When The French Theater of the Absurd Meets Children's Theater: The Use of Farce as Theatrical Innovation in Eugène Ionesco's *Les Chaises* and Mary Melwood's *The Tingalary Bird*

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Résumé: Les chaises *de Eugène Ionesco a été jouée pour la première fois le 22 avril 1952 au Théâtre Lancry à Paris. La pièce de jeunesse de la dramaturge britannique Mary Melwood intitulée* The Tingalary Bird *a été jouée par la compagnie Unicorn Theatre for Young People au Arts Theatre à Londres le 21 décembre 1964. Cet article montre comment la farce devient source d'avant-garde et crée un univers qui relève de l'esthétique propre au théâtre de l'absurde. La comparaison de ces deux pièces confirme que le théâtre de l'absurde trouve une sorte de "rallonge" dans le théâtre de jeunesse et parmi une nouvelle entité du public dans les années soixante. Néanmoins, l'utilisation de techniques ancrées dans la même tradition, celle de la farce, mène à une interprétation différente par le public. Cet article s'attache donc à l'analyse de ces deux univers absurdes et comment Ionesco et Melwood adaptent la farce en tant qu'innovation théâtrale d'une part mais aussi en tant que commentaire social d'autre part. L'étude des dialogues en particulier est l'objet de l'analyse détaillée de ces deux pièces qui font partie désormais intégrale du répertoire de cette école de l'absurde et de sa portée hors de la scène française.*

Mots-clés: *théâtre absurde jeunesse farce langage expérimental*

In 1961, Martin Esslin in his most acclaimed study, *The Theater of the Absurd*, examines the Theater of the Absurd; that particularly French movements of the 1950s with such playwrights like Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet. In a chapter called "Parallels and Proselytes," Esslin argues that the French Theater of the Absurd has largely influenced a "growing number of young dramatists on parallel lines" and proceeds to provide the reader with a survey of the experiments from many contemporary playwrights who developed "their own personal idiom in a similar convention." [1] The language failure Ionesco presents in his play *Les chaises* through farce and language is not his alone. Samuel Beckett's plays, *Fin de partie* and *En attendant Godot* [2], are symptomatic of many absurdist playwrights' obsession to portray man trapped in his own social and linguistic conventions.

Most farcical tragedies, typically acted out by a duet or a trio of actors aiming an audience of adults, appealed to such children's playwrights like the British, Mary Melwood and the German, Paul Maar with their plays *The Tingalary Bird* [3] and *Noodle Doodle Box* [4]. These plays are two examples in drama for the youth that critique society, and with the use of farcical language, the arbitrariness of language. In this article, I show how both Ionesco and Melwood turn to dramatic techniques pertaining to the mid-Nineteenth century farces to create this innovation. In *Les chaises*, Ionesco uses a stock farce set to foster a style that escapes techniques praised in realistic plays. Like Alfred Jarry who drew his techniques from puppet theatre as foundation to create his half-man half-marionette actor, Ionesco turns to farce to create his *anti* theatre with living actors, inanimate objects and a farcical stage. A careful examination of both *Les chaises* and *The Tingalary Bird* is crucial to understanding how the farce language is adapted by each playwright. Ionesco's *anti* farce operates a tragedy. Melwood reverses the process: her play initiates in a state of loss (a tragic situation) but peaks as a burlesque farce.

Theatre specialist Martin Esslin situates historically and aesthetically the Theater of the Absurd. He asserts about this new trend that " in its rebellion against the naturalistic convention, the Theatre of the Absurd entered the consciousness of its audiences as an *anti*-theatre, a completely new beginning, a total breach with the conventions of the past.[5] In parallel, theatre historian Jeffrey H. Huberman describes the evolution of farce in his seminal study *Late Victorian Farce* and rightly observes about farces that it will take more than two centuries before British playwrights recovered the art of creating the full-length variety.

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The definition of this theatrical style (meaning "to stuff" in French), refers to dramatic pieces consisting of loosely connected episodes of buffoonery and slapstick clowning, also referred as "knockabout" by the British. These farces were initially directed toward all audiences and relegated to a child audience in the mid- nineteenth century. Huberman defines the farce set as follows -- a set both Ionesco and Melwood adapt into their dramatic style respectively:

> Thus, the general scenic effect reflected the domestic milieu of the subject matter and was rendered, not in the flat forestage conventions and painted details of the previous period, but in the new rubric of three-dimensional pictorial realism rendered in a box set. (...) The windows and especially the doors of an enclosed set (in contrast to the open pathways of flat wings) provided a physical and audible mechanism for allowing characters bearing complications to appear and disappear with a literal bang. [6]

The set is generally acknowledged as one key ingredient in the development most farces and therefore the stage must reflect a farcical action in a tendentious "realism;" drawing a world which seems real, but which ultimately serves the world on stage very closely. Both *Les chaises* and *The Tingalary Bird* fulfill Huberman's definition of the farce and its aesthetic conventions. Both play display a three-dimensional pictorial realism in their set.[7]

Stock language is also one major ingredient both Ionesco and Melwood fuse into their art; a language Ionesco conveys in his Orator's speech for example. In addition, traditional farces, abound in the use of puns, malapropisms, funny character names, speech defects and dialectic humor. Authors Dina and Joel Sherzer provide a very succinct definition of typical farcical dialogues. According to them,

> Farces (...) are always characterized by an exploration of and indeed celebration of the total gamut of forms of speech play and verbal humor. These include puns, riddles, proverbs, nonsense, scatological language, endless repetitions, verbal repartee and dueling, grammatical deviations, interactional manipulations, breaking of social norms, and satire. Playing with frames of interpretation and performance and trickster behavior are always paramount. Every aspect of language, from sounds to sociolinguistic patterns, is affected. [8]

This definition of the farce language fits well the verbal qualities both Ionesco and Melwood confer onto their characters' speech. The critique of character is central and the use of stock farce, albeit for two distinct audiences, results in a new convention: what Esslin calls "poetic" speech. This poetic speech is proper to the Theatre of the Absurd which is further characterized as

> a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important, yet subordinate part in this conception, but what happens on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters.[9]

This "radical devaluation of language" is reflected in both Ionesco's Orator and Melwood's Old Woman with dialogues that are overtly illogical and senseless. Jeffrey H. Huberman recalls in typical dramaturgical terms that the farce's socio-linguistic dimension aims at presenting "a method of humorously distinguishing classes of characters by their usage of language, pronunciation, and vocabulary."[10] This ingredient of farces sets the basis for the dramaturgy in both plays. Both Eugène Ionesco and Mary Melwood take over this reliance on farcical language to emphasize their absurdist critique: one as an adult *anti* farce, the other as a children's fantasy. Displaying minimum cues about the characters' motivations

and the situation, much like most farces, both playwrights present language as arbitrary and ineffective when uttered by any classes of characters. In fact, language is ultimately in both plays the most powerful dramatic innovation and the very source of the avant-garde. The breakdown of language is in each play quintessential. However, Ionesco's *anti* farce is antithetical to Melwood's goals, since she, by reducing language to riddles and puns, celebrates instead language. On the other hand, with Ionesco, powerful signification seems to always refer to fascism or totalitarianism.

The Breakdown of Farce Language in Eugène Ionesco's *Les chaises*

In *Les chaises*, the farce language turns to tragedy: the tension between the play-within-the-play structure revealed at the end of the play and repetitions of ritual, representation and linguistic contingency confuse the audience. Ionesco already praised the joys of games with language in his *Théâtre de la dérision*, calling for nihilism and a devaluation of language especially in the historical context of World War II. In *Notes and Counter Notes,* he sets forth his position on language about his first play, *La cantatrice chauve* (1950). This social comment is reflected in the intrigue of *Les chaises*, where, by the end of the play, the Orator is reduced to speak in a series of disjointed vowels and consonants, thereby exemplifying Ionesco's desired disintegration of social language. In his own terms, Ionesco praises the disintegration of language:

> The language had become disjointed, the characters distorted; words, now absurd, had been emptied of their content and it all ended with a quarrel the cause of which it was impossible to discover, for my heroes and heroines hurled into one another's faces not lines of dialogue, not even scraps of sentences, not words, but syllables or consonants or vowels!...[11]

This statement about language epitomizes Ionesco's vision to present the absurdity of human social conventions; namely man's inability to transcend meaning, the futility of trying to secure any meaning, and the fact that language always collides with reality. Early in the play, Ionesco warns his audience about this breakdown of language which is reflected in the finale of the play: namely in the proliferation of invisible guests and the increasingly "distorted" conversations between the old couple and them. Soon the audience comes to realize that the more the old couple introduces nonexistent newcomers, the less likely they are to be united with the outside world. The furniture is created only in their own minds. Their disrupted dialogue is symptomatic of the old couple's inability to reconcile with or to establish true communication with reality. Ironically, the couple is both the agent of the farce and the victims of this *anti* farce. The materiality they create for their fantastic world, their world of ghosts, is ironically the very weapon that forces them to ultimately commit suicide.

To understand the couple's downfall fully, one needs to examine how Ionesco uses speech as the principal medium in his *anti* farce. Perhaps the best example of his socio linguistic critique is the first “guest,” the Lady. The audience soon realizes that she represents in some ways the Old Woman's idealization or what she might have liked to be when she was younger. The pseudo dialogue occurring between the old couple and the invisible Lady is established from a system of antinomies based on oppositions between what was and what might have been. This system reveals the old couple's own decrepitude, and their failure to communicate their social estrangement. For example, the old woman cannot help comparing herself to the Lady when she says: "I'm so badly dressed (...) I'm wearing an old gown and it's all rumpled" (*The Chairs*, p.123), a statement to which she immediately gives reality and reinforcement by showing her admiration to the Lady, claiming: "Oh! What a pretty suit...and such darling colors in your blouse (...) What a charming hat you have! My husband gave me

one very much like it, that must have been seventy-three years ago... and I still have it" (*The Chairs*, p. 123-124).

This contrast is equally comical when one considers the social language the old woman uses towards the Lady and the topic of her conversation. Her dress, emblematic of the obvious gap in social class between the old woman and her invisible guest, does not match the Lady's. As one method to create his *anti* farce, Ionesco contrasts the couple and the Lady's speeches. He only used stereotypical clichés and phrases in what characterizes the Old Woman's language. But mainly, Ionesco uses farce dialogue to stress the void behind human conventions; the lifelessness behind their purported lives. The ambivalence he suggests between rhetoric and content stresses the couple's major crisis: their inability to express their inner selves toward each other in a true dialogue. Ionesco thus signals to his audience the tragedy of language as foundation for social construction. Actually, it is only in the presence of a third person like that of the Lady that each one learns something from the other and yet excludes each other. Where traditional farces traditionally rely on the intrusion of a person to develop the plot line, Ionesco opts for a ghost that epitomizes that rhetorical figure; that of a life not lived and the plot ends in a deadlocked situation. Each attempt at communicating turns out to be totally ineffective: the more crowded the stage becomes, the more apart and inert the couple is. Finally, the couple falls into the trap of their own fantasy, and the invisible guests become true obstacles to the couple's hope to unite.

Although the play opens with a fake gestured unity between the couple (such as when the old man sits on his wife's lap), the audience realizes soon the dangerous irony of their fantasy and quickly anticipates the final double suicide. As they hope to become closer in sharing their game of fantasy, the couple's language becomes less effective and eventually void. It is this gap which Ionesco wished particularly to present to his contemporaries. The gulf between the old couple grows proportionally wider as the conversations between the guests become more intense. The more the chairs accumulate on stage and the more invisible guests invade the old couple's space, the more the couple is prevented from embracing; robbed from their last bit of human contact. As a result, the break between the two becomes irreversible: neither their minds nor their bodies can be reconciled, despite their apparent physical closeness and their complicity in the making of this fantasy: "The Old Couple should be behind the chairs, very close to each other, almost touching but back to back." (*The Chairs*, p. 131). Thus the couple's dialogue becomes more dislocated or, as Ionesco himself states, “disjointed.” This dislocation, mostly epitomized in the Orator's speech, reveals the couple's inability to reach a consensus in speech. Their conversation first consists of polite remarks exchanged with the many guests, but soon it becomes vain and contradicts the couple's attempt to communicate more authentically. In fact, their own speech is affected and begins to consist of questions and reiterations rather than interpersonal communication:

> OLD WOMAN. [dislocated dialogue, exhaustion] All in all.
> OLD MAN. To ours and to theirs.
> OLD WOMAN. So that.
> OLD MAN. From me to him.
> OLD WOMAN. Him or Her?
> OLD MAN. Them.
> OLD MAN. Curl-papers... After all.
> OLD MAN. It's not that.
> OLD WOMAN. Why?
> OLD MAN. Yes
> OLD WOMAN. I.
> OLD MAN. All in all.
> OLD WOMAN All in all. (*The Chairs*, p.136)

Each one undergoes a metamorphosis which is revealed in their speech. This "dialectic humor," typical of the farce language, is intentionally twisted by Ionesco to reflect the couple's existential crisis. Although *Les chaises* starts with a situation that is burlesque and senseless, it is the tragedy around the couple's final suicide that affects mostly the audience, and signals Ionesco's adaptation of the genre into a social critique.

One of the most striking examples of this appropriation of the farce language occurs when the old woman addresses the Photo-engraver and asks: "So you think I'm too old for that, do you?" and as stage directions indicate "she raises her many petticoats, ... exposes her old breasts; (...) throws her head back, makes little erotic cries, projects her pelvis, her legs spread apart; she laughs like an old prostitute" (*Les chaises*, p. 132). Such dehumanization, Ionesco suggests to his audience, is centered around language as social construction. Ionesco, like most postwar absurdist playwrights, uses the farce as a pseudo-realist genre. Through the familiar farce conventions, Ionesco forces his audience to see the void behind all human social conventions. Much like Alfred Jarry who criticized humans, Ionesco sees them as victims of their own language, devoid of criticism. Both, however, clearly understand the theatre of the absurd as social critique just as their followers in children's theatre would agree although in a different style.

Farcical Dialogue in Mary Melwood's *The Tingalary Bird*

Although Melwood's use of the farce set is more explicit than Ionesco's, nonetheless she shares some of his goals; so, too, is her critique of language and its arbitrariness. Ionesco intended to reduce language to a never-ending game, evidenced in the breakdown of language in the Orator's speech, consisting of vowels and consonants. Melwood chooses to celebrate language mostly because, as Roger L. Bedard justly claims: "This topsy-turvy world is best perceived and understood by a child audience -- one that is not yet constrained by expectations of form and structure, and one that willingly suspends disbelief to follow Melwood through this fantasy." [12] The farce language with Melwood becomes a source of entertainment for children while presenting them with a stylistic innovation derived from the absurdists' experiments: a pseudo farce neither tragic nor entirely comical; a genre close to the pantomime with a transformation scene. She, in her own style, offers a parody of human conventions that criticizes routine to children.

In his Introduction to the play, Roger L. Bedard raises the issue of language. He admits that Melwood rejects everyday logic so as to celebrate language stylistically:

> Language is not always used just to further the story line. It is characterized by non sequiturs, long pauses, rambling discussions, and intellectual decrees. The woman, for example, babbles on the proper way of ironing clothes, while at another point, she deftly parries a request from her husband with a seemingly meaningless reply that very succinctly characterizes the whole world of the play.[12]

In *The Tingalary Bird*, Melwood creates an absurdist, senseless situations created from various language games in which the old couple successively engages. Nonetheless, these games are not unintelligible (unlike that of Ionesco's Orator), but rather highlight the arbitrariness of language to children. Yet, while Ionesco critiques language as meaningless, Melwood looks to that meaninglessness as hope for children's ability to see the world anew. Thus at the start of the play, the young audience is presented with a couple who spends their time together arguing. The first example of Melwood's critical celebration of language occurs when the old woman reprimands her husband who could not light the fire:

> OLD WOMAN. Look at the soot! Look at you. Oh, what a mess.
> OLD MAN. It's the wind... It keeps blowing...

OLD WOMAN. Of course it keeps blowing...that's what wind is for. (*TB*, p. 500)

Although the old woman's response is grounded in semantic logic when she states "that's what wind is for," it is intended to create surprise and laughter, two ingredients of the farce. A conventional statement is suddenly revealed to have a unconventional meaning. Melwood uses similar rhetorical repartees throughout the play. Very interestingly, these speech parodies have no effect on the plot other than presenting to children the absurdity of the couple's world and their inability truly to communicate in their daily environment. The old couple points out the senseless situation of their life in many ways, such as when the old woman argues:

OLD WOMAN. That's a good fire. Look at all the wood in it.
OLD MAN. Yes, but it don't burn.
OLD WOMAN. It's a wood fire... but if the wood burned there wouldn't be any wood in it, would there? So -- it wouldn't be a wood fire... and it couldn't be a good fire...so you'd still have something to grumble about, wouldn't you? (*TB* Act I, p. 504)

If the prior example played on semantics, this one works with homonyms and rhymes - almost a jazz riff. If Melwood presents a topsy-turvy, linguistically senseless world to children, unlike Ionesco, she wants her audience to feel what she means. The old man suggests just this solution to the audience participants when his wife asks him:

OLD WOMAN. Go on. Say what you mean -- if you know what you mean ...which I often doubt.
OLD MAN. I don't know what I mean.
OLD WOMAN. There you are!
OLD MAN. I just feel what I mean. (*TB*, p. 512)

The two-chambered meaningless world in which the old couple seems to be confined at the start of the play is often reflected in meaningless statements that engender a series of senseless actions and humor, and that often seem to be drawn from two different conversations. For example, in Act I the old woman decides to iron clothes with a cold iron because "the kind of ironing I'm going to do can be done with a cold iron ...and anybody can iron with a hot iron " (*TB* Act I, p. 504).

Melwood relies on other rhetorical figures to celebrate language, while revealing its capacity for play, its status as artifact. Act II, which announces the arrival of the magical Tingalary bird, introduces a new type of language, taking the Old Man and the Old Woman into a space of shared, playful language, a move which reflects Melwood's wish to praise language poetically. She fuses new rhetorical strategies like riddles:

OLD MAN. (As if playing a game). I'll say -it's as Big as a - Battleship.
OLD WOMAN. I 'll say - it's as Big as - a Baboon.
OLD MAN. It's as Big as - a Barn.
OLD WOMAN. As Big as - a Bandit (*TB*, p. 515)

Here, the audience is supposed to be thinking through this new language of the Tingalary bird, to see how words work rather than merely parroting them as the Old Man and the Old Woman had done in Act I. Words unite: they do not only divide. Roger L. Bedard explains that "Melwood, rather than underscoring the traditional elements of exposition, complication, and denouement, presents the story more like a collage of sound, sense, and action given life through the combination of many disparate elements," a definition which can be applied to any absurdist drama (*TB* Introduction, p. 494). Indeed the idea of a collage best

explains the play's innovative qualities and challenges the typical linear plot usually found in more conventional children's plays. However, although the play begins in a state of discord and chaos, unlike Ionesco, Melwood prefers to end her play in a state of equilibrium, like most farces, a dénouement children's theatre prescribes. Roger L. Bedard again addresses the issue of style acknowledging its shared characteristics with absurdist plays of the adult theater:

> *The Tingalary* Bird has often been compared with the absurdist plays for adult theatre - an appropriate comparison considering Melwood's use of the many absurdist techniques. The absurdists, however, attempted to portray man's entrapment in an illogical, hostile, impersonal, and indifferent existence. There are no such pretensions in *The Tingalary* Bird; it is more fantastic than brooding, more humorous than menacing. [13]

Melwood intends to be critical but optimistic about language. Unlike Ionesco's pair, who maintains an aesthetic distance between the action of stage and the audience, Melwood's old couple directly addresses the young audience and even encourages them to participate in the orchestration of the plot, either directly or in an aside, as when the old man says "the bigger the spectacles the more you're see" (*TB*, p. 506). Both protagonists while away time in a succession of never-ending senseless speeches. When Magical bird enters the couple's life in Act II, a transformation occurs and their language also undergoes a radical shift. The play's initial power hierarchy, like when the Mean Old Woman explains to her husband the function of each object as if addressing a child, is quickly replaced in Act II by numerous games of riddles between the couple. Throughout, the play uses puns and other linguistic devices typical of farces, so that the young audience quickly realizes that the alienated couple is able to rejuvenate and reconcile in fantasy, off their daily life.

The result is clear: the Old Man's verbal repartees become more manipulative, and soon the young audience witnesses his spiritual metamorphosis. Whereas the Old Man was initially presented as a child, in Act II his verbal repartees become more articulate, to the point that he can initiate new riddles which engender more laughter among the children.. In fact, the Old Man is even able to change his wife's bossy attitude into a more likeable, cooperative partner:

> OLD MAN. Practice makes perfect. (She plays again.) You've gotquite a nice touch, I do declare.
> OLD WOMAN. (Flattered): Have I really? (She continues to play.) If this is all there is to it, it's quite easy. All that fuss people make about practice. (She strums away and the music improves. The OLD MAN and the BIRD bow to each other. Then they try the dance -- not without mistakes.) (*TB*, p. 525)

From this transformation of the couple's relationship manifested through the language of cooperation and creation (not division), the audience sees the plot. The play's pseudo-realistic set, already materialized on stage by the presence of oversized objects in Act I, also change, to offer children a totally presentational (non-realist) style that culminates in Act II. Tingalary bird removes language from its social framework, and gives it new power.

First and foremost, language in Act II becomes less illogical and more poetic. Melwood reclaims a creative logic. In fact, Melwood intentionally shifts from the farce language as seen in Act I to a more poetic style, underscored also by the presence of songs in Act II which climaxes in Act III. Songs like "Elsie-May" emphasize the couple's reconciliation, and stage directions indicate a regained unity between them:

OLD WOMAN. Spoiling things as usual! (She snatches the doll, begins to rock it in her arms, and waltzes around the room as she sings.)
Rock-a-bye-Baby, dear Elsie-May,
Mother won't spoil you whatever folks say.
When evening comes, from tree at the top,
Right to the bottom, dear Baby can drop!
(She joins the OLD MAN front stage) (*TB*, p.537-538)

The revision of a song familiar to most children, offers a magical transformation of the known into the original. Whereas Ionesco devalues language through his characters' vain attempts at communicating, Melwood celebrates language and creates new venues of communication. The children's audience realizes that the world of words is, indeed, absurd, but that this very world can be rewritten, and so transformed. Like many other children's playwrights, Melwood's innovation is well informed by her knowledge of conventions proper to children's theatre. [14] She hopes to change the dicta of this philosophy to hold the tradition open for a new generation of critiques, and for a growing entity in the audience. The change in generation is clear.

In conclusion, if Ionesco's *anti* farce interrogates the tragedy of language, Melwood offers a much more optimistic dramatic vision to children by celebrating language. We have two plays that clearly exploit the same dramaturgy, albeit for their different purposes. Both plays critique the practice of bourgeois language and theatre through techniques adapted from the farce. This critique, which develops an aesthetics of the avant-garde, is also directed by the playwrights' views of the audience's role and it relies on a very specific definition of the playwright's appropriate social responsibility towards that audience. The theatre of the absurd may cross the boundary of adult drama and extend to children's theatre to present an alternate kind of absurdism, here overturning the farce tradition. That these two plays draw on the farce, however, changes their critique. Their target is more individualized. In these two cases, two couples are divided by language itself, not by fate or an outside world. Of course, society's language controls our fate, as in the case of Ionesco's couple, unless we learn to play with it and fantasize about new lives as does Melwood's couple. This borrowing from the farce tradition is thus based on self-image and self-knowledge, rather than upon a consideration of social class. Both Ionesco and Melwood's plays address two alternatives in the theater of the absurd: one that is highly pessimistic, the other highly optimistic.

Notes

[1] In Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Anchor Books, Garden City, New York, 1961, p. 290. Esslin further advocates the full range of children's theater . According to him "theatre for young people must be able to confront its audiences with the full range and vocabulary of styles, from *commedia dell'arte* to classical verse drama, burlesque comedy, Brechtian alienation, or grotesque expressionistic acting... The young people's theatre may lay the foundation for a more comprehensive and artistically more varied adult theatre in this country" in Helene S. Rosenberg et Christine Prendergast, *Theatre for Young People: A Sense of Occasion*, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York: 1983, p. VIII

[2] In Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie* , Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1957 and *En attendant Godot* , Les éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1953.

[3] Mary Melwood, pseudonym for E. M. Lewis, was born in Carlton-on-Lindwick, Nottinghamshire. When *The Tingalary Bird* was first published in the United States in 1969, the repertoire of children's theatre was becoming increasingly less traditional and started to employ new techniques that escaped the well-made plays typical of the first half of the twentieth century inherited from the Victorian period. Melwood admits being rather pleased about the labeling as an absurdist playwright. "I am fairly sure I had no awareness of "influences" absurdist or any other. Though I must have heard of Ionesco and the new trend of writing for Theater, I had never seen, heard or read any of his works. After Caryl Jenreis' first production at Christmas 1964, *The Times*, then a paper of much repute, gave a review which mentioned *The Chairs* - much to my curiosity. " Letter to me addressed on December 16, 1997.

[4] This play has been translated in English in 1979 and makes an important social critique to children without portraying real-life situations, characters, or events in Coleman A. Jennings and Gretta Berghammer, eds., *Theatre for Youth: Twelve Plays with Mature* Themes, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, TX, 1986, p. 123.

[5] In Martin Esslin, *Reflections: Essays on Modern Drama*, Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1969, p. 190.

[6] Jeffrey H. Huberman, *Late Victorian Farce* , UMI Research Press, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1986, p. 15.

[7] When *Les chaises* opens, the audience is immediately immersed in a rather familiar farce set which Ionesco conceived as follows: " Circular walls with a recess upstage center. A large, very sparsely furnished room. To the right, going upstage from the proscenium, three doors. then a window with a stool in front of it; then another door. In the center of the back door of the recess, a large double door, and two other doors facing each other and bracketing the main door: these last two doors, or at least one of them, are almost hidden from the audience. To the left, going upstage from the proscenium, there are three doors, a window with a stool in front of it, opposite the window on the right, then a blackboard and a dais. (...) Downstage are two chairs, side by side. A gas lamp hangs from the ceiling" in Eugène Ionesco, *The bald Soprano and Other* plays, translated by Donald M. Allen, Grove Press, New York, 19858, p. 112.

[8] Dina and Joel Sherzer, "Verbal Humor in The Puppet Theater," editors Dina Sherzer and Joel Sherzer, *Humor and Comedy in Puppetry: Celebration in Popular Culture*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1987, p. 53.

[9] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* , Anchor books, Garden City, New York, 1961, pp. xix.

[10] Roger L. Bedard, *Dramatic Literature for Children* , *A Century in Review*, Anchorage Press, New Orleans, 1984, p. 9. Furthermore, it is crucial to draw these connections since many children's theater historians, like Roger L. Bedard (in his introduction to *The Tingalary Bird*), acknowledge the difficulties to fit this play in the history of children's theater. He observes that Melwood's play is "a totally bizarre play that uses few of the elements of the past (....) and represents a significant step in the development of the field, but a step that seems to have been made independent of the traditional influences" in Roger L. Bedard, *Dramatic Literature for Children, A Century in Review*, Anchorage Press, New Orleans, 1984, p. 493.

[11] Eugène Ionesco, "The Bald Soprano: The Tragedy of Language," *Notes and Counter Notes*, translated by Donald Watson , Grove Press, Inc., New York, 1964, p. 179.

[12] In Mary Melwood, *The Tingalary Bird* in Roger L. Bedard, ed., *Dramatic Literature for Children: A Century in Review*: *Selective and Evaluative Essays* by Roger L. Bedard , Anchorage Press, New Orleans, 1984, p. 495.

[13] In Roger L. Bedard, *Dramatic Literature for Children* , *A Century in Review*, Anchorage Press, New Orleans, 1984, p. 495.

[14] British children's playwright and director Ken Campbell continued in the vein of Mary Melwood's Absurdist plays and produced a play for audiences for 7-13 year olds entitled *Skungpoomery*. Premiered by the Nottingham Playhouse Roundabout Company on 24 June 1975, this play demonstrates qualities of the Absurdist theater while introducing children with an idiotic fantasy acted out by Faz and Twoo in Ken Campbell, *Skungpoomery*, Methuen Young Drama, London, 1980.

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