies for props and playbills, and overall, it was very overwhelming from a technical standpoint. However, the one thing I was never

worried about during that first show day was the strength of my actors. I regret that during my in-process writings I didn't discuss the collaborative effort that went into this show. I had an incredible and hard-working team that never ceased to impress me. As the show went up, I sat in the audience and got to enjoy the brilliance of their performances. Witty, inventive, and endlessly creative, these people that I had spent the last few months with had produced something far beyond what I could have wished for. After the first show ended, I knew that I had something special. Through all the hard work and intimidating deadlines, I set out for myself, I had almost forgotten what I was here to do: entertain.

SECTION 4: PRODUCTION ANALYSIS

This following analysis, without the context of the play, could seem like a verbatim summary of the action on stage. However, due to the absurdity of the piece, I feel that a summary that details the nuance of the ideas behind each scene will shed a light on our mindset during the production.

Scene 1

The opening monologue of this play was one of the biggest hurdles in this production. We spent a while deliberating over how to make it interesting. In a play like this, interesting is important. The monologue is mundane, with Mrs. Smith talking about the daily goings-on of the London suburbs, where she gets her oil from, and so on. To create interest, we focused on Mr. Smith's benign reaction to her conversation. Mrs. Smith, we decided, is trying to get her husband to listen to her. While she is on this mission, she is cleaning up the mess on the floor- a dozen potatoes scattered around the set. On shelves, on chairs and tables, and all over the floor. The decision to have potatoes cover the set was borne from a few separate ideas that landed in one place. First, Mrs. Smith needed something actionable to do during her long opening monologue. Second, I wanted something that made the set feel *off* from the very moment the audience sat down. Thirdly, I wanted some sort of icon for an audience to latch onto and follow throughout the show. We landed on potatoes because she talks about them extensively in the opening lines, and they are an adequately random thing to be strewn about the house. I especially enjoy the line "Mary did the potatoes very well this evening," which can be interpreted as Mary having laid out the potatoes in this odd arrangement.

As she collects the potatoes, she hands them off to the on-stage door, where a disembodied hand collects them. This solution leans into the absurdity of the show. She also references their daughter, Peggy, by holding up and looking at the picture frame on the table. Establishing this is one of the many hints toward the combined lives of the Smiths and the Martins.

Following the monologue, Mr. Smith slams down his newspaper. His first line of dialogue in the show is argumentative, making a moralistic argument about a doctor who tries out every procedure on himself before his patient. They first chat about the doctor for a while, commenting on this odd doctor as if it is completely normal. They actually find something else wrong about the doctor's behavior besides the obvious. After the chime of the grandfather clock, voiced by our stage manager, they discuss the death of Bobby Watson, a man who died one, two, three, and four years ago. It is then revealed that every member of Bobby's family, including his wife, is named Bobby Watson as well. The next chime of the grandfather clock immediately sets them back, talking about the wedding of Mr. and Mrs. Bobby Watson. After a quick pause, they return to talking about the funeral. In this dialogue, we found an underlying theme of cyclical routines infiltrating the discussion of death and marriage. When they discuss Bobby Watson, and all of his family members, one can surmise that perhaps they are not really talking about Bobby Watson, but rather about someone who they knew well. However, to maintain their posture as upper-class suburbanites, they find themselves talking about every death, birth, and wedding with the same passive intrigue.

They quickly find themselves in an argument based on nothing, mocking each other and getting incredibly angry. The fight doesn't last long, as Mr. Smith fades into baby-talk and the couple superficially makes up. It is telling that they can't really allow themselves to have problems, for fear of breaking from the mold they've put themselves in.

Scene 2

As the Smith's leave, the Maid enters and announces herself. Mr. and Mrs. Smith immediately reenter, as if nothing has happened, and sit down to ignore her. The Maid, Mary, seems genuinely excited to share about her day. When the Smiths dismiss her, she tells them about the Martins, who are at the door. The Smiths ridicule her in an absurd and nonsensical way, causing Mary to say one of the most nonsensical lines in the show: "I bought me a chamber pot." It comes from nowhere and leads to nothing. This is one of my favorite lines in the show, and it comes from who I would consider the sanest character. I believe that this moment frames Mary as a rational person who cannot handle the irrationality of her superiors and is simply being driven to the same absurd behaviors. Mary then welcomes Mr. and Mrs. Martin and exits. For my production, Mary climbs to a loft space where she spies on and takes notes about the following conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Martin.

Scene 3

The Martin's scene was by far the most challenging to direct. The scene is a repetitive conversation where Mr. and Mrs. Martin seem to know each other but can't quite remember. They seem to coincidentally be at the same places at the same time, live in the same house, etc. However, despite their extensive similarities, they do not

remember each other. My first concept for this scene was a bit convoluted, but from it we gleaned what I called the “underpainting” of the scene. Since the dialogue itself meant very little, we sought to understand what we could imply with the dialogue. The scene is separated into two halves, between which the grandfather clock chimes once again. In the first half, the couple is having a ‘meet-cute’, where they slowly get to know each other and flirt with each other. They almost kiss, then sit down awkwardly, only to get so close to kissing one more time before the clock strikes. This first section we considered to be a flash-back to the young lives of the Martins, before the mundane cyclical nature of their current reality. They are intrigued by every little detail they learn about each other.

After the clock strikes, they flash forward to the present. I wanted it to seem as if they had been having this conversation for the past twenty years, and Mrs. Martin is finally getting sick of it. They get into an argument, she mocks his insistence, and finally, he shows her a photo – the same photo that Mrs. Smith showed to Mr. Smith – and talks about their little daughter Alice with a white eye and a red eye. This convinces Mrs. Martin, and they leap into each other’s arms. This section is more focused on the heartbreaking reality of these characters: They don’t know who they truly are. They are simply living in a place and going about their day. In this moment, they slow down to recognize the life that they have built and lay down together comforted.

Scene 4

Mary enters from the loft where she had been spying, and sneaks over to the Martins as they sleep. Mary, during this scene, reveals a true nature about the Martins. Or does she? With a clipboard and a Jumbo Crayon, she draws insane notes about the conspiracy between the couple, determining that Mrs. Martin and Mr. Martin are in fact

not who they say they are. She ends the scene announcing that she is secretly Sherlock Holmes. For our interpretation, we wanted to find a reason why she is making these deductions, and why she cares so much about the Martins. We determined that she is frustrated with the insanity of her living situation and is openly mocking the behavior that the couples exhibit. She is instilling confusion in the audience, who she addresses directly, and in the Martins. We began to call Mary the *catalyst* for this reason. She initiates the breaking of the cycle that the Smiths and the Martins are trapped in.

Scene 5

As Mary exits, the Martins wake up, and make their resolution: to live as before. The Smiths enter from behind, introducing the interactions between the two couples for the first time. It's unsurprising that the logic begins to break down even more now that these two worlds collide, but I wanted to focus that energy on pushing each member of this odd quartet to pick a side. Initially, they stumble awkwardly through a passive conversation. I put this moment in darkness to really highlight the conflict that arises in these few seconds: Who are these people? Rather than answering the question, the small-talk continues. Mrs. Martin presents a slow and incremental reveal of a man who was tying his shoelace, a story which is interrupted constantly by the other guests. When the story is finally over, they cheer. Later on, more stories are told, but this one is interesting for how simple and mundane it is. Maybe it's an insight into who is really calling.

Scene 6

This scene shift is one that I marked not because of an entrance or exit, but because of a significant shift in the tone of the play. When the doorbell rings, Mrs. Smith is sent to open it. In staging, I set Mrs. Smith as far away from the door as possible. This

way, every time the rest of the group expects her to answer the door, it makes as little sense as the argument in the first place. The doorbell is when we see a divide between the couples. The men versus the women, but not about anything to do with gender, but rather to do with right or wrong. The question being that if someone rings the doorbell, is there or is there not someone at the door. The men say that there is always someone at the door, and the women say there is never anyone at the door. I think this argument is less about the door itself, but perhaps a question that the characters in the play are asking of their world. Do things make sense here, or do they not? The answer, unfortunately, is that they don't, and it makes their arguments all the more vigilant. So, when they finally find someone at the door, they can all agree that at least one time, it made sense.

Scene 7

The Fire Chief steps through the door and is immediately carried into the argument about the doorknob. He seems very eager to listen to their problems, and simply gives them the answer that both are true, sometimes. An unsatisfying answer to an unsatisfying argument, but it seems to quell the couples. The fire chief then asks if there is a fire in the building. We discussed the meaning of the fire in rehearsals and decided that the fire was a representation of the relationships of these people. He is here to put out any sparks of anger, or doubt, or questioning. Keep these people from loving each other too much or too little. He goes on to describe the random stipulations of his job. The Fire Chief, in our production, was very aware of the audience. He could almost be seen as the mediator of their confinement to their absurd reality, within the play.

He then is asked to tell a story. The stories that these characters tell seem very apt for the world they are in. They make as little sense as the rest of the play, but still feel

like stories being told. The Fire Chief tells a small story about a dog and a cow, and then quickly tells another one.

Mr. Smith, to the chagrin of the others, tells his own story, which is surprisingly aggressive. This was a moment to highlight yet another running joke we had in the show: Mr. Smith being bullied. He became a punching bag for the other characters to put down, and his insistence to still be a part of the conversation made it all the more funny. His story is met with uninterested remarks, and then Mrs. Smith tells a captivating story. Then, the group turns their attention back to the Fire Chief.

The Headcold is a two-page story that follows the lineage of an old woman who occasionally catches a cold in the winter. In this moment, I had the Smiths be infatuated by the story, and the Martins terrified of the story, and trying desperately to get away. After being chased around the audience, the Martins find a seat in the audience and pretend to be members of the audience, possibly to avoid being a part of the play in this moment. The energy during this story on stage is incredible, and it is interesting how drawing the focus to the reactions from other actors really makes the mundane nature of the story secondary. The punchline lands, and the story is told, but the audience is not bored.

This segment, the storytelling, really shines a light on one of the core ideas I found in this play: The meaning isn't what makes a good story, it's the way that it's told. The group all tells these stories, and the audience is captivated by them, reacting like they would any story being told. It shows how much of our emotional response is tied to the performance. The Fire chief then excuses himself and checks the time. This is the first moment another set piece was given any attention: The clocks. There were seven clocks

onstage, and none of them worked. One of them didn't even have hands. He asks for the time, and Mrs. Smith tells him that they don't have the time. The Fire Chief grapples with this as Mary enters.

Scene 8

Mary, who has clearly been eavesdropping, asks to tell a story. That is, until she spots the Fire Chief. They've clearly met before. Earlier in the play, when the doorbell was ringing, they were seen making out in the doorway. In this moment, they jump onto each other, and begin making out and dive behind the chairs. They throw clothes up into the air. One bra, another bra, and another, and two more. This moment is what I would consider to be the climax of the show, if we were to use traditional terms. If we consider the Fire Chief to be the mediator, and Mary to be the catalyst for change, then their love for each other culminates in a real possibility for the cycle to be broken, and for the Smiths and the Martins to be let go. The Fire Chief restrains himself, and Mary goes to tell her poem. She gives a loving tribute to the Fire Chief about how everything caught fire, and as she steps down for an embrace, the other couples shove her unceremoniously out of the door. Once the door shuts, the fire chief is angry. He appreciated the poem but says that he must go. He exits.

The titular line of the play is said in this moment. It doesn't make sense, and it doesn't follow any of the previous dialogue, so we decided to modify it a little bit. The line in question is "speaking of that—the bald soprano?". We had the Fire Chief exit one door of the theatre and enter in through another. When he entered again, he was holding a playbill for the show, and acted as if he was an audience member himself coming to watch the performance.

Scene 9

The last scene of this play is so iconic. It is everything that you could ask for from an absurdist show. The couples just begin to recite random words and phrases over and over again. It's as if they've completely lost any connection to reality. They scream, they fall on the floor, they knock over furniture, and they make loud noises. While this is going on, Mary enters, holding the potatoes from the beginning. She places them all around the set, and then goes to sit with the Fire Chief.

They end the show by putting everything back in its proper place, and the Martins enter in the same place the Smiths were at the top of the show and begin the lines again. Music plays, and they bow.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSIONS

What I've discovered over the course of this project, more than anything, is that art means what we want it to mean. Anyone who makes or consumes art will find a meaning in it, and that meaning is the only important one. Theatre brings people to it in droves not because of any one magical element, but for a thousand different reasons. There is no meaning to the Bald Soprano, but that only means that there is an open palate with which to paint a story on. I set out on this mission to produce an entertaining show, and I believe that I succeeded. I learned how to tell a better story by letting go of everything I thought a story could be.

If you would like to watch a recording of this production, please follow this link:

https://youtu.be/vzdef2Suv_Q

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