

## Candidate 1 evidence

Does Performance Execute the  
Playwright?

'*The stage is a scaffold on which the playwright is executed*'<sup>1</sup>. This quote from Chekhov reminds us that the story of the playwright unhappy with how their work is interpreted is as longstanding as the art form itself. One particular example of this is Australian playwright Lachlan Philpott who, on the opening night of his play *Alienation*, cut all ties with the production and placed a note on every seat stating "*this production does not reflect my original scripted or communicated intentions as the playwright*"<sup>2</sup> after a squabble with the director over the message of his play. This situation begs the question, who, if anyone, is right? And calls into questions the idea of authorship itself. Who gives a play its meaning? It can be all too easy to turn our attention to the writer but to what extent does the authorship extend? The audience member describing the play to their friend? The historical, political and social context in which you take your seat? The director and the actors? All of these factors play a role in terms of influence over a performance - but who gets the final say on a text's dramatic meaning?

The conflict at the heart of this discussion is one about interpretation. An essay on this subject<sup>3</sup> proposes the idea that there are in fact two versions of any play – the written and the performed. Within the written is everything the writer envisioned while crafting their story, a pure version of their ideas, not muddied by a director's or designer's idea for what the story should say. In reality this version can never be realised, it is impossible for a playwright's story to be heard without - at the very least - the vessel of an actor to bring it into the physical world. As director Jonathon Miller stated at the Adelaide festival

*"the act of interpretation is absolutely essential... The so-called pure version of the bard speaking for himself hasn't ever and will never happen."*<sup>4</sup>

And it is from this interpretation that the play materialises into what an audience can see - the performance text, one presented through the lenses of directors and designers and actors. Some people believe that a good performance of a play is one that is as close to the 'true' text as possible, while the more recent postmodern movement asserts that there is no such thing as inherent meaning within a text and that the playwright has no more say over what their words mean than anyone else.

If we look at the opening quote from Chekhov, it appears clear on which side of the fence he stands. By stating that the stage, and thus the performance, of a play is damaging to the writer he seems to be asserting that some inherent part of his text is inevitably lost no matter what the performance may be. He is stating that the true meanings of the text are impossible to convey through performance. In reality all plays that truly stand the test of time and continue to be performed again and again rise above the idea that there is one 'correct' interpretation and give breathing space for both the creatives performing the play and the audience watching to find their own meaning.

A good example of this is 'Rhinoceros' by Eugene Ionesco. The play follows the unlikely and reluctant hero of Berenger, an alcoholic office worker who stares first in wonder, then curiosity and finally defiance as his friends, and the people of the town around him turn, one by one, into rhinoceros. The obvious metaphor this play creates is one of the rise of fascism Ionesco himself witnessed across Europe in the 1930s. Berenger looks in shock

as one by one these people that he has known his whole life transform into ugly wretched beasts – drawing parallels to the reality of those who were violently opposed to fascism being forced to witness neighbours, colleagues and friends suddenly turn to this ugly ideology. Admittedly it would be unhelpful to argue that seeing this tide of fascism surround him while living in Romania didn't bare great influence and inspiration for *Rhinoceros*, Ionesco himself rejects this idea that the play is fundamentally about the danger of Fascism and in doing so rejects the idea of inherent meaning within a text –

*"It is wider than that. It depicts a struggle against any tyrannical and dogmatic system, any ideology that becomes an idolatry, be it East or West."*<sup>6</sup>

Thus any production that wishes to remain true to Ionesco's intentions must first reject the idea that his intentions are as concrete as many make out. An example of such a production was performed recently at the Lyceum Theatre in Edinburgh. Adapted by Zinnie Harris in an attempt to make the play more coherent for a modern audience the production makes some interesting and unique changes to the original text. One of the most striking is the surreal and absurd setting. Fully embracing Ionesco's love of absurdity the play begins with a man-sized cat in a suit and tie walking across the stage, instantly silencing the hubbub of the preshow audience. This coupled with the set of hanging chairs and other colourful elaborate costumes contrasts with the idea of the play being set in a quiet, average provincial town. While there is an argument that the original setting allows more space for the interpretation were the audience is reminded how creeping conformism of dangerous ideologies invade everyday life, however director Murat Dalataban's somewhat surreal setting conveys another more unique idea to its viewer. In this world of bright tartan trousers, moustached waitresses and purple suits it is our protagonist, Berenger, who

stands out, clothed simply in a purposefully plain all cream crumpled shirt, overcoat and chinos. On top of this it is Berenger alone who is uncertain in the face of growing number of rhinos while the other characters are all certain their solution is the correct one. Dudard thinks it is simply a "*fad*"<sup>7</sup> which will pass in time. Daisy believes they simply have to learn to live with them and get on with their lives. It is only Berenger who looks out on what is happening with fear for the future

This gives the impression that Daltaban is proposing that, in political life it is not the gentle, soft spoken people, floating peacefully through life that pose a threat but instead it is the over-confident zealous pragmatic person, only happy with complete certainty that is more susceptible to cult like, overbearing movements. The character of Jean, the best friend of Berenger is the most self assured character of all even describing himself as '*full of vim*' and thus "*one of the good guys*"<sup>8</sup>, and it is he who we see transform first, while Daisy who is most similar to Berenger, and only becomes certain and transfixed on her idea of a solution in her final moments, holds off the longest before succumbing.

We cannot certify if this is a belief Ionesco himself held or wished to convey, but nevertheless it is possible to interpret it from the text he wrote. What's more the production never goes as far as to mark this idea as completely true or false, it simply proposes it and this sticks to another idea Ionesco held, that the purpose of theatre of was not to be didactic. and that is precisely why he used the symbol or rhinos to represent creeping conformism. At no point do those transforming spurt fascist language or don an armband, nor does the writer or any actor condemn fascism or any far right movement, they simply condemn conforming for conforming's sake, and warn against allowing yourself to be caught in the stampede of a radical ideology, this world view is shown in a quote from Ionesco

*"All affirmations are stupid. Only second-class minds, grade-B intellectuals, make violent affirmations"*<sup>9</sup>

This Lyceum production simply hints and nudges viewers towards ideas of the movement the rhinoceros symbolise without ever overtly stating. For example, it is of note that the Turkish director utilised several Middle Eastern actors, and Middle Eastern Turkish music during scene transitions, at a time when Turkey itself becomes increasingly totalitarian - a clearly purposeful choice intended to draw a connection between the dangerous ideologies the rhinoceros represent and the Turkish totalitarian regime. What is key is that the audience are not forced into believing this. That same music also serves to increase tension and sustain the energy of the play as it moves from scene to scene. The result of this highlights one of unique traits of theatre - in a room of 200 hundred people everyone can be watching an essentially different yet equally valid version of the play. While one person might see the rise of the far right in the west another might see the rise of Corbynism in the labour party or even the world's obsession with social media. Through the act of interpretation, the audience too become authors of the performance, in control of its meaning.

The play culminates in a stunning finale with the finale stage picture of the play being Berenger alone atop a tower of chairs and tables shouting out *"I am the last man and I am not changing"*<sup>10</sup> as the set around him is stripped away revealing chairs hanging all around. The chairs are a symbol throughout the production, at the start they are very purposefully set out neatly, and some fall whenever a rhinoceros makes an appearance. In a post-show

discussion John Cobb who played the old man said he saw that as a unique way to visualise the rhinoceros on stage, showing the ever present nature of the threat of both the rhinoceros and what they represent, and when you take this to be true it opens up your options for interpretation even further.

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*"It allows you to see that the rhinos are whatever you want them to be"<sup>11</sup>*

While the director stated he had always thought of the chairs as a metaphor for society and order as the play begins with them all organised neatly and ends with them hanging at peculiar angles from the ceiling- representing the extreme and unnatural change extremist regimes can bring. Again reemphasising that when analysing a play, it can be limiting to simply try and find the director's or writer's intent and take it as gospel. Instead we should see what they have created and how we personally interpret it, accepting that this is equally valid. This is not to say that there is no such thing as a playwright's intentions, simply that these intentions are often far more straightforward than is often communicated. Ionesco tells the story of Berenger and draws attention to man's right to individual expression and condemn a hive mentality and as long as a production does this, it is free to mould and reshape Rhinoceros in any way desired, while still fundamentally being the same play.

In the production of Rhinoceros, by Murat Daltaban, the original ideas of Ionesco are tweaked and fiddled with but clearly this is still a production, which resonates with the philosophy and ideas of the playwright. It is however also paradoxically possible to stage a production that manages to both stay true to the intentions of the text while going against the intentions of the playwright and a perfect example of this is Yael Farber's adaptation of 'Miss Julie' by August Strindberg.

It is no secret that Strindberg was a misogynist and wrote this play in defiance of the growing feminist movement that was beginning in his era, even going so far as to add a preface to the play, describing the protagonist as a "*man hating half women*"<sup>12</sup> and women as a whole as a "*shunted form of human being who stands between man, the lord of creation, the creator of culture*"<sup>13</sup>. The original play looks at one midsummer night in a stately home during which Miss Julie, the Lady of the manor, has an affair with Jean, her father's valet. The morning after Julie learns that Jean is not the lover she thought him to be and the play ends with her walking out to the barn with a razor to kill herself as she cannot bear the shame and embarrassment the affair will bring. With preface in mind it is clear that Strindberg intended this play to depict a hysteric, unsavoury women unable to control herself and who thus deserves the ridicule and the punishment which she receives - her suicide.

However it is possible to create a play which stands in stark contrast to the interpretation presented in this preface In her essay '*Miss Julie* as "A Naturalistic Tragedy"'<sup>15</sup> Alice Templeton proposes that it is possible to view '*Miss Julie*' as a feminist text. Rather than the deserved fall of a women devoid of morals, she suggests the tragic tale of a powerful but unguided upper-class women, in-tune with the social injustice both placed upon her gender and upon other classes, who attempts to rebel against this unjust society but eventually becomes convinced it is impossible and ultimately conforms to societies expectation of her and killing herself to save bringing shame to her family. These ideas are realised in Yael Farber's stunning adaptation '*Mies Julie*'.

Relocated to South Africa in 2012, the play's action hinges the dynamic between Miss Julie, the descendant of Boer farmers, and John, a family servant with which she grew up.

We see these two character's toil with both the privilege and handicap placed on them by society. The result of this is a play which stands in the face of Strindberg's sexist ideals.

The beauty of this idea is that essentially it only differs from the original text through the social context in which it is set – modern day. Sexism is much less prevalent than in the time of Strindberg meaning that people are less inclined to see female characters as weak and feeble minded and instead compare them to the modern day ideal of a woman.

As Julie enters and flirts with John, rather than seeing the petty woman driven solely by unsavoury desire Strindberg intended, we are inclined to see a socially conscious woman in a time of social upheaval, uncomfortable with her position of power over this man simply because of the family she was born into, and who perhaps, on this holiday of freedom day on which the story is set, wishes to erase all social barriers and feel equal to this man. The script reinforces this idea when Miss Julie enquires about who John once loved and says she will ask him "as an equal, as a friend"<sup>16</sup> and again the morning after as she complains when he continues to call her Mies Julie, implying her superiority and status. Indicating a desire to feel equal to him, or at the very least a disdain for the idea of her superiority over him another time this occurs is as the night goes on-

*Miss Julie: Why don't you sit down?*

*John: I wouldn't take the liberty in your presence.*

*Miss Julie: Not even if I ordered you?*

*John: Of course I'd obey.<sup>17</sup>*

Despite her attempts and wish to feel equal the John, she ultimately, and ironically, has to 'order him' to achieve her goal; with this moment perfectly highlighting the arbitrariness of the class system while clearly showing Miss Julie's yearn to rebel against the meaningless and oppressive social norms which suppress both her and John. Furthermore the script places heavy emphasis on Julie's description of a repeated dream she has of falling from a tower, clearly symbolic of Julie's disinterest in her social status and her willingness to "fall" to a lower one, as it would be an act of defiance against a society she can see the flaws in. This alternate interpretation completely repaints the character of Miss Julie.

The morning after their encounter we learn that John lied about his feelings of affection for Julie and simply used their sexual encounter as leverage over Julie.

Templeton suggests that as Julie as is unable to effectively express her discontent with society she seeks a symbolic act of defiance, a sexual encounter with the lower class and black John, however when he instead uses this against Julie in an attempt to move up the social ladder, Julie starts to believe her goals to be impossible and recedes to accepting society's control over her, symbolised by doing what society demands of her

*" her [Miss Julie] "revolution" lacks a method, and because she has no satisfying means of expression, her discontent is self-destructive"<sup>18</sup>*

However Yarber's use of stage image in the final moments of 'Miss Julie' could be seen to contradict this and cement the production as an act of disobedience to Strindberg's sexist intentions.

In the original, the play ends with Julie walking out to the barn with a razor in her hand, clearly signifying her suicide but without overtly showing it to the audience. This is not the case in Faber's adaptation. Instead we see Miss Julie in her final moments, standing centre

stage ultimately killing herself by using a scythe to mutilate the part of her body society places most value on, resulting in the final image of this tense, socially charged adaptation being shocking and brutal. This choice of image and deviation from the original is the culmination of the production's repainting of Julie. Rather than the suicide symbolising Julie's acceptance of society's power over her we see is symbolising the opposite – her defiance. By destroying the part of her which society values most she refuses to partake in a system which marginalises and objectifies her.

This stands in clear contrast to how Strindberg saw her suicide, describing in his preface how Julie succumbs to her "*weak and degenerate brain*"<sup>19</sup> indicating he views the death, which John encourages, as retribution for a delirious women believing she can be an equal to man in society.

It is clear that while there is such a thing as playwright's intentions, taking them as gospel can be just as dangerous as completely disregarding them. Not only can a text be reimagined and interpreted in different ways in relation to the author's belief it can also take the authors belief and completely turn them on their head, and this process is essential. It allows plays to be put on time and time again, and to resonate with audiences from different ages and cultures. Farber talked of her process for reinterpretation and the aspects she enjoys –

*I know these texts once had an enormous potency. It becomes almost forensic... how do you rediscover what gave that text teeth?*

This idea of refinding a play's teeth is the key to reinterpretation, finding out what aspects of the text continue to resonate with audiences and what new aspects and themes can be coaxed out. A playwright whose work only stands in its 'own time' with a singular purpose sacrifices the right to be revisited and reimagined for generations to come. The more rigid control placed over a text and what it "should" mean, the more you rob the audience of a chance to fully experience and connect with a play. It is even possible to reinterpret Checkov's quote on the subject to reinforce this idea. Rather than saying the stage can never truly represent a playwright's intent, we can instead read that, the moment a script becomes realised physically on a stage the playwright is symbolically killed and thus the play and all its meaning is freed from their grasp - they have no longer have any power over its meaning of interpretation, once the written text becomes the performed, authorship and true meaning is left up for grabs, to both history and audience.

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