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Communication of an Actor's Mental Processes to an Audience

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COMMUNICATION OF AN ACTOR'S MENTAL PROCESSES TO AN AUDIENCE

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THE PROBLEM

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Mystery, discord, and ambiguity surround the craft of acting. It is possible to find many theories of acting that are in direct conflict with each other. Ask an actor what he does to create a role and one will get almost as many different answers as there are different actors. The teacher of acting is faced with a variety of dicta such as: "It is a truism that actors are born and not made; another truism that acting cannot be taught."[1] Teachers do, however, conduct classes in acting. The question is what are they teaching. Is it possible that they have mystically discovered what should be taught in an acting class, or have they just determined their own methods from all possible methods available to them? They either teach their own method or someone else's, but who is to say which is the right or the correct interpretation of the craft of acting?

It is the purpose of this study to explore one area of the actor's craft to find out if this select area can be measured, and if a principle, based on empirical evidence, can be formulated. There is a growing interest in theatre scholarship in the establishment of objective measurement

[1]Michael Redgrave, The Actor's Ways and Means (New York, 1961), p. 30.

and analysis of the craft of acting.[2] If the craft is to be taught (and the number of schools teaching acting would indicate that this is so), then it is of great importance to research the craft and to arrive at some definite, empirical principles that can be used in teaching these classes.

Studies are being carried out in the area of acting.[3] Some of them deal with the personality of actors, others with the changes of personality caused by being in a play, and still others with the judgment of an actor's performance. The field is new and relatively open for research. The scope of this study is limited to exploration of only a very small portion of the craft.

A basic principle of acting accepted by a great many people is that an actor must be mentally in character (the actor must think as his character would think) as well as being physically in character (the actor must walk, talk, dress, and look as the character would). "The actor creates the whole length of a human soul's life on the stage every time he creates a part. This human soul must

[2]George Gunkle and David Thayer, "The Relevance of Measurement Research to Theatre: A Progress Report," a paper presented to the Children's Theatre Conference and American Educational Theatre Association convention in New York (1967), p. 1.

[3]Gunkle and Thayer, p. 15.

be visible in all its aspects, physical, mental, and emotional."[4] There is a concept implicit in this statement that should be looked at more closely. The assertion that an audience must see the "mental" aspect of the character implies that the mental state of the actor does indeed communicate itself to an audience. If that assertion is true, can an actor function in the dual capacity suggested by John Dolman Jr.? The artist, he claims, "is two things at once: artist and instrument. . . . As instrument, the actor is theoretically identified with the character he represents. . . . As artist, on the other hand, we think of him as independent of the character--as an interpreter. . ."[5] Thus, a dualism in the art is implied: acting is emotion controlled by intellect; e.g., the actor uses, say, seventy-five per cent of his mind to play his character and twenty-five per cent to control everything he does on stage.

If the mental processes of the actor do communicate to the audience, it would seem that the actor would not be able, during performance at any rate, to fulfill this dual nature. If he is thinking about his function as an

[4]Richard Boleslavsky, Acting: The First Six Lessons (New York, 1960), p. 77.

[5]John Dolman, Jr., The Art of Acting (New York, 1949), pp. 32-33.

interpreter, surely that must be communicated to those people watching.

The actor considering Boleslavsky's and Dolman's theories must suddenly find that he is faced with a dilemma: does he play his role with full involvement in the mental aspects of his character, or does he reserve a part of his mind to act as an overseer of his emotions?

Konstantin Stanislavski, the great Russian director, claimed that the actor must always play to his audience and be aware of how the audience is accepting what he is offering. "The audience is an important co-creator of the performance."[6] If this is true then the actor must devote another portion of his mind to a function unrelated to the full development of his character's mental state. Now the actor must think on three levels. He must communicate the total mental aspect of his character while, at the same time, his mind is engaged as an overseer of his emotions, and an observer of audience reaction. Denis Diderot wrote that the paradox of acting is that the man who feels nothing is the man who will make the best actor.[7] It would seem that there are even more apparent contradictions

[6]Konstantin S. Stanislavski, in The Stanislavski System by Sonia Moore (New York, 1965), p. 51.

[7]Denis Diderot, The Paradox of Acting, trans. Walter Herries Pollock (New York, 1963), pp. 11-20.

in the actor's art.

The problem is compounded when one realizes that the actor is already very busy mentally. He must, of course, remember his lines, his blocking, and the relationships that exist between his character and every other character on-stage. Certainly these aspects of role playing have become almost second nature to him through the process of rehearsal; but he is faced with the problem of keeping these things fresh--that is, he must present all the actions and reactions as though they were happening for the first time.[8] In order to interrelate acceptably with other actors he must listen, as the character, to what they are saying and react accordingly. In short he must also think about what the other actors are saying and doing. It would lead one to believe that the tasks are impossible.

It cannot be an impossible task, however, for actors do perform and they give very good characterizations apparently without the audience perceiving all of these mental processes. Perhaps the perception of mental processes is a question of degree--depending upon the caliber of concentration the actor devotes to the role; or upon the degree of perception, by the audience, of the mental

[8]William H. Gillette, "The Illusion of the First Time in Acting," in Actors on Acting, ed. Toby Cole and Helen K. Chinoy (New York, 1968), p. 25.

activities of the actor. It is possible that all members of an audience are not as sensitive to the mental processes of the actor as some people have indicated.[9] This very small segment of the actor's craft is worthy of study.

II. DEFINITIONS OF TERMS TO BE USED

Absurdist Drama. The term is usually defined in two ways. The most common is that Absurdist Drama is drama that presents characters in situations that are inconsistent with reality in order to show that life is absurd. Martin Esslin, however, says that Absurdist Drama is that which presents the absurdity of life on the stage in concrete images; it does not argue that life is absurd.[10] For the purpose of this study the second definition is more appropriate.

Blocking is defined as the changes in location of the actors on stage.[11]

Business. This term refers to bits of individual illustrative action, as opposed to blocking above.[12]

[9]Stanislavski, Dolman, et al.

[10]Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, rev. and enl. ed. (London, 1968), p. 25.

[11]Dolman, p. 110.

[12]Dolman, loc. cit.

Character. This term carries a double meaning as it relates to the study. First, it refers to the persons in the drama, as written by the playwright. In this sense role, part, and character are synonymous. Second, the term alludes to the aggregate of distinctive qualities belonging to an individual role.

Direction. Direction refers to all the duties of the director. These include selecting the play, casting the roles, rehearsing, and the responsibility for all the artistic aspects of production.

Mounting a Production. This is defined as the preparing of a production to be put on the stage. It refers to the technical and business aspects necessary to set the play in its final form before an audience.

Playing. This is defined as all of those things an actor does to portray a character; such as the interpretation of lines, the manner of speech, movement, and interaction with other actors.

Recurrent Audience. A group of ten people was asked to see all three productions of the play produced for this study. They were an experimental group.

Regular Audience. These people saw the production once only. They were the control group.

Stage Directions. Almost every playwright includes

in his script many descriptions (stage directions) that are not a part of the spoken dialogue. They are intended to give the actors and director some additional information about the characters and settings, and some suggestions concerning the blocking of the scenes.

Straight Playing. The term is used in this study to identify the playing of the actors according to the playwright's intentions.

Theatricality. Theatricality is here defined as all of those qualities that give a play its standing as a dramatic work and one that is stimulating both to read and to produce, as contrasted with the popular definition noted by Roby and Ulanov as "the quality of artificiality or sheer sensationalism in stage presentations."[13]

Varying Character. The actor who, at the request of the director, played his role differently on each of the three successive nights is called the varying character.

III. STATEMENT OF HYPOTHESIS

According to Samuel Selden,[14] the spectator responds in three ways to an actor's role. He perceives

[13]Robert C. Roby and Barry Ulanov, Introduction to Drama (New York, 1962), p. 675.

[14]Samuel Selden, First Steps in Acting, 2nd ed. (New York, 1964), p. 7.

participates, and makes a mental comment. The visual aspects of the actor's role, costume, make-up, facial expression, and stance, are, of course, what the audience member perceives. The spectator also participates in the role in that he imagines the character's experiences as real situations and that he, the spectator, is involved with them. The spectator also makes a running mental comment on the role. He analyzes, evaluates, and criticizes the role.

The audience then, like the actor, is very active mentally during a performance. Perception is essentially a mental process. The act of participating involves another mental activity, the use of imagination. While the audience member is engaged in these two processes he is making a variety of evaluations. He must be very involved mentally because all of these mental processes are directed toward a number of characters and all of the artistic aspects of the production--sets, lighting, costume, and properties.

Thus it can be seen that there is a very involved interaction between the actor and audience. Books have been written on the psychology of an audience,[15] but

[15]See Harry L. Hollingworth, The Psychology of the Audience (New York, 1935).

research has failed to turn up any writing on the perception by the audience of the mental state or processes of the actor. If directors recognize that this communication, a silent one, does exist, then it would be of value to know its characteristics. The communication may be very subtle, or the audience may perceive the expression of only the most obvious thoughts of the actor.

There are expressions of thoughts that can be called obvious to an audience, because the actor is reacting physically--that is, he uses his body and facial expression, to convey what he is thinking. If, however, the communication is very subtle, then it is questionable if the spectator can tell whether or not the actor is mentally in character, and whether his thoughts are those of his character.

If for example, it can be proved that the communication is of a very subtle nature, then the principle that many directors use, that the actor must be thinking as his character would at all times, would be true and one that should be taught in every class in acting. On the other hand, if the obvious mental processes are the only ones that do communicate to an audience member then the principle should be abandoned and the actor should be taught more about body movement and facial expression to convey

thought processes.

IV. HYPOTHESIS

It is held that the actor communicates his mental processes to the audience and that this silent communication is of a subtle nature.

CHAPTER II

DESIGN OF THE STUDY

Because the purpose of the study was to discover whether a subtle form of mental communication exists between an actor and his audience, it was decided that a descriptive method of investigation would be used. As far as can be established, a study of this type has not been published. Thus, this is a pilot-study. It was decided to direct a play in which one particular character would be played differently each night. Immediately following each performance the audience was asked to fill out a questionnaire designed to determine audience reaction to the three performances.

I. THE PRODUCTION

Eugène Ionesco's The Lesson was produced and directed as the vehicle for the study. The reasons for selecting The Lesson were; its very small cast, its theatricality, and the character reversals in the play. These three criteria are discussed at length in Chapter III. The production was mounted on the stage of The Little Theatre in Barge Hall on the campus of Central Washington State College. The stage is very small (twenty feet wide and sixteen feet deep) and the auditorium seats only one hundred and twenty-four. The small theatre was chosen rather than the main stage, because it was thought that

the intimacy of The Little Theatre would be more suitable for testing the mental relationship between actor and audience. As a questionnaire was used it was also desirable to test an audience of small numbers in order to make tabulation of the results easier.

The Lesson was presented on three consecutive nights after five weeks of rehearsal. The first two nights the play was performed using the varying character technique. The third and final night the play was acted straight. The audiences were one hundred and ten, ninety-four, and eighty-seven in number, respectively.

II. THE VARYING CHARACTER

The cast of The Lesson consists of only three characters—the Professor, the Student, and the Maid. In order to evaluate audience responses to the mental communication of an actor, it was decided to vary the playing of the Professor each night. Since it was also an intent of the study to determine the degree of subtlety in communication with an audience, the varying character was played so that the amount of concentration devoted to the character's thought processes grew progressively greater in each performance. On the first night of performance the varying character was asked to play his role

without thinking about the play. It was suggested that he concentrate only on lines and in this way he would be less apt to think as the Professor would think. When he was listening to the Student and the Maid he was to try to think about anything except what they were saying.

During the second night of the production the varying character was directed to play his character almost straight. He was asked to concentrate on his blocking and the cue lines a little more than he normally would. The third night he was to play the role straight and with full concentration. The actor was most cooperative and with very little rehearsal he was able to do what was asked of him. It should be noted that it is frustrating for an actor to play a role before an audience and <u>not</u> play his part to the utmost of his artistic ability.

The outward particulars of the Professor were played the same each night. Make-up, costume, movement, blocking, business, and facial expression were executed as consistently as possible. During rehearsals the Student and the Maid had grown accustomed to the Professor's varying character technique and thus were able to remain fairly consistently in character on each night of performance.

III. THE REGULAR AND RECURRENT AUDIENCE

The regular audience saw the show only once. They came to the performances as a result of the normal advertising that was done--posters, newspaper advertisements, and radio announcements. The recurrent audience was made up of selected persons who saw the play on all three nights. Letters of invitation were sent to randomly selected members of the faculty, students of various disciplines, and college employees. The letter stated that The Lesson was being produced for a thesis project, that it was necessary to have a recurrent audience, and invited the receiver to be one of that selected audience. There were ten people in the recurrent audience. A questionnaire was filled out by every spectator each night.

IV. THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire[1] began, in Section I, by seeking information about the respondent--such as educational level, major field of study, age, sex, and marital status. Section II consisted of ten questions, each supplied with several printed answers, only one of which was to be chosen by the respondent. The section asked questions

[1]See Appendix I, Questionnaire, p. 79.

about the production of the play. Queries were made as to whether or not the respondent had read the play, had read any work by the author, Eugène Ionesco, or had seen any other production of The Lesson. The person filling in the questionnaire was asked if he liked: absurdist plays, this production, the lighting, and the setting. The respondent was also asked to rate the production by checking one of the following: very good, good, fair, poor, or do not know. The Second Section was put in the questionnaire for two reasons. First, it was more difficult for the individual using the form to discover the nature of the variable being studied, and second, it gave the investigator some indication of the relative success of the production.

In the Third Section, a three-point rating scale enabled the spectator to assess the success of each of the three actors. Nineteen questions dealt with the various aspects of each role. Of the nineteen questions only seven were concerned specifically with mental aspects of the actor's performance. These questions were spaced arbitrarily throughout the list (1, 2, 6, 8, 10, 13, and 19), so that they would not receive special attention. Nine other questions required ratings dealing with acting ability. The remaining three questions were directed

toward the physical side of the role. The nineteen questions in Section III were the most important to this study, in that the answers to them would indicate to what degree the mental aspects of acting a role communicate to an audience.

As the play has at least seven possible interpretations (discussed in Chapter III), Section IV required the respondent to pick from the list those interpretations which seemed appropriate to him. These answers were for the benefit of the investigator so that he could determine how many of the seven possible interpretations the audience discovered.

In Section V space was provided for the respondent to write his evaluation of each of the characters and his comments on the direction of the play. The replies to this section could then be compared to the answers supplied in the other sections. Also, the respondent was thus permitted to evaluate any other aspects of the production which had not been provided for in the investigator's questionnaire. The complete questionnaire is attached in Appendix A, page 79.

V. EVALUATION AND REPORTING

The questionnaires were carefully examined and any

that were not completely filled out were not used in the tabulating procedure. If it seemed that a questionnaire had been facetiously filled in, that also was discarded. After this culling process, the number of questionnaires obtained from the Saturday night (third performance) regular audience was sixty-five. Since each questionnaire was numbered, it was possible to select sixty-five from each of the other two groups (the Thursday and Friday night regular audiences) by using a table of random numbers.[2] Thus, thirty questionnaires from the recurrent audience and one hundred and ninety-five from the regular audiences were used for tabulation. Tables were compiled and results reported in proportions to describe the following data.

1. Audience description--sex, education, major field of study, and degree of partiality for absurdist plays.
2. Audience familiarity with the play--by reading or having seen other productions of The Lesson and other plays by Ionesco.
3. Audience rating of the production--degree of partiality expressed for lighting effects, setting, acceptable interpretations, and the production as a whole.
4. Audience interpretation of the play-which of the

[2]George W. Snedecor and William G. Cochran, Statistical Methods, 6th ed. (Ames Iowa: Iowa State University Press, 1967) pp. 543-545.

seven listed interpretations were selected.

5. Acting ratings--mean scores were reported for all the answers to questions concerning the acting of the three roles. Mean scores were also reported for answers to the seven questions concerning the mental aspects of the roles. Comparisons were made between the answers of the regular and recurrent audiences to determine if there were any similarities and to ascertain any trends in the scores.

CHAPTER III

SELECTING, INTERPRETING, AND DIRECTING THE PLAY

I. SELECTING THE PLAY

The play chosen for the study was Eugène Ionesco's The Lesson. This play was picked because of its theatricality, its small cast, and the great possibility for development of the characters. An Absurdist play was selected in the hopes that it would attract a large representative audience.

The Department of Drama has produced relatively few Avant-Garde or Absurdist plays, yet faculty and students campus-wide have evinced an interest in productions of this kind. Thus, The Lesson seemed to be a good choice in that it would draw an audience comprised of drama students, non-drama students, faculty from all disciplines, and possibly people from the town.

As this study was concerned with the relationship of the actor with a broad audience, it was important to have an audience so composed, so that the observations would be valid. If all members of the audience were already sensitive to character development, as one might expect persons trained in theatre arts to be, then it would be expected that they would be able to detect slight differences in portrayal of character. A comparison of responses from knowledgeable theatre people with replies from persons from other disciplines should produce some conclusive or at

least significant differences.

"Art is the marvelous come to life. And that is what theatre ought to be above all."[1] If one accepts this definition of theatricality written by Eugène Ionesco, then The Lesson is a very theatrical play. It is certainly an extraordinary situation come to life on the stage. Saying that the play is theatrical means that the piece would play well for the audience and that it has much to offer in visual and intellectual stimulation. The use of pantomime is very theatrical as are changes of character.

The controversy surrounding the play was thought to be a factor that would draw an audience. When The Lesson and The Chairs were produced Off-Broadway in 1958, the six New York reviewers were split down the middle in their acceptance of them. Brooks Atkinson led those in favor by saying: "These odd, elliptical fantastifications are amusing and provocative."[2] Richard Watts Jr. on the other hand, called them "hollow and pretentious fakery."[3] Even the meaning of The Lesson is subject for discussion,

[1]Eugène Ionesco, "The Marvelous Come to Life," trans. Rosette C. Lamont, Theatre Arts, XLV (September 1961), p. 78.

[2]Quoted in, "Ionesco Double Bill," (editorial), Theatre Arts, XLII (March 1958), p. 14.

[3]Ibid.

but this will be taken up in a later section of the chapter.

The small cast of The Lesson (three characters) made it an ideal play for the study. The relationship that exists between actors while performing a work was a factor viewed with concern. Good actors, of course, play for and to one another. That is, they play each other's roles as well as their own. They must do so for the play to be successful.[4] The object of the study was to have one actor varying his role on each of the three nights. This would present a difficulty for the actors playing opposite him. The other actors would have to be skillful enough to play their roles consistently even though they would not be playing to exactly the same character. This would probably make directing more difficult in that the director would have to be especially concerned about the performance of the two consistent roles. Of course, the more characters in the play the more difficult the directing becomes. Due to these considerations The Lesson seemed to be a very good choice.

The character reversals in The Lesson were another reason for its selection. If the variable of the study is

[4]Hardie Albright, Acting: The Creative Process (Belmont, Calif., 1967), pp. 54-55.

to be the nature of the playing of one role in a piece, it would seem appropriate to pick a play in which the characters are changing. It would then be more difficult for the audience to presume what the questionnaire is attempting.

The role of the Professor must be played with a changing personality and then with a reversion to the personality first established. When he first comes on stage the author asks that he be played as an old man of fifty-five to sixty. He is unsure of himself and almost seems to be frightened of the Student. As the play progresses he becomes more and more sure of himself. He becomes strong and very powerful; indeed, in the middle of the play, he dominates the pupil. This change is to be played imperceptibly. After he kills the Student he immediately becomes the old man who first walked on stage.

Ionesco says of the Student: "From gay and smiling she becomes progressively sad and morose, from very lively at the beginning, she becomes more and more fatigued and somnolent."[5] By the end of the play she is completely submissive to the Professor. This change of character, like the change in the Professor, is a slow

[5]Eugène Ionesco, "The Lesson," in Four Plays by Eugène Ionesco, trans. Donald M. Allen (New York, 1958), pp. 45-46.--Hereafter cited as "Ionesco, The Lesson."

and subtle process. The third character, the Maid, is somewhat of a mystery. She appears on stage, briefly, several times before the murder. However, a strange relationship seems to exist between her and the Professor. After the murder she reveals herself as a weird kind of mother figure.[6] Table I, page 28, graphically illustrates the character changes.

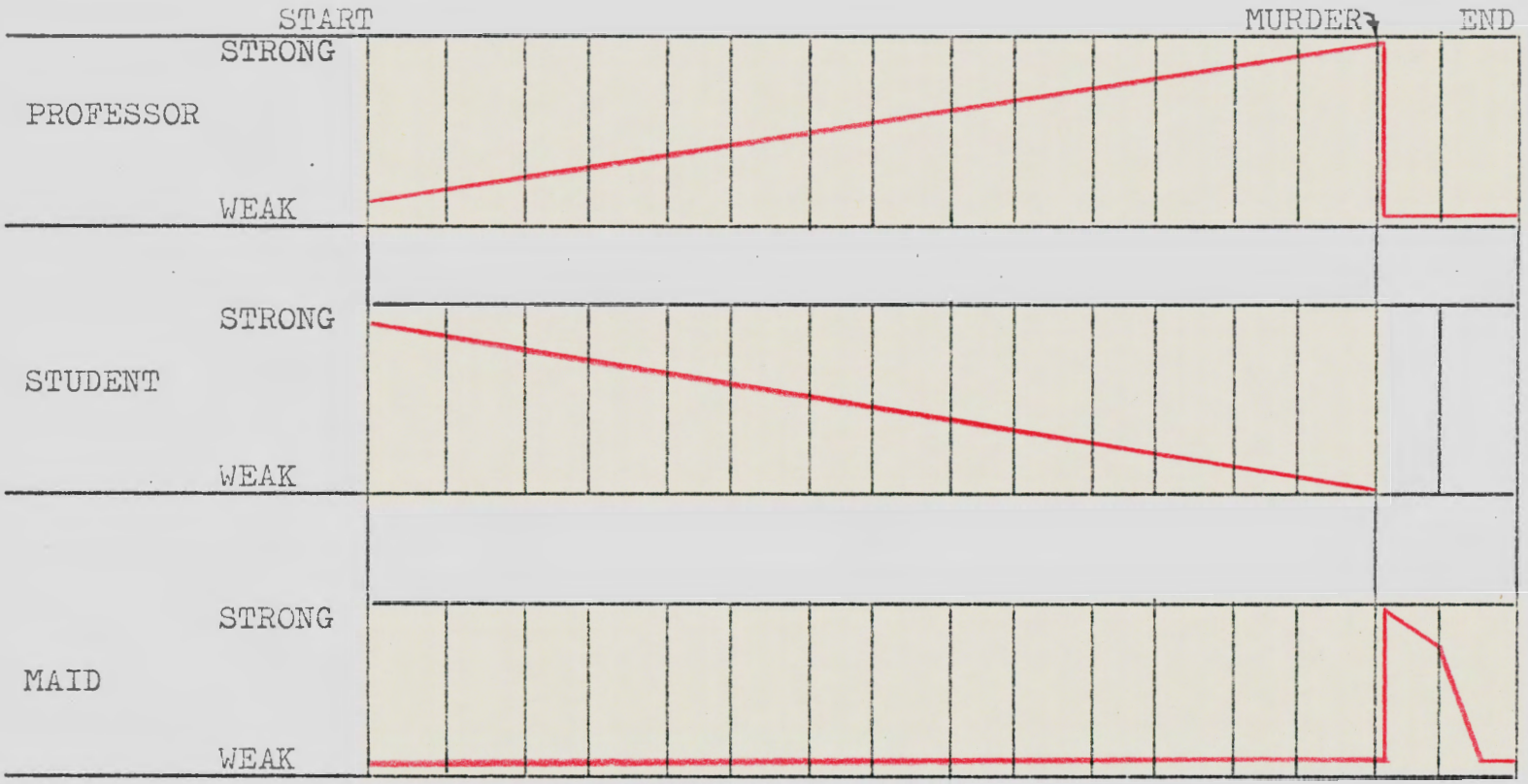
With all three characters changing so radically during the presentation of the play it seemed almost certain that it would not be obvious to the recurrent audience that a particular character was being played differently each night. If, under these circumstances, the recurrent audience would indeed pick out the character who was not playing with full concentration, then it would be safe to assume that the mental attitude of an actor is communicated to an audience. The foremost reason for selecting The Lesson was to make it as difficult as possible for the audience to discover what was being tested.

It was decided that the Professor would be the varying character. Two facts determined this. First, the role changes twice. The initial change is a very slow

[6]Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, rev. and enl. ed. (London, 1968), p. 143.

TABLE I

CHARACTER CHANGES



EACH VERTICAL LINE IN THE CHART REPRESENTS TWO PAGES IN THE SCRIPT

process and this would serve to disguise the variable. Second, the role should be played with hesitancy and very slight stammering at the beginning. These two characteristics in combination would make the accidental discovery of the variable practically impossible.

Once the play was selected and the varying character chosen, try-outs were announced. Casting was effected through open auditions and it was made clear that the production would be mounted as a thesis project. The cast was not told what the study was to be until the first reading rehearsal. The people cast were chosen not only for their talent, but also for their ability to work together. The plan of the rehearsals was to work the play straight until it was firmly set. After it was set, it was to be rehearsed using the varying character technique, but always returning to the straight runthrough before leaving each particular rehearsal.

The Lesson is a play of many levels of meaning. It was discovered in the first reading that all of the actors had reasonable interpretations of the play. The interpretations, however, were all different, and some of them were dogmatically held. The first order of business was to reach a consensus on which interpretation to use and to develop a unified course for the production to follow.

II. INTERPRETING THE PLAY

Ionesco called The Lesson a comic drama. It is funny, but it is also stark, pessimistic, and terrifying.[7] "Ionesco laughs steadily, and the ache of absurdity, failure, and despair is felt, if it is felt at all, in the midst of a kind of hyena laughter, a voiceless laughter, a laughter that is noisy only in the lungs and mouth of the astonished spirit . . . Laugh all you like, but just try to forget what you saw and how it made you feel. You can't."[8]

The play is about a lesson and at the beginning it is a realistic piece of work. A pupil arrives for her first lesson. The dialogue is ordinary and except for a few leaps into the ridiculous (the delight from simple answers and the various degrees to be obtained) the play is almost banal. Once Ionesco has established this banality he makes the play absurd by emphasizing the banality.[9]

The young girl has come to be tutored for her total doctorate. The Professor begins his questioning to find

[7]Esslin, p. 145.

[8]William Saroyan, "Ionesco," Theatre Arts, XLII (July 1958), p. 25.

[9]George E. Wellwarth, The Theater of Protest And Paradox (New York, 1964), pp. 57-58.

out what the girl has already learned. She knows the basics of addition but is unable to subtract. Although she can multiply enormous numbers (she has memorized all the products of all possible multiplications) she can count no further than sixteen. Because of these limitations the Professor decides that she will only qualify for the partial doctorate.

As he begins a lecture on "the fundamental principles of the linguistic and comparative philology of the neo-Spanish languages," the pupil develops a sudden toothache. Language and communication break down. The Student, so overcome with her toothache, is unable either to communicate with or learn from the Professor. This so enrages him that he murders her. The Maid, who has been on stage several times to warn the Professor that he is going too far, now dominates him. He tries to kill her also but she is too powerful for him. The Maid quiets the Professor and when he begins to worry about what people will think, she gives him a swastika armband, so that people will not ask questions. They carry the body out and the Maid returns to admit another student. "The Lesson has the same circular structure as [Ionesco's] first play, [The Bald Soprano] and suggests again the perpetual but senseless activity. 'A vicious circle has its virtue,' one of

Ionesco's characters says."[10]

The Lesson has at least seven interpretations. They are: (1) The absurdity of life, (2) The misuse of power, (3) Sexual domination, (4) The ineffectiveness of language, (5) A political statement, (6) A study of character, and (7) An attack on educational philosophy. The interpretations are discussed in turn.

The Absurdity of Life

Martin Esslin states that: "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about [italics his] absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents [italics his] it in being--that is, in terms of concrete stage images."[11] The circular structure of The Lesson seems to indicate that not only is life absurd but also that man is unable to escape its absurdity. The fact that the Student is stabbed with an imaginary knife is, of course, absurd, but, all the same, the Student dies.

As the body is being removed, another student knocks at the door, but she too will be unable to learn and the Professor will murder her. Thus, the students are as

[10]Leonard Cabell Pronko, Avant-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), p. 71.

[11]Esslin, p. 25.

trapped by life as is the Professor.

The Misuse of Power

During the course of the play the Professor becomes very powerful. He dominates the Student completely. The Maid in turn dominates the Professor. Both of these people use their power in a perverted way. The Professor demands that the Student learn what he prescribes and when she does not he kills her. The Maid, described by Esslin as a malignant mother figure,[12] keeps her hold on the Professor by permitting his actions and also by covering up the murders. She drives the Professor to commit the acts by telling him that he is going too far and that he does not know what he is doing. This makes him angry and pushes him into situations that must lead to the Student's murder.

Language in The Lesson is both a source and an instrument of power. The Professor obtains his increased potency from his position as the authoritative source of meanings. His use of words drives the girl into insensibility and he virtually rapes her with words.

Sexual Domination

The Professor, "rubs his hands together constantly;

[12]Esslin, p. 143.

occasionally a lewd gleam comes into his eyes and is quickly repressed. During the course of the play his timidity will disappear progressively, imperceptibly; and the lewd gleams in his eyes will become a steady devouring flame in the end."[13] This character description by Ionesco makes it very clear that the Professor not only wants to dominate the Student, he must also possess her.

According to the stage directions, the slash of the knife that kills the Student is delivered so as to cut her "from bottom to top." The author asks also that the body fall into a chair in an immodest position with legs hanging over each side of the chair. The sexual drive is explicit. The murder scene is written to be played as the climax of a sexual act. Both characters scream at the final blow; the Student has reached the climax of life, the Professor the climax of his domination of her.

Martin Esslin states that the sexual nature of the play is the main proposition and that it:

> . . . hinges on the sexual nature of all power and the relationship between language and power as the basis of all human ties.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> It is all authority, therefore, which is shown up in its sexual, sadistic nature. What Ionesco is saying is that even behind so apparently harmless an exercise of authority as the teacher-pupil relationship, all the violence and domination, all the aggressiveness

[13]Ionesco, "The Lesson," p. 46.

> and possessiveness, the cruelty and lust are present that make up any manifestation of power. The technique of non-literary theatre, which allows the author and director to treat the text of a play as expendable, enables Ionesco to bring this hidden content into the open. While the language remains on the plane of question and answer, of information asked for and imparted, the <u>action</u> [italics his] can become more and more violent, sensuous, and brutal. All that remains of the elaborate body of knowledge, information (in its parodied form), and conceptual apparatus is the basic fact that the professor wants to dominate and possess the pupil.[14]

<u>The Ineffectiveness of Language</u>

The Professor points out to the Student that communication is impossible because words do not convey the personal associations that they carry for each individual. The example given is the meaning of "my country." If an Italian says "my country" he means Italy. But when a Frenchman says "my country" he means France. In another case, if two people are using the word "grandmother" they are, of course, talking about two very different persons. The only safe words are nonsense syllables because, "words charged with significance will fall, weighted down by their meaning, and in the end they always collapse; fall. . . . Or else burst like balloons."[15] Indeed, the

[14] Esslin, pp. 142-143.

[15] Ionesco, "The Lesson," pp. 62-63.

ineffective use of language is one reason that communication is lost between the teacher and the pupil in The Lesson.

The Political Statement

Esslin is very emphatic in his theory of the sexual implications of The Lesson, but he claims that the political statement is there, although it is very minor.[16] George Wellwarth is equally emphatic that the political statement is very important.

> The allegory is obvious: the insidious deadliness of the professor's speech is precisely analogous to the equally insidious deadliness of the rhetoric used by the Nazis--and nothing was more appalling about the Nazi era than the extent to which the German intellectuals (the teachers, the artists, all those, in short, whose task it is to guard the truth) willingly used their powers to pervert truth, to give falsehood the appearance of truth. Ionesco's professor perverts language, which, as he himself says, is more important than anything else, for it is the medium through which truth is expressed. As the words lose meaning, they become deadlier: the professor's frenzied gabble and Hitler's hysterical ravings--which were not only meaningless but unintelligible as well--are one and the same. Semantic anarchy equals moral anarchy.[17]

The use of the swastika armband to cover up murder is today an absurd idea. However, at one place in time it was an absurdity that was a reality. One can try to use

[16]Esslin, p. 144.

[17]Wellwarth, pp. 58-59.

another armband but the thought behind the swastika, the political statement, will not allow any other.

A Study of Character

The Lesson can be interpreted as a study of a sexually perverted, homicidal character. The Professor is an emasculated individual, dominated by the Maid (the mother figure). The Maid goads the Professor into a situation that must end in the murder of the girl. Indeed, after he rapes her (verbally, on stage) he must also destroy her in an attempt to regain his masculinity. As soon as the act is committed the Maid chastises him in order to reinforce his guilt feelings. She then comforts and protects him so that she may keep her hold on him. As the play ends she is admitting another girl and thus starts the process over again. It is almost a perfect textbook case history.[18]

The psychology of the Student can be approached in the same way. She is a study of the victim who wants to be just that, a victim. She has every chance to leave the room; in fact she is left alone, but she waits for death.

If it is argued that this point of view puts too much

[18]From conversations between this writer and Tulin K. Garg, Professor of Sociology, Central Washington State College, (January, 1969).

reality into an absurdist play, it can be rebutted by saying that Ionesco must have taken his characters from life, for how else do we know characters? Even more important; if Ionesco is presenting the absurdity of life, then he must present life--that is, characters whom we know and can recognize.

In his book on character, Alvin Kernan discusses what he calls the "psychological plot." He says that the psychological plot is as important as is the story. "We must try to approach psychological plots as well as physical plots without preconceptions about how the playwright ought to portray the workings of human nature. In his depiction of the process of mental change he offers an image of the dynamics of the human mind, and we are likely to miss his point completely if we fail to take his plot seriously."[19] If we infer from this that a psychological plot can be taken as a character study, then we must also consider Ionesco's description of the Professor seriously, so that we will not miss the point.

An Attack on Educational Philosophy

Esslin presents Pierre-Aimè Touchard's theory that The Lesson expresses the spirit of domination that is

[19]Alvin B. Kernan, Character and Conflict: An Introduction to Drama (New York, 1963), p. 316.

found in all teacher-student relationships.[20] This theory was brought out forcibly as the play was being discussed by the actor who played the Professor, Robert Michael Nevills. Nevills saw the Professor as the embodiment of an educational system that does indeed rape all students by demanding they learn a prescribed body of knowledge. In this case the Professor is the power and needs no external justification; nor can he accept anything from the student but submission or death. The Maid is simply a supporter of the system.

Nevills uses a frame of reference that is contemporary. In this age of student riots, student interest, and involvement, a dissatisfaction with the old standards of education is often violently expressed. The calling to task of long-accepted philosophies gives this interpretation plausibility. Even if one claims that Ionesco did not mean anything of the kind when he wrote the piece, this interpretation is defensible in that the work is meaningful to today's audiences and that in itself is a testimonial to the worth of the play.

As all seven of these interpretations were thought to have value, it was decided to work towards some of them and to leave the rest to discovery by the audience. The

[20]Esslin, p. 144.

absurdity of life is, of course, what the play presents, and this is evinced through the dialogue and action. The misuse of power, another interpretation, was not made manifest because the actor playing the Professor should not develop the mental attitude that he is misusing power. The sexual connotations in the play were thought to be very important to the development of characters and some scenes were directed to bring out this interpretation very strongly.

Ineffectiveness of language, one of the themes of the play, is brought out in Ionesco's dialogue. As stated above, the political statement is present in the play, but it was decided that a mere reference to the swastika armband would be a sufficient suggestion to the audience. The clearly defined psychological traits of the characters (as described above) were immensely valuable in directing the play, and each role was subtly developed in order to effect a psychological interaction among the players. The attack on educational philosophy is a sound interpretation but one that was left to the interpretive powers of the audience. The cast finally agreed with this over-all interpretation and the play was rehearsed with these goals in view.

III. DIRECTING THE PLAY

In the stage directions, Ionesco indicates that the Student should bring books and notebooks on stage with her. Later in the play, however, he asks that the Professor write on an imaginary blackboard and that the knife used to kill the girl be "real or invisible," thus leaving the decision to the discretion of the director. After careful consideration, it was decided that no hand props would be used at all. The nonrealistic style created by the lack of props seemed to be more in accordance with Ionesco's play than the suggestion of realism that would be created by the use of hand props.

The same line of reasoning led to the decision not to use a set. The play was performed on a very small stage with curtains defining the walls. The only furnishings used were a desk and three chairs. It was intended to let the audience members imagine their own sets and more important, it was thought that the audience would be able to concentrate more on the acting if the setting were kept to a minimum. Entrances were made through the curtains up-stage, just left of center, and stage-left. The up-stage entry was to suggest the outside door and the stage-left entry was to represent the door to the rest of the house. Illustration I, page 42, shows these entrances as

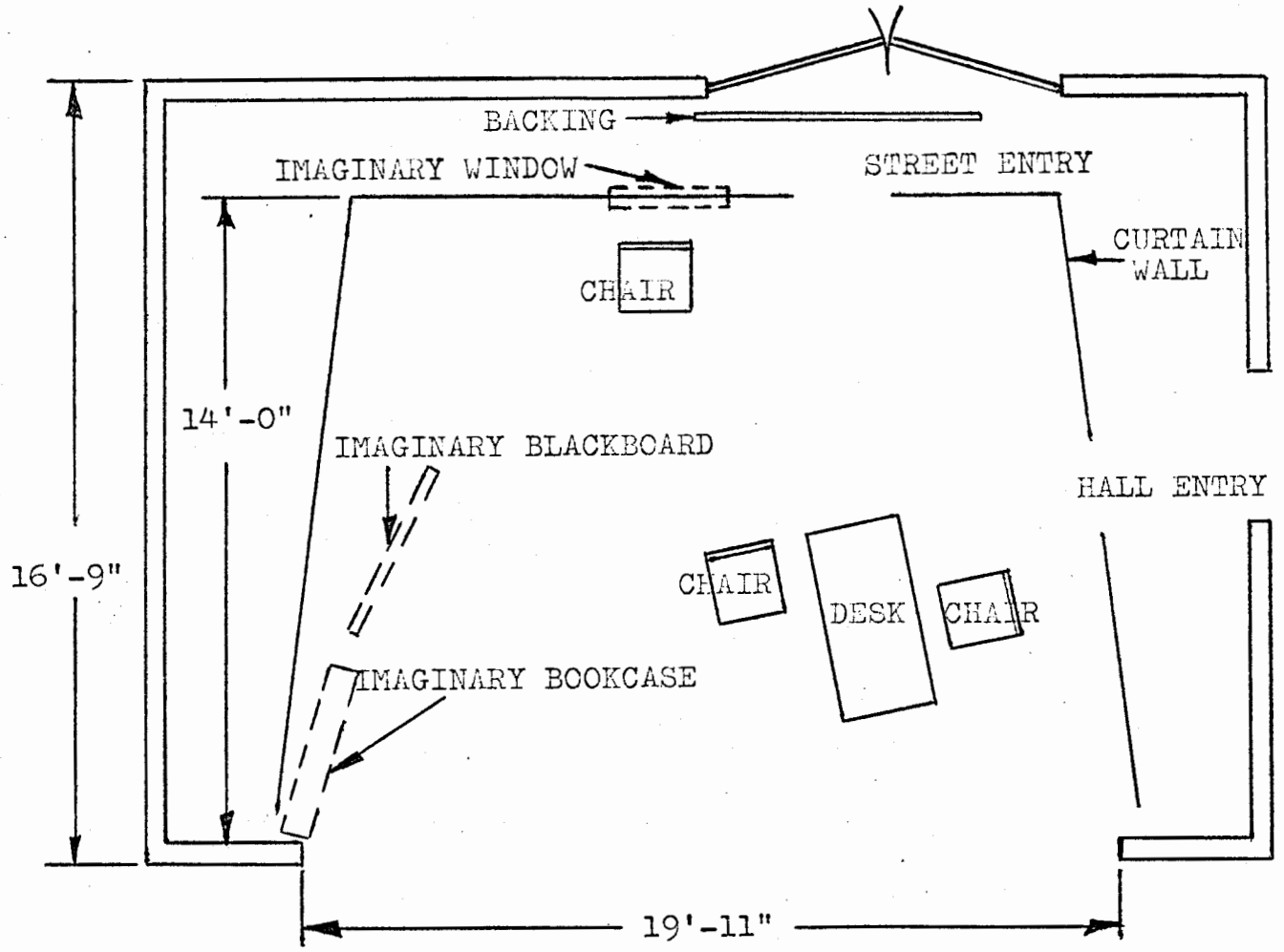


ILLUSTRATION I

FLOOR PLAN FOR THE LESSON

SCALE: ¼" = 1'-0"

well as the location of the imaginary window, bookcase, and blackboard. The positions of the real furniture are also shown.

The author gives no indication of the period of time in which the action takes place. It was decided to keep the play timeless and the program note about time reads, "The time: Yesterday - Today - or perhaps Tomorrow." As the time of The Lesson was undefined it seemed appropriate to costume the actors in the same way, that is, ageless. The Professor was costumed in a black academic gown, with grey trousers and shoes, a slightly dirty and wrinkled white shirt, and a black tie. He also wore the black skullcap called for by Ionesco.

It was decided to use the skullcap because it seemed to support the political statement of the play. If one accepts the condemnation of the Nazi power structure that is in the play, it is suggestive to have the Professor wearing a symbol of the Jewish faith. Of course it was the Jews who were slaughtered under the Nazi regime, but Ionesco might be saying that the possibility exists that the Jews could have been capable of the same brutality.

The Student was dressed in a blue "A-line" skirt, hemmed to three inches above the knee, a pink, long-sleeved turtleneck sweater, pink shoes, and wore a white bow in her

hair. The intention was to make her appear young and bright. The Maid's costume was a nondescript black dress, calf length, with a white apron, and black shoes. The apron was styled to go over each shoulder. As the effect desired was that of a mother image, she did not wear a cap. Illustration II, page 45, shows the actual costumes worn by the Professor and the Student.

Make-up was designed to concur with the character descriptions given by Ionesco. The base color for the Professor was selected to give him a pale, pasty look, as though he had not been out in the sun for a very long time. The face lines and shadowing suggested the age of sixty. His hair and beard were whitened. The Maid was made-up in much the same fashion except that, as her age was thought to be fifty, her hair was only slightly grey. The Student's base color was chosen to give her a healthy look, as though she were active in outdoor sports. Her hair (brunette) was left in its natural state, while her eyes were made-up to achieve a rather wide and eager look. Illustration III, page 45, shows the actual make-up used for performance.

The people cast in the roles were selected, in part, because of their physical characteristics. Robert M. Nevills (the Professor) stands six feet four inches tall. As the old man, his stance was to be bent and crippled so

ILLUSTRATION II

COSTUMES

ILLUSTRATION III

MAKE-UP

that his height very nearly approximated that of Lavinia Whitworth (the Student). As the character of the Professor grew stronger it was planned to have Nevills stand progressively taller so that it would appear that he grew in height as well as in strength. At his tallest, it would make an imposing sight to have his great size dominating Lavinia Whitworth who is only five feet five inches. Nevills' capacious gown helped to make him appear smaller when such an effect was desired.

Pamela Cole (the Maid), a stocky woman of considerable height (five feet nine and one half inches) was cast because her size and height would be advantageous in the scene where the Maid knocks the Professor to the floor. She would also present a figure that would be believable when she is in complete domination of the Professor.

The lighting was designed to give a natural effect except for a few select moments in the play. During the scene in which the Professor tries to get the Student to subtract,[21] blue light was added in order to cool the lighting and help create the feeling of frustration that the scene presented. As the sexual connotations of the play were thought to be important, this scene was played as an unsuccessful attempt, by the Professor to seduce the

[21]Ionesco, "The Lesson," pp. 55-57.

girl. To heighten the excitement red light was introduced in the Addition Scene,[22] which was played as a successful encounter. The scene was blocked so that the Professor sat at his desk with the Student sitting in the chair across from him, both characters in a relaxed state. As the scene progressed they became excited and breathless. The Professor broke the scene when he fell back into his chair, exhausted, crying, "Magnificent. You are magnificent. You are exquisite."[23] Both the red and blue lights were brought up just enough to color the scenes slightly in order to accomplish the psychological effect desired.

The murder scene also was played for the sexual connotations present. As the final encounter began,[24] the red lights were brought up slowly, to one half of full intensity. As soon as the reds were up the natural light was dimmed to one half. The scene was played in this light until the murder blow was struck. Ionesco asks that two blows be given. It was decided that only one blow would fall. The Professor struck the Student in the groin and held the "knife" there until the scream stopped. He then raised the "knife" to breast level. As the blow fell the

[22]Ionesco, "The Lesson," pp. 51-52.

[23]Ionesco, loc. cit.

[24]Ionesco, "The Lesson," p. 78.

white light was turned off, plunging the stage into red light.

After the murder was done, the Professor fell to his knees to allow his breathing to become normal and also to effect the change of character. During this pause the red light was cross-faded to the full natural light. The light remained the same from then on until the curtain.

Physical contact was kept at a minimum. The Professor touched the Student only three times and the Maid touched the Professor twice. In the Subtraction Scene[25] when the Student put up ten fingers for the Professor to count, he took hold of her hands. Later in the play when the Professor demonstrated how the head must be held to speak properly,[26] he put his finger under her chin and forced her to rise to her feet. The last contact with the Student was, of course, the final blow. The Maid's two physical contacts with the Professor occurred when she slapped him and then put her arm around him to comfort him in the final scene.[27] The gestures discussed above were the only physical contacts in this production. Tenseness was developed merely by the proximity of the characters.

[25]Ionesco, loc. cit.

[26]Ionesco, "The Lesson," p. 62.

[27]Ionesco, "The Lesson," pp. 76-78.

The blocking of the play was planned to develop the same feeling that the characters were experiencing. At the beginning the Student was blocked in such a manner so as to force the Professor to retreat from her constantly. When the lesson began they were both seated, and except for the occasions already noted, the Student remained in her seat. When the Professor forced her to rise (during the demonstration of a correct speaking posture)[28] the Student's chair was forced to a center-stage position. That was the only time the Student left her seat until the murder. This was done so that she was always at a lower level than the Professor. As the Professor became stronger he used the whole acting area more and more. At times he was very close to the Student, towering over her, and at times he was at a distance, but always dominating the scene. The murder was staged just as it is written in the stage directions.[29] The final scene was blocked so that the Professor was subservient to the Maid.

In order to reinforce the circular structure of the play, when the curtain opened a chair was discovered center-stage, overturned and very out of place. As the Maid entered to admit the first student, she picked up

[28]Ionesco, "The Lesson," p. 62.

[29]Ionesco, "The Lesson," pp. 73-75.

the chair. Later, during the murder, the same chair was knocked over and remained that way until the Maid picked it up when she returned to the stage to admit the second student. In order to strengthen Ionesco's point of reoccurrence and also because the Professor was portrayed as a homicidal pervert, the second student appeared on-stage, rather than announcing her presence off-stage. Because of the nature of the characterization of the Professor and the portent of the play, it seemed most appropriate to have the role of the second student played by the actress who was the first student. The play ended with a blackout as soon as the second student made her entrance.

Characterization was developed and then sustained according to the interpretation discussed earlier in this chapter. It must be made clear, however, that the Professor, as the varying character, was given the responsibility of subtly changing his role on each successive night during the run of <u>The Lesson</u>.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

It is held that an actor communicates his mental processes to the audience and that this silent communication is of a subtle nature. To test this hypothesis Eugène Ionesco's play, The Lesson was produced and directed by the investigator. The playing of the Professor's role was varied on each night of three productions. This was done to see if the audiences would notice any differences in the characterizations of the Professor. In order to test the subtlety of the communication, the Professor became slightly more involved in his character's mental processes during the second production than he was in the first production. On the third night, this involvement was carried a little further and he played the role with his utmost concentration.

Thirty questionnaires from the recurrent audience and sixty-five selected from each of the three regular audiences made a total of two hundred and twenty-five questionnaires from which the data were assembled. In the following descriptions (Sections I, II, and III) data relating to the regular audience are mean percentages, established from the three regular audiences, unless otherwise stated.

I. AUDIENCE DESCRIPTION

Table II, page 53, shows that the audiences were

TABLE II

AUDIENCE DESCRIPTION

	RECURRENT AUDIENCE	REGULAR AUDIENCE		
		THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
	10	65	65	65
MEN	.50	.45	.42	.48
WOMEN	.50	.55	.58	.52
HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS	.00	.12	.02	.08
COLLEGE STUDENTS	.80	.66	.74	.83
GRADUATE STUDENTS AND FACULTY MEMBERS	.20	.22	.24	.09
DRAMA	.40	.23	.15	.11
NON-DRAMA	.60	.77	.85	.89
LIKED ABSURDIST PLAYS	.80	.52	.63	.66
DISLIKED OR INDIFFERENT ABOUT ABSURDIST PLAYS	.20	.48	.37	.34

similar in some respects and dissimilar in others.

Sex of the Audience

The recurrent audience consisted of fifty per cent men and fifty per cent women, and the regular audience of forty-five per cent men and fifty-five per cent women. In this respect the two audiences were well-balanced.

Education of the Audience

The recurrent audience was comprised of eighty per cent undergraduates and twenty per cent college graduates. The regular audience consisted of seventy-four per cent undergraduates, eighteen per cent college graduates, and eight per cent high school students. Thus the recurrent and regular audiences were well-balanced in regard to educational background.

Major Field of Study

Drama majors constituted forty per cent of the recurrent audience and seventeen per cent of the regular audience. In this respect the two audiences were significantly different. Because of their training as audience as well as craftsmen, drama students are usually considered to be more exacting in their evaluations of dramatic productions and therefore, this variant should not be detrimental to the study.

Partiality to Absurd Plays

Eighty per cent of the recurrent audience liked absurdist plays as compared to twenty per cent of the same group that either disliked them or were indifferent. Of the regular audience, only sixty-one per cent liked absurdist plays and thirty-nine per cent were negatively predisposed. Thus there was a small disparity in the two audiences.

II. AUDIENCE FAMILIARITY WITH THE PLAY

Table III, page 56, shows the responses to the questions in the Second Section of the questionnaire. This section dealt with the familiarity that the individual had with The Lesson or any of Ionesco's writings.

Familiarity With the Play

Forty per cent of the recurrent audience and eleven per cent of the regular audience had read the play. Twenty per cent of the recurrent audience and thirteen per cent of the regular audience had attended some other production of The Lesson.

Familiarity With the Author

Concerning audience familiarity with Ionesco, eighty per cent of the recurrent audience and thirty-one per cent

TABLE III

AUDIENCE FAMILIARITY WITH THE PLAY

		HAVE YOU SEEN ANY PRODUCTION OF THIS PLAY		HAVE YOU READ THE PLAY		HAVE YOU READ ANY IONESCO	
		YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO
REGULAR AUDIENCE	THURSDAY	.24	.76	.14	.86	.34	.66
	FRIDAY	.08	.92	.09	.91	.31	.69
	SATURDAY	.06	.94	.09	.91	.27	.73
RECURRENT AUDIENCE		.20	.80	.40	.60	.80	.20

of the regular audience were, to some extent, familiar with his writings. Thirty per cent of all the people who filled out questionnaires had no prior exposure to the work of Ionesco. For them this production was a new experience in theatre. That some of the audience had no prior exposure to the play or its author was not considered significant to the study. The response to the acting of the varying character, regardless of audience background, was what was sought.

III. AUDIENCE RATING OF THE PRODUCTION

Table IV, page 58, shows the regular and recurrent audience ratings of the production as a whole, and also of its technical aspects.

Rating of Lighting and Staging

Ninety-four per cent of the regular audience and ninety per cent of the recurrent audience thought that the lighting was effective, and eighty-five per cent of the regular audience and ninety per cent of the recurrent audience thought that the lighting effects were helpful to the actors. In response to the question concerning the acceptance of the bare stage, eighty-one per cent of the regular audience and ninety per cent of the recurrent audience were favorably disposed.

TABLE IV

PRODUCTION RATINGS

FROM RECURRENT AND REGULAR AUDIENCES

		WAS THE LIGHTING EFFECTIVE		DID THE LIGHTING HELP		DID YOU LIKE THE BARE STAGE			WAS THE INTERPRETATION ACCEPTABLE			DID YOU LIKE THIS PRODUCTION			HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE PRODUCTION				
		YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	D.N.	YES	NO	D.N.	YES	NO	D.N.	VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	D.N.
REG. AUD. 65	THURS.	.99	.01	.85	.15	.77	.23	.00	.57	.00	.43	.95	.05	.00	.23	.62	.15	.00	.00
	FRI.	.88	.12	.82	.18	.84	.08	.08	.43	.00	.57	.88	.03	.09	.31	.62	.07	.00	.00
	SAT.	.94	.06	.88	.12	.82	.14	.04	.37	.01	.62	.88	.04	.08	.43	.42	.12	.00	.03
REC. AUD. 10	THURS.	.80	.20	.80	.20	.80	.20	.00	.70	.00	.30	1.00	.00	.00	.40	.40	.20	.00	.00
	FRI.	.90	.10	.90	.10	.90	.10	.00	.70	.00	.30	1.00	.00	.00	.40	.50	.10	.00	.00
	SAT.	1.00	.00	1.00	.00	1.00	.00	.00	.70	.00	.30	1.00	.00	.00	.50	.30	.20	.00	.00

Acceptability of Interpretation

Seventy per cent of the recurrent audience thought that this production presented an acceptable interpretation of The Lesson, but only forty-six per cent of the regular audience expressed this opinion. It should be noted, however, that only two fifths of one per cent of all the respondents thought the interpretation unacceptable, while thirty per cent of the recurrent audience and fifty-three per cent of the regular audience were unable to express either a negative or positive opinion.

Production Rating

The production was liked by one hundred per cent of the recurrent audience. Of the regular audience, ninety per cent liked the production, four per cent did not like it, and six per cent were undecided.

Thirty-three per cent of the regular audience rated the production as "very good," fifty-five per cent as "good," and eleven per cent as "fair." Not one respondent in either audience rated the production as "poor," and only one per cent of all persons who saw the play gave no opinion whatsoever on its merits. Of the recurrent audience, forty-four per cent rated the production as "very good," forty per cent as "good," and fourteen per cent as "fair." Thus it can be seen that the production was well-received

by both audiences. It should be noted that the "very good" ratings increased with each night of production, the "good" ratings tended to fall off, and the "fair" ratings tended to remain constant. Obviously, the production was better received on Saturday night than on the previous two nights.

Audience Ratings of the Production According to Partiality

Since more than one third of all the respondents (thirty-five mean percentage of the four different groups) had expressed a dislike of absurdist plays, comparisons of production ratings were made in relation to the respondents' partiality to this type of play. From Table V, page 61, it can be seen that, regardless of their partiality, a large majority of all the respondents thought the lighting and the setting were effective. Of those who disliked absurdist plays, only twenty-seven per cent thought that the production presented an acceptable interpretation of the play. Of that group, however, only two per cent thought the interpretation unacceptable, but seventy-one per cent were unable to give an opinion.

In considering the whole production (Table V, page 61), only nine per cent of those who did not like absurdist plays disliked this presentation of The Lesson, seventy-six per cent were favorably disposed, and fifteen per cent did

TABLE V

PRODUCTION RATINGS

ALL RESPONDENTS' PARTIALITY TO ABSURDIST PLAYS

		WAS THE LIGHTING EFFECTIVE		DID THE LIGHTING HELP		DID YOU LIKE THE BARE STAGE			WAS THE INTERPRETATION ACCEPTABLE			DID YOU LIKE THIS PRODUCTION			HOW WOULD YOU RATE THE PRODUCTION				
		YES	NO	YES	NO	YES	NO	D.N.	YES	NO	D.N.	YES	NO	D.N.	VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	D.N.
DISLIKED OR INDIFFERENT	THURS.	.97	.03	.81	.19	.68	.32	.00	.42	.00	.58	.94	.06	.00	.16	.58	.26	.00	.00
	FRI.	.92	.08	.87	.13	.79	.08	.13	.21	.00	.79	.67	.08	.25	.17	.70	.13	.00	.00
	SAT.	.95	.05	.91	.09	.82	.09	.09	.18	.05	.77	.68	.14	.18	.36	.36	.18	.00	.10
LIKED	THURS.	1.00	.00	.88	.12	.85	.15	.00	.71	.00	.29	.97	.03	.00	.29	.65	.06	.00	.00
	FRI.	.85	.15	.78	.22	.88	.07	.05	.57	.00	.43	1.00	.00	.00	.39	.56	.05	.00	.00
	SAT.	.93	.07	.87	.13	.82	.16	.02	.46	.00	.54	.98	.00	.02	.46	.45	.09	.00	.00

not state an opinion.

Audience evaluation of the production established that twenty-three per cent of those opposed to absurdist plays rated the production as "very good," fifty-five per cent as "good," and nineteen per cent as "fair." Only three per cent were undecided. Audience members who liked absurdist plays rated the production as follows: thirty per cent as "very good," fifty-seven per cent as "good," and seven per cent as "fair."

The production, therefore, appealed both to persons who professed a dislike for absurdist plays and to those who enjoyed them. The data assembled in Table V show that the final performance of The Lesson received the highest ratings concerning over-all production.

IV. AUDIENCE INTERPRETATION OF THE PLAY

Seven possible interpretations of The Lesson were listed on the questionnaire and respondents were asked to select those that they thought appropriate. Table VI, page 63, shows how many times each of the interpretations was selected and the percentages of persons making those selections.

Selection of Interpretations

The regular audience selected "the absurdity of life"

TABLE VI

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PLAY

		NUMBER OF TIMES SELECTED							PERCENTAGE OF SELECTIONS						
		METHODS	LANGUAGE	SEXUALITY	POWER	PERSONALITY	LIFE	POLITICS	1 SELECTION	2 SELECTIONS	3 SELECTIONS	4 SELECTIONS	5 SELECTIONS	6 SELECTIONS	7 SELECTIONS
REGULAR AUDIENCE 65	THURSDAY	7	15	9	11	25	29	5	.71	.16	.05	.02	.06	.00	.00
	FRIDAY	25	26	20	32	35	43	14	.40	.10	.08	.10	.13	.09	.10
	SATURDAY	17	11	12	16	27	37	10	.57	.19	.09	.03	.04	.04	.04
RECURRENT AUDIENCE 10	THURSDAY	2	3	1	5	3	4	2	.70	.30	.00	.00	.00	.00	.00
	FRIDAY	4	5	5	6	4	5	4	.40	.20	.10	.10	.10	.10	.00
	SATURDAY	4	4	6	5	4	4	3	.40	.20	.00	.40	.00	.00	.00

more often than any other interpretation, and the recurrent audience more often chose "the use of power." In both the regular and recurrent audiences, "political implications" were selected least often. Each of the seven interpretations was chosen by some respondents on all three nights of production.

Percentage of Selections

A mean fifty-three per cent of all the respondents chose only one of the seven interpretations listed, and a mean three per cent selected all seven. Thus, relatively few people considered that the production successfully presented all seven interpretations, although almost half the respondents thought that the production as staged could be interpreted in more ways than one.

V. ACTING RATINGS

Table VII, page 65, shows the percentages of the total number of first, second, and third places allotted to each character by audience members who like absurdist plays and by those who were not in favor of them. Table VIII, page 66, also shows percentages of rankings, but this table compares the opinions of drama majors with those of others. The percentages of first-place ranking for the Professor (the varying character) increased on the second and third

TABLE VII

ACTING RATINGS

ACCORDING TO RESPONDENTS' PARTIALITY

TO ABSURDIST PLAYS

		PROFESSOR			STUDENT			MAID		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
LIKED ABSURDIST PLAYS	THURSDAY 34	.50	.38	.12	.58	.27	.15	.35	.25	.40
	FRIDAY 41	.69	.25	.06	.49	.39	.12	.32	.25	.43
	SATURDAY 43	.68	.22	.10	.44	.38	.18	.33	.33	.34
DISLIKED OR INDIFFERENT ABOUT ABSURDIST PLAYS	THURSDAY 31	.45	.37	.18	.48	.35	.17	.26	.26	.48
	FRIDAY 24	.46	.38	.16	.47	.39	.14	.32	.16	.52
	SATURDAY 22	.62	.28	.10	.40	.30	.30	.30	.29	.41

TABLE VIII

ACTING RATINGS

ACCORDING TO MAJOR

		PROFESSOR			STUDENT			MAID		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
DRAMA MAJORS	THURSDAY 15	.39	.44	.17	.57	.33	.10	.20	.18	.62
	FRIDAY 10	.62	.30	.08	.44	.40	.16	.25	.26	.49
	SATURDAY 7	.48	.29	.23	.21	.56	.23	.30	.22	.40
OTHER	THURSDAY 50	.52	.35	.13	.43	.33	.24	.33	.28	.39
	FRIDAY 55	.60	.30	.10	.43	.43	.14	.33	.22	.45
	SATURDAY 58	.63	.25	.12	.46	.33	.21	.32	.34	.34

performances in both tables. In almost every case the Student scored higher than the Professor in first-place votes on the first night, but ranked lower on the second and third nights. The Maid was rated in third place consistently in all three productions. It is significant that the ratings follow the same trend in both tables, regardless of the manner in which the respondents were classified.

The Professor ranked higher on Saturday night than on the two previous performances, and on that night there was considerable agreement of opinion regarding the ranking of the other two characters. This indicates that not only was the role of the Professor most effective on Saturday, but also that the successful playing of the other two roles depended upon audience acceptance of his performance.

Mean Scores on Acting Ratings

The average number of times each character was given a particular rank is shown in Table IX, page 68. This table provides the mean scores of the answers to all nineteen questions in the Third Section of the questionnaire which dealt with the effectiveness of the acting.

Comparisons are made between the ratings of the regular and recurrent audiences. The mean scores indicate a rising trend in the ranking of the Professor on each successive night of performance. Although the recurrent

TABLE IX

MEAN SCORE FOR ANSWERS TO ALL QUESTIONS

ON ACTING RATINGS

		PROFESSOR			STUDENT			MAID		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
REGULAR	THURSDAY	31.3	24.2	9.5	35.5	20.3	9.2	19.5	16.6	28.9
AUDIENCE	FRIDAY	39.3	19.3	6.4	31.4	25.1	8.5	20.4	14.7	29.9
65 TOTAL	SATURDAY	41.6	15.7	7.7	30.5	26.5	8.0	20.7	20.6	23.7
RECURRENT	THURSDAY	3.7	5.2	1.1	6.5	2.8	.7	2.2	.9	6.9
AUDIENCE	FRIDAY	6.4	3.4	.2	4.2	4.9	.9	1.8	1.8	6.4
10 TOTAL	SATURDAY	6.2	2.4	1.4	6.0	3.0	1.0	4.3	2.1	3.6

audience considered his Friday night performance slightly better than his Saturday presentation,[1] it was the opinion of the Saturday night recurrent and regular audiences that he outranked the other two characters. On the first night of production the Student received first-place among all three characters, but in the final performance she was rated second to the Professor.

Mean Scores of the Seven Questions on Mental Processes

The mean scores of the answers to the seven questions dealing with the ranking of the characters' mental processes are tabulated in Table X, page 70. The same trend is evident as is shown in Tables VII, VIII, and IX. The Student was rated best actor by all respondents on opening night, but fell to second place by the final performance. The regular audience rated the Professor second to the Student on opening night, but in first-place in the second and final performances. The recurrent audience rated the Professor one half of a point lower than the Student on the final performance, although this same audience gave the Professor a higher rating than it had given him on opening night.

[1]The Professor was rated only .2 of a point lower by an audience of ten people. The sample was small and the difference so slight that it is not considered very significant.

TABLE X

MEAN SCORE ON ACTOR RATINGS

ANSWERS TO SEVEN QUESTIONS ON MENTAL PROCESSES

		PROFESSOR			STUDENT			MAID		
		1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
REGULAR	THURSDAY	34.9	21.7	8.4	38.7	18.7	7.6	23.9	12.0	29.1
AUDIENCE	FRIDAY	42.1	18.6	4.3	34.9	24.6	5.5	20.9	12.7	31.4
65 TOTAL	SATURDAY	42.8	14.6	7.6	31.4	25.0	8.6	20.3	20.6	24.1
RECURRENT	THURSDAY	4.0	5.4	0.6	7.0	2.7	0.3	1.7	0.7	7.6
AUDIENCE	FRIDAY	6.3	3.7	0.0	4.3	5.1	0.6	1.6	1.1	7.3
10 TOTAL	SATURDAY	5.9	3.0	1.1	6.4	3.2	0.4	4.2	2.1	3.7

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. CONCLUSIONS

It has been shown in Chapter IV that most of the audience members not only liked the production of Eugène Ionesco's The Lesson, but also that they were favorably impressed by its integral parts such as lighting and setting, and that they were satisfied with the director's interpretation of the meaning of the play. It is therefore concluded that this production of The Lesson was successful.

It has also been shown that the audiences tended to rate the Professor (the varying character) lower on the two nights when he was not concentrating completely on his role than on the final night when he was playing the character with his utmost concentration. Thus, it is concluded that an actor does communicate his mental processes to the audience.

The director perceived that the changes in the role of the Professor were very slight each night and the data support this in that the statistical results, although significant, are small. It is concluded that communication of an actor's mental processes to the audience is indeed subtle.

Concerning evaluation of the actors, the responses made by the regular audience members, who saw the

production once only, were remarkably similar to the responses from members of the recurrent audience who attended all three performances. It is concluded that actor ratings made by audience members who attend a single performance follow a similar trend to evaluations made by individuals who see more than one presentation.

At the final presentation, when the varying character played his role with his greatest concentration, there was considerable audience agreement on the ranking of the other two characters. Thus, it is concluded that the degree of concentration of one cast member has an effect on audience acceptance of all the roles.

II. IMPLICATIONS

It has been here demonstrated that investigations into the craft of acting are possible and that norms should therefore be able to be established. This study has shown that there is a silent communication between an actor and his audience, and also that the acting of other cast members is affected adversely when one actor fails to concentrate completely on his role. More research in these aspects of the actor's craft is implied and it is to be hoped that more scientific methods of study may be developed. An encouraging fact emerged from this study. Even when

relying on the opinion of several heterogeneous audiences, the investigator discovered that there was considerable agreement among them. Persons who saw only one presentation of the play seemed to apply the same standard of judgment as those whose familiarity with the production increased through attending three performances.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that a similar type of study be carried out in other theatres and with other plays. It is also recommended that attempts be made to develop more scientific methods of investigation. For example, it might be possible to perform a play for a "blue ribbon audience" of experienced theatre persons, instead of a lay audience. It might be possible to vary several roles instead of just one, to discover if an audience would still notice the changes. Staging might be altered: this play was done on a proscenium stage and it is possible that results might be different if it were done arena style. Perhaps more stringent controls could be developed and thus more conclusive results obtained.

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APPENDIXES

APPENDIX A

QUESTIONNAIRE

Questionnaire Number _____

If you plan to see the play tomorrow night, will you please remember this number.

I.

Education: High School _____. College _____. Year _____.

Graduate Student _____. Faculty Member _____.

Student Wife _____. Faculty Wife _____.

Major or Department _____.

Age _____. Sex _____. Marital Status _____.

How many times have you seen this production?

First Time _____.

Second Time _____.

Third Time _____.

If you have seen the play before, what was the number of the last questionnaire you filled out? _____.

Which nights have you seen the play? The 6th ____, the 7th ____, the 8th ____.

II.

1. Have you seen any other production of this play?
   Yes ____. No ____.
2. Have you read the play? Yes ____. No ____.
3. Have you read any Ionesco? Yes ____. No ____.

4. What do you think of absurdist plays? Like ____.
Dislike ____. Indifferent ____.

5. Would you say this production presented an acceptable interpretation of Ionesco's work? Yes ____. No ____.
Don't know ____.

6. Did you like this production? Yes ____. No ____.
Don't know ____.

7. How would you rate the production? Very good ____.
Good ____. Fair ____. Poor ____. Don't know ____.

8. Do you think that the lighting was effective?
Yes ____. No ____.

9. Do you think that the lighting helped the actors?
Yes ____. No ____.

10. Did you like the bare stage? Yes ____. No ____.
Don't know ____.

11. Would you have preferred a full set? Yes ____.
No ____. Don't know ____.

III.

Would you rate each of the performers on each of the following questions by placing either 1, 2, or 3 in the boxes under the character name. 1 should be the highest and 3 the lowest.

	WHICH OF THE ACTORS:	PROFESSOR	STUDENT	MAID
1.	Understood the role best?			
2.	Believed in the role most?			
3.	Played most effectively?			
4.	Had the best interpretation?			
5.	Had the best physical character?			
6.	Had the best attitude toward the role?			
7.	Used voice best?			
8.	Seemed to be thinking most about the play?			
9.	Had lines memorized the best?			
10.	Had the best attitude toward the play?			
11.	Had the most believable character?			
12.	Was the most convincing?			
13.	Seemed to be concentrating most?			
14.	Had the best make-up?			
15.	Had the best emotional control?			
16.	Seemed to be overacting most?			
17.	Used most effective pantomime?			
18.	Was most true to life?			
19.	Was most in tune with the play?			

IV.

If you were to describe the play which of the following phrases would you use?

a. The play is about education methods. ____

b. The play is about language. ____

c. The play is about sexuality. ____

d. The play is about the use of power. ____

e. The play is about a psychopathic personality. ____

f. The play is about the absurdity of life. ____

g. It is a political play. ____

V.

Would you please write the shortest possible evaluation of each role. State the good and bad of each.

THE PROFESSOR:

THE STUDENT:

THE MAID:

Would you evaluate the direction of the production.

Thank you so very much for your help. The cast is very willing to discuss the play with you. Please feel free to question them.

Again, thank you for your time.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE TABULATION SHEET

TABULATIONS FOR:

TABULATION OF SECTION I

Education: High School ____ College ____ Graduate ____

Major: Drama ____ Other _____

Sex ____ Like or Dislike Absurdist Plays _____

Total X

NIGHT OF PERFORMANCE FRIDAY

TABULATION OF SECTION II

	YES	NO
1.	5	60
2.	6	59
3.	20	45

	LIKE	DISLIKE	INDIFFERENT
4.	42	7	16
5.	28	0	37
6.	57	2	6

	VERY GOOD	GOOD	FAIR	POOR	DON'T KNOW
7.	20	40	5	0	0

	YES	NO
8.	57	8
9.	53	12

	YES	NO	DON'T KNOW
10.	53	5	5
11.	----------	----------	----------

TABULATION OF SECTION III

	professor			student			maid		
	1	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
12.	48	14	3	29	30	6	23	12	30
13.	39	20	6	37	26	2	19	14	32
14.	41	21	3	32	30	3	7	18	40
15.	40	21	4	31	27	7	15	18	32
16.	44	16	5	24	30	11	23	20	22
17.	42	20	3	32	24	9	24	14	27
18.	44	16	5	31	26	8	13	15	37
19.	41	21	3	36	23	6	21	9	35
20.	25	27	13	47	14	4	27	14	24
21.	38	22	5	40	21	4	22	15	28
22.	30	27	8	27	23	15	22	15	28
23.	37	18	10	29	25	11	23	18	24
24.	40	18	7	34	26	5	16	15	34
25.	49	11	5	19	30	16	16	25	24
26.	36	19	10	31	25	9	25	12	28
27.	33	23	9	31	20	14	25	15	25
28.	44	17	4	29	29	7	11	9	45
29.	28	20	17	21	25	19	34	13	18
30.	47	15	3	36	22	7	21	10	34

TABULATION OF SECTION IV

	a	b	c	d	e	f	g
31.	23	26	20	31	34	42	14

APPENDIX C

NOTES

A student planning a thesis and using the type of experiment employed in this study might be interested in the number of hours spent in the various processes. They are listed below.

REHEARSAL OF THE PLAY

Number of rehearsals..... 31

Hours of each rehearsal..... 2.5

Total hours..... 75.5

TABULATION

Total number of Questionnaires..... 225

Time to Tabulate one Questionnaire..... 7 minutes

Number of Tabulations made..... 10

Total time for Tabulation..... 262.5 hours

Total time for math work on all of the Tabulation sheets..... 66.0 hours

Grand Total of Time spent..... 404.0 hours, or 50 3/4 days at 8 hours per day.

This does not include any of the planning time or research time. The project does not seem very big at the beginning but the hours spent in the processes mount up very quickly. I am grateful to both faculty members and students in the Department of Speech and Drama for their help, advice, and especially their time.

APPENDIX D

PROGRAM

"Can we penetrate the differences between languages to arrive at the sameness underneath?

Variety may be enormous but similarities abound, and one can even attempt a definition, perhaps something like 'Human language is a system of vocal auditory communication using signs composed of arbitrary patterned sound units and assembled according to set rules, interacting with the experiences of its users.' However we word it - and obviously no one definition will ever be adequate - there is enough homogeneity to make some sort of definition possible. Languages are alike because people are alike in their capacities for communicating in a uniquely human way."

Dwight Bolinger
Aspects of Language

THE LESSON

Eugène Ionesco Feb. 6,7,8, 1969

THE CHARACTERS

THE PROFESSOR:

ROBERT M. NEVILLS

THE YOUNG PUPIL:
LAVINIA WHITWORTH

THE MAID:

PAMELA COLE

THE SCENE:

The office of the old professor.

THE TIME:

Yesterday - Today - or perhaps Tomorrow.

THE DIRECTOR — Earl D. Torrey

THE ASSISTANT DIRECTOR — Kay Grey

THE LIGHTS — Ken Shoemaker

THE PROGRAM DESIGN — Richard Wells

"The Lesson" is being directed in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master's Degree.

You are asked to remain after the performance to fill out a short questionnaire.

We wish to express our thanks to: Dr. Evans, Dr. Leinaweaver, Dr. Ericson, Mr. Smith, and Mr. Garg.