EXPERIENCING IONESCO’S NIGHTMARE WORLD:
THE PREPARATION AND PRODUCTION OF MAN WITH BAGS

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EXPERIENCING IONESCO’S NIGHTMARE WORLD:
The Preparation and Production of *Man with Bags*

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Thesis

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To my parents, Paul M Duke and Stephanie Grant Duke, whose passion for the theatre continues to live in my life and work.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Man With Bags* conceived as an environmental theatre piece with audience participation provided challenges that tested my abilities to take a highly conceptual idea and bring it to life. I am grateful for the encouragement and assistance of everyone in The University of Akron’s School of Theatre, Dance, and Arts Administration, in particular my mentor and advisor James Slowiak who invariably showed me a new way to look at problems in order that I might come to the solution myself, as well as the other members of my thesis committee, Randy Pope and Neil Sapienza, who from beginning to end gave positive support as well as sound advice. Without Oliver Corrigan and the rest of the folks from Newfangled Production, the venture would not have come to fruition or nearly as close to my initial imaginings. I was also very fortunate in attracting talented and adventurous actors and technicians whose participation in the production gave the project its heart and its humor. From the beginning, I could imagine no one else as The Man than Ray Luttner. I thank him for joining in the dream.
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CHAPTER I

BACKGROUND TO THE PROJECT

As both a visual and theatre artist, I delight in the challenge of bringing playwright Eugene Ionesco’s dream imagery and unusual special effects to life on the stage. I first read the English translation of Man with Bags shortly after it was published in the United States in 1977. I was captivated by the ongoing stream of striking images: a boatman on the Seine in Paris, a house on fire like a beacon for a journey to the past, a quiz-giving sphinx, tourists who walk backwards, a knife-wielding woman chasing a hen across the stage, a culminating dance of wheelchairs and motorcycles. I knew from that first reading that one day I would direct this play – if I could only find the appropriate place and people with whom to work.

Years later I found myself in graduate school looking for a suitable play for my thesis production. I pulled Man with Bags from my shelf and began to re-read it, this time with The University of Akron’s facilities and students in mind. Since I graduated with my BA in theatre from UA, the theatre program had moved out of Kolbe Hall and now resides in Guzzetta Hall, a building that has two black box theatres, one on top of the other. Sandefur Theatre is the larger of the two, a full-fledged working theatre with enough space and technical assets to accommodate most productions. The smaller space, Studio 28, is generally used for student-directed one-acts and for acting and directing
classes. It has a functional but tiny light board and, like the larger black box sitting on top of it, can be arranged in any configuration utilizing black drapes, risers and chairs. I knew I wanted to work in a black box theatre, but which one would be best suited? Gradually, I came to the conclusion that I would like to use both theatres and incorporate the audience moving from one space to another as part of the main character’s journey through Ionesco’s dreamscape.

As I worked through the script, I could see that the dozens of characters who populated the play could be played by an ensemble of fifteen to twenty actors. The majority of the actors could be college students, but I also could use a few high school students and some older, more mature actors. I would need an exceptional actor to take on the role of First Man and I immediately thought of one of my fellow graduate students in the Masters program, my acting partner in Directing class, Ray Luttner. I approached him with the idea of performing the role. He read the play and agreed to take on the part.

**Personal Impetus**

My journey in pursuit of theatre art has usually leaned toward the experimental. As an undergraduate, I devoted my energies to exploring medieval theatre. I was attracted to the variety of staging possibilities exemplified by that era: outdoor venues, pageant wagons, simultaneous staging that involved the audience by making them either move from scene to scene or moving the scenes from one performance space to another. I was equally attracted to the post World War II absurdist playwrights. There are connections between medieval theatre and absurdist theatre. Both forms are strikingly
visual. Compare the gaping jaws of the medieval stage that signified the Gates of Hell with any Samuel Beckett landscape or with the hospital in *Man with Bags*. In both theatre forms, the characters tend to be personifications of concepts. First Man in *Man with Bags* is a modern Everyman on his journey toward Death. First Man’s suitcases take on lives of their own, vanishing and reappearing, growing heavier and filling themselves with vegetables and concrete. When objects and characters appear, they carry with them a significance that goes beyond mere utilitarianism: luggage brings to mind a journey, while the objects inside represent the burdens of life weighing down the traveler. As Ionesco stated, “Nothing is barred in the theatre: characters may be brought to life, but the unseen presence of our inner fears can also be materialized. So the author is not only allowed but recommended to make actors of his props, to bring objects to life, to animate the scenery and give symbols concrete form” (*Notes and Counter Notes* 29).

As will be described further on, the concept for an environmental staging of *Man with Bags* grew out of my own experiments with participatory and environmental forms of theatre. I am not very interested in passive audience situations, much preferring to give the audience an opportunity to become a part of the action. Furthermore, I wanted the contemporary audience to identify with First Man as perhaps the medieval audience did with Everyman.

**Rationale For Undertaking This Project**

Again I shall be told that I have a particular background, that I live in a certain historical context of time, that I can only belong to my own period…But this does not mean that I am a prisoner of my own times, that I can or should address myself only to an audience of my own times. I do
not know what this audience is. We only know ourselves. In fact a work of art springs from a particular soil, a particular time, a particular society; it springs from them, but it does not grow in the same direction; it does not turn back to them. We must not confuse the point of departure with the point of arrival. (Ionesco Notes and Counter Notes 149-50)

*Man with Bags* was written in 1975. Ionesco drew upon recurring themes in his work: the absurdity of the human condition, the isolation of the individual within society, the difficulties of achieving genuine communication of thoughts and emotions, and the compulsion of authority toward totalitarianism. Throughout his writing career, he made use of images that came to him in his dreams. *Man with Bags* is the most overt example of Ionesco’s dreamscape writing. Many of the images that appear in *Man with Bags* are dreams of his own childhood and family life that he first recorded in *Fragments of a Journal*.

As I re-read this play in consideration of preparing it for my masters thesis, I felt that the themes it contains resonate with contemporary issues, particularly the pressures that homeland security brings to bear on maintaining individual liberty in a world where threats and acts of terrorism dominate the news. As citizens, we are asked to sacrifice individual freedoms in order to feel more secure in the face of terrorism. The US Congress passed the Patriot Act in which the government asserted more power to detain, eavesdrop and spy upon its citizens. Some of the Patriot Act’s more intrusive powers are suggestive of the nightmare world in which First Man wanders, lost, without his all important identification papers.

When confronted by authority figures, First Man fears doing and saying the wrong thing. He carries bags filled with guilt and dread that he would rather the authorities did not examine too closely. Certainly I have also felt similar fears while
waiting in line to have my own luggage inspected and I assume that I am not alone in feeling unease as people in uniform poke through my clothing and toiletries. By including the audience as fellow travelers in First Man’s journey, I expect that the play will connect with those who participate in ways Ionesco may never have fathomed but would recognize as related to his own era. When Ionesco wrote *Man With Bags*, in the early 1970s in the Cold War era, borders to many countries were barricaded. Most citizens in the Eastern European block were essentially held captive behind the Iron Curtain. The ordinary citizen was encouraged to fear those on the other side of the curtain by those in control. In the 1950s and 1960s, school children were instructed to hide under their desks in case of nuclear attack by the Russians. Just as I was expected to fear the communists, communist children were taught to distrust the capitalist countries. Three decades later, the Cold War is long over, but the age of international terrorism and economic crisis provides another opportunity for some governmental authorities to use fear to control and coerce their citizens.
CHAPTER II

PLAYWRIGHT EUGENE IONESCO

Relevant Biographical Details

A Program note written by Ionesco for the initial staging of Man With Bags reads:

Dream is theatre par excellence. We witness the surging of events, the birth of astonishing, utterly surprising *dramatis personae*, and yet these amazing creatures come from us. Our secret self, unknown to our conscious mind, lies revealed to us. We discover our inner depth as well as some objective truths . . . (qtd. in Lamont *Ionesco’s Imperatives* 223)

No full-length biography of Eugene Ionesco has been published at this time. The most detailed account of his life in English can be found on the web site *Ionesco.org* (http://www.ionesco.org) created by Soren Olsen. Dedicated to Ionesco’s wife and daughter, the site includes a bibliography of works by and about Ionesco as well as biographical material. To prepare for this production, I drew extensively from Olsen’s website, making copies of her biographical timeline to hand out to the cast as we began work on the text. Since *Man with Bags* is a collage of Ionesco’s dreams and memories, it made sense to begin by looking at the playwright’s life to gain greater understanding of his process and intentions.

When I first read *Man with Bags* years ago, I had no idea that it was an autobiography told in dreams. I was entranced by the dreams themselves and was pulled
in by the imagery that spoke to me in personal, political and philosophical ways. Years later, as I prepared to direct the play, I discovered a number of scholarly articles and studies that delved into Ionesco’s life and works.

According to Olsen, Eugene Ionesco was born in Romania on November 26, 1909. His father, also named Eugene, was a lawyer and his mother, Therese Ipcear, was of French origin. Her father was an engineer who moved to Romania for employment purposes. After the birth of their first child, the Ionesco family moved to France so that the father could obtain his law degree. When Romania entered the First World War, Eugene senior moved back to Bucharest, leaving his wife and two children behind to fend for themselves. By war’s end, nothing had been heard from the father, so the family thought he had died in the conflict.

At the age of eight, young Ionesco’s health was delicate enough to give his mother great concern. She sent him and his younger sister Marilina to live in the French countryside, in La Chapelle Anthenaise. For two years, the children lived an idyllic life. In his writing, Ionesco often returns to this time when he was “outside time,” living in the present. Interviews with Ionesco and his own writings, in particular *Notes and Counter Notes* and *Fragments of a Journal*, provide clues to events in his life and how they correspond to events in *Man with Bags*.

…when I was eight or nine, when I lived at the Mill, everything was joy, everything was presentness. The seasons seemed to spread out in space. The world was a decorative background with its colours, now dark and now bright, with its flowers and grass appearing, then disappearing, coming towards us, moving away from us, unfolding before our eyes while we ourselves stayed in the same place, watching time pass, ourselves being outside time. (*Fragments of a Journal* 11)
This feeling of “presentness” is something Ionesco refers to time and again. He longs for it and can only find it in his dreams, where time can run in all directions and even be brought to a halt. For Ionesco, “presentness” is the feeling of being alive in the moment without intruding thoughts of past or future. It is finding joy in the sensations of the pulse of life without concern for impending decay and death. It is interesting to note that “presentness” is also a goal for actors, meaning to be alive in the moment, to be clearly engaged with the action at hand. In the University of Akron’s production of *Man with Bags*, we sought to engage both the actors and the audience. By including the audience as fellow travelers, we hoped to set up a situation in which they also were present in the moment.

Olsen’s biography states that in 1919, Therese Ionesco managed to secure an apartment in Paris suitable for raising her children. She arrived at the Mill to pack them up and move them back to the city. Eugene did not want to return, and so his mother enticed him with exaggerations of conditions in the city. In *Fragments of a Journal*, Ionesco reflects upon the conversation with his mother:

‘You know,’ she tells me, ‘Paris has changed. The war’s been over for a long time, it’s quite different, quite different. There are fêtes going on all the time, it’s lots of fun: roundabouts, shows, lights, lots of lights. It’s all lit up at night. And Aunt Sabine has a fine drawing-room. She entertains fashionable people. She gives parties.’ …It’s time to go. I’m feeling more cheerful. I’m looking forward to the fêtes in Paris. Paris never used to be like that. I imagine merry-go-rounds, all lit up, gorgeous illuminations, ladies in fine dresses, people singing in the streets, fireworks, a sumptuous drawing room. (7-8)

His mother’s tempting words ignited expectations of a Paris that could only appear in dreams, and eventually Ionesco recalls them in the opening scene of *Man with Bags* (8-12) when First Man finds himself on the bank of the Seine, but in multiple time
periods all at once. Paris is lit up with sounds of merriment and fireworks in the sky. He finds himself present in a multitude of Parises from various time periods: Paris surrounds him, the winds of the revolution blowing still. There are celebrations with cheers and fireworks, yet at the same time it is over hung with defeat, and again in another time period, silent and dead. Clearly, First Man is Ionesco, facing his own and his adopted country’s past, but with an absurd twist. This initial scene is of a man for whom numerous pasts are still present.

Once Ionesco moved from the countryside at around the age of twelve, time no longer stood still. Olson records that in Paris, he continued his schooling and began to write his first plays. His family life was disrupted once more, however, by the sudden reappearance of his father. Eugene Ionesco the elder did not die in the war after all, but had joined the Bucharest police, thus avoiding battle. This was to be the pattern throughout his life: side with whatever authority had power at the moment. Throughout the turbulence of post World War I Europe, Ionesco’s father deftly jumped into the camp of whomever was ruling Romania at the moment whether it be WWI right-wing political leader Alexandru Averescu, Corneliu Codrianu, founder of the fascist and violently anti-Semitic Romanian Iron Guard, the Nazis during WWII, or the post-war Communists. 

*Man with Bags* is populated with father-authority figures that carry out their interrogations, inspections and punishments without question. However, Ionesco’s hatred of what his father became is tempered by a yearning for a kind father, one who will befriend and aid him on his journey. (Such characters as the boatman, the painter, the consul and the customs inspector who remembers him from his youth all signify the need for a loving father and give First Man enough impetus to continue on his journey.)
Having abandoned his family in the middle of war time, Ionesco senior divorced Ionesco’s mother without her knowledge, and then married again. Although he had paid no attention to his children for years, he nevertheless managed to obtain legal custody of them and removed them from their mother in Paris, taking them to Romania to live with his new wife. Ionesco and his sister did not get along with their stepmother, and eventually argued violently with their father. Ionesco senior insisted that his son study to be an engineer, but the youth was much more inclined toward poetry and literature. Eventually, the children moved out of their father’s household to live with their mother, who by this time had moved back to Romania.

Olson’s biography suggests that Ionesco’s relationship with his mother was perhaps more complex than that with his father. Her influence ran deep and his childhood memories were very much centered on her. As a four-year-old child, he questioned her about death and her answer brought him to tears, not because he feared his own death, but because he suddenly realized that one day she would die and leave him. Fear of separation is a continuing theme in his work. In *Fragments of a Journal*, he writes of being placed in a children’s home outside of Paris when he was only five. He doesn’t say why this separation took place, but one can surmise that the young mother was having difficult financial struggles raising her family without any support from the absent father. Ionesco writes:

I was unhappy all the time, I never got used to separation, nor to the communal dormitory and refectory, nor to the all-pervading, intolerable presence of other people. It was not that I wasn’t fond of them, I had friends, a great many friends, but I never had play-fellows. At five I was already an individualist. My mother came to see me once a fortnight: she would appear and disappear, not in time, but in a kind of immense space.
When she left again on Sunday night, it was forever, a fortnight was forever. An emptiness in the present. (127)

This passage provides an important clue about the female figures in *Man with Bags*: the wife, the mother, the daughter, the grandmother, even the waitress, all appear only to cajole and chide then vanish, leaving First Man empty and more lost than ever, just as Ionesco felt abandoned by his mother. In Freudian terms, there was a whole lot of separation anxiety going on between mother and son. Some of the female characters in *Man with Bags* hint that First Man is difficult to live with. He, in turn, often confuses the wife for the mother. In a particularly revealing scene, First Man and his wife are visiting the house in which he grew up. He struggles to remember whether his mother was alive to attend their son’s christening. The family house appears to be on fire. Out of it steps an old woman—it is his mother who died many years ago. She clutches a bouquet of wildflowers, approaches and addresses the wife:

OLD WOMAN. I’ll leave him in your hands. He’s yours now. Take care of him. Love him. *Pauses.* It’s not going to be all that easy…not all the time. I know you’ll do the best you can. *Hands flowers to WOMAN.*

WOMAN. I…I’ll try. Thank you. Mrs…. *Smiles.* Thank you, mother.

OLD WOMAN. Sometimes, he’s pretty difficult. *Pauses.* I know you’ll do your best, dear… *She begins to move away.* (16; 1.2)

As the old woman exits toward the burning house, the wife scatters the wild flowers as though on top of a grave. In the play, First Man is overcome by the sudden appearance of his mother and, only when she drifts back toward death and vanishes does he spring to life himself, wishing to rush after her into the burning house (17; 1.2). His wife and son prevent him. In actuality, Ionesco’s mother offered similar words to Eugene’s fiancé Rodica Burileanu before he married her. Three months after their
honeymoon, his mother died and the transformation from son to husband was complete and final.

Ionesco’s father died fourteen years after Ionesco’s mother. During those years, father and son had remained distant and at odds philosophically. In a revelatory passage that sets up thematic concerns that appear throughout his plays, Ionesco describes his final meeting with his father:

The last time I saw him, I had completed my studies . . . and was married. . . . He believed in the State, no matter what it represented. I did not like authority. I detested the State. . . . In short, at the end of our meals together, we were at sword's point with each other: at one time in the past he had called me a Bolshevik; this time he called me someone who sided with the Jews. . . . I remember the last sentence I ever said to him: ‘It is better to be on the side of the Jews than to be a stupid idiot!’ (qtd. in Olson)

_Man with Bags_ does not concern itself with specific autobiographical details from Ionesco’s mature life. The play clearly represents a return to his early years and young adulthood, but from the perspective of one who has lived a life marked by the uprootedness brought about by conditions of war and political upheaval. The horror of living through most of the twentieth century permeates the dreamscape and reaches out to all dreamers. Despite, or perhaps because of the startling images and absurd encounters, the audience finds itself in a familiar although surreal territory. Ionesco speaks of “. . . a fundamental anguish: the sense of danger, my coexistence with others, my condition in this world, the knowledge of death. And this comes to me in such a sharp form, with such immediacy, as something so obvious, that it could never happen in the false light of day” (*The Two Faces of Ionesco* 245).
Ionesco's Use of Dreamscapes

. . . when I dream I do not feel that I am abdicating thought. On the contrary, I have the impression that as I dream I see evident truths that appear before me more brilliantly illuminated, more ruthlessly penetrating than in my waking state, when everything often seems more mellow, more uniform and impersonal. That is why in my drama I utilize images drawn from my dreams, realities that have been dreamed. (Ionesco Counter Notes 111-2)

Influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, the two leading psychoanalysts of the twentieth century, Ionesco mined his dreams to create his plays. *Man with Bags* consists almost entirely of dream fragments previously recorded in Ionesco’s journals. Ionesco filled his plays with what he called “cultural archetypes,” autobiographical images that nevertheless, resonate with contemporary audiences (qtd. in Lamont "Ionesco's Absolute Stranger" 247). He drew upon Freud’s concept of dream analysis to uncover hidden desires and fears and populated his dreamscapes with Jung’s archetypes. Ionesco pointed out that the dreamer is the director, actor and designer of his own personal dreamscape, aware of all these functions at once and yet pulled along on a journey by a momentum that seems removed from self-control (Lamont "Absolute Stranger" 248).

Thinking about Freud and Jung makes me keenly aware of how far we have moved from those early twentieth century psychological theorists. Although I found it interesting to read about how these theories influenced Ionesco’s writing process and worldview, I remembered his words of advice that although a work of dramatic literature spring from a particular place, time, and culture, it must always move forward and play to the present conditions. I felt no need to emphasize the specific Jungian and Freudian
references in the text. At one time, audience members may have readily identified oedipal complexes, for example. Contemporary audiences might be more concerned with issues of gender instead.

What seemed most important to me was to capture in performance the feeling of dreaming as clearly as possible. Although science has investigated the subject of dreams and come up with a wide variety of theories based upon everything from psychology to random neural synapse firings, no clear conclusions have yet been made as to the origin and purposes of dreaming, other than the fact that humans in every culture from time immemorial dream.

Ionesco believed that his dreams were more real than everyday life, and he developed a method to capture the creative flow of his subconscious by recording his dream fragments in a journal and then using them as jumping off points into writing plays. By making his dream images concrete in his writing, he was able to see beyond the images, find context, and, ultimately, take control of the dream’s progress.

*Man with Bags: A Dreamscape*

*Man with Bags* takes the form of an oneiric odyssey by the character, First Man. This journey aspect shaped my production concept as director, how I structured and conducted the rehearsals, and eventual performances of the play at The University of Akron. In order to help clarify the dream-like absurdity of this play, it is useful to look at it in broad overview to gain an understanding of its structure. Later in the chapter on design, I will examine Ionesco’s dreamscape from a more detailed and technical
viewpoint by taking the reader on a walk through each of the environments as created by the cast and crew of The University of Akron production of the play.

First Man – like Ionesco, indeed like most of us – is intent upon finding his roots, a search for identity. As the play begins, he is seen carrying two suitcases (8; 1.1). He is about to embark on a journey into his past. The spectators begin to enter the dream as First Man departs with a Charon-type figure, a boatman, who offers to take him to his hotel (10; 1.1). The streets of Paris have merged with the canals of Venice.

First Man’s return to the land of his birth soon turns into a nightmare, in which his movements are variously self-directed, knocked about, confused, blocked, restricted, and immobilized. The scenes transform, just like dreams, with sudden changes in setting along with leaps from one time period to another, with no apparent order, and yet there is an underlying sequence and thematic grouping of the scenes.

The elements of chaos and uprootedness, of suddenly being wrenched from one environment to another, Ionesco knew as a child. Scenes two through six of Act one (13-36) spring from Ionesco’s memories of relatives long dead and of relationships that still bind beyond death. Relatives no longer living return to say things they never could while alive. First Man is never really sure if he is talking to living or dead people until the family urges him to join them. From the personal, the journey then turns toward the philosophical, as indicated by the appearance of a questioning Sphinx (38; 1.7). With wonderful wordplay, First Man duels with the Sphinx, answering one absurd question after another, First Man is doomed to lose, and in the process begins to lose his own identity. His bags grow heavier and he frets over the loss of the third one, the one with
his manuscripts. The dreams turn nightmarish as he struggles to prove his identity to customs officers, policeman and even passersby.

In act one, scene eight (42-8), First Man meets up with the boatman once again, and this time is transported to his former country, which has fallen under a totalitarian regime. It is Romania behind the Iron Curtain. Once he has arrived in the land of his birth, he finds that he has lost his passport and can’t remember his name. The next cluster of scenes (49-74) involves First Man’s attempts to prove his identity in the face of increasingly hostile questioning by authorities.

From this point on in the performance text (76-113), changes in scenery, mood and tone grow more bizarre. Actions tumble on top of each other, increasing the pace. Soldiers stalk the periphery. A young woman falls dead in a phone booth while First Man waits in line to make a call for help. A helpful ambassador transforms into a murderous doctor who instructs First Man on how to euthanize an old woman who has a tree growing inside of her. Then like Alice in Wonderland, in a courtroom filled with strangely familiar characters, First Man is put on trial, not for stealing tarts, but for refusing to eat his vegetables!

The final cluster of scenes in *Man with Bags* (114-48) is filled more with actions than words. Various improbable images run on and off, including a Japanese woman in a kimono, a bum scrounging for cigarette butts, and a giant chicken chased by a waitress. The tempo becomes almost manic, as First Man is clearly unable to control his dreaming from this point on. He meets up with a seductress who arranges a tryst with the cooperation of her husband who agrees to watch First Man’s bags while he goes off into the bushes with the young woman. A carnival atmosphere fills the dream with music and
laughter as the entire cast join in a dance that surrounds and confounds First Man who must make a huge effort to break free from it at which point everybody freezes as fireworks go off and lights black out.

The next scene reunites First Man with the boatman. They arrive at a dirty pier washed over by a filthy river. This sequence is like a dream within a dream. Here First Man meets a woman. The text does not make it clear whether she is his wife or long time lover. She is waiting for him, standing before him wearing a tattered skirt with no top or bra. She is dirty and bedraggled like the land she waits in. Although she is naked from the waist up, the two of them carry on a normal conversation, the kind that can only happen in dreams. The conversation turns toward accusations. She has had to wait for him too long. He cannot understand her filthy state. He makes promises that everything will be fine, but she is not buying it. The scene ends with promises that may not be possible to carry out:

WOMAN. Every once in a while, you wake up and realize you’ve spent your life sleeping.

FIRST MAN. I’ll only dream when I’m awake. From now on, that’s the way it’ll be. I understand now. I’ll never waste my dreams by falling asleep. Never again. (134; 2.7)

The last scene in the play marks the final tumultuous stage of the dream. It is written as a kind of ballet performed by pedestrians carrying suitcases, other people pushing or riding in wheelchairs, people on motorcycles (in The University of Akron production we used scooters) and policemen. Patterns of traffic swirl about First Man and all is underscored by unnamed music. Ionesco has always been open to providing alternative endings to his plays beginning with The Bald Soprano. Rosette Lamont
describes the ending of the original Paris production of *Man with Bags*, which is unlike that provided in the written text:

The final image of this play is that of the man sitting on one of his valises in the midst of a busy throng. Suddenly every one of the dancers turns into a traveler, each carrying one suitcase. They seem terribly busy as they rush from one side of the stage to the other. Some begin to pile up their luggage around the protagonist who does not move, watching this hustle and bustle with a bemused smile… The sudden immobility of the man does not suggest death as much as a state of contemplation… Ionesco and Mauclair, the dramatist’s principal interpreter, have succeeded in creating on the stage the ultimate metaphysical image, that of Man as inveterate dreamer… (“Absolute Stranger” 264-65)

In the Horowitz adaptation (of a translation into English by Marie Ionesco), the traffic moves slowly and gracefully to music as in a ballet (138; 2.8). The sound cuts out suddenly, all freeze and then a blackout. In the production I directed, the traffic movements built to a crescendo in the music, then both the music and the traffic began to slow down. The suitcases grew heavier and heavier until finally everything was brought to a standstill as the music ended.
CHAPTER III

ENVIRONMENTAL STAGING

Review of Various Forms of Environmental Staging

An environment is what surrounds, sustains, envelops, contains, nests. But it is also participatory and active, a concatenation of living systems. In terms of planet earth, the environment is where life happens. (Schechner "Environmental Theatre" ix)

The history of theatre may be viewed as an examination of the changing relationship between performer and audience. This relationship can be charted by looking at the evolution of the theatre space itself. Over the centuries, the shapes and allocation of space in theatres have evolved from the circular arrangements of the original outdoor Greek amphitheatre to Roman stadiums and indoor stages that developed into the proscenium style theatres of the Renaissance to the present day. In the proscenium theatre the relationship between performer and audience is clearly defined. The audience remains within an area separated from the performer by the framing device known as the proscenium arch.

The contemporary theatre makes use of all that came before in terms of staging by utilizing black box theatres in which seating and staging areas are flexible to meet the needs of individual productions. During the 1960s, a number of theatre groups experimented with the audience/performer dynamic by creating environments that
allowed for actions to take place throughout the space, so that the audience was both surrounded by and included in the actions. For instance, the Performance Group worked in a single space, but redesigned the environment to meet the needs of each production. For *Dionysus in 69*, the group built scaffolding which provided many levels throughout the space and “afforded spectators varied views of the action they could be watching from positions on the floor or perched six feet over the performers. The performers could move through the center of the space, or employing ladders and ramps, could navigate and perform among, beneath the feet, or over the heads of the spectators” (Sainer 43). In the Performance Group’s 1969 production of *Macbeth*, a new environment was created that allowed the audience to move about the space and follow the trail of the actions.

A number of performing groups have moved beyond the idea of a permanent performance space, creating site-specific works that draw in both audience and performers by use of authentic environments such as gas stations, beauty shops, or abandoned buildings. The Pageant Players staged *Laundromat* at a real coin-operated laundry and did not inform customers that a play was going to be performed. Two actors entered with laundry, began to argue, and so the performance began.

Environmental theatre may or may not provide the audience with a specific place to sit and observe. In one form of environmental staging, known as promenade theatre, the performance space can be quite large, utilizing all the floors in a building or acres of wooded grounds. The audience is free to wander at will in promenade theatre. Seating is generally not included, encouraging the audience to follow the actions.
Experiments with Environmental Staging

The spectator in the radical theatre may be finding something that the play has been unable to find before his appearance on the scene. As the play breaks down many of the barriers between life and art, the spectator may find out something about his life through his physical entrance into the art. (Sainer 61)

I have been interested in environmental theatre for many years and often have worked in non-traditional venues such as stairwells, basements, punk rock clubs, and outdoors on the streets, in alleys and in more rural environments. I am attracted to places where theatre is not expected, where it can appear for a brief time and then vanish.

My main interest is in finding ways to involve the audience beyond the role of spectator. I have worked with the concept of the entire audience being given specific roles to play in an improvisation-with over one hundred participants staged in the plenum chamber of Akron’s Civic Theatre. This vast space sits underneath the seating area of the theatre and was fitted with ducts so that stale air in the theatre could be replenished with fresh air. Truly a found space, the plenum chamber housed abandoned bits of furniture and pieces of scenery that was used to create an entire village in which participants were invited to improvise.

At other times, when working solo, I have pulled members of the audience into the performance – casting them on the spot. Sometimes, I handed out masks and asked audience members to become random people on the street, to be interviewed and questioned on a burning issue of the day. This technique allows audience members to be collaborators and responders. Even those who do not step out of the audience to act tend
to identify with those who do. Because at any moment they might be asked to participate, every audience member becomes less passive.

While solo work has its place, I am also interested in exploring the creative process as a group exercise. It is not enough to have an idea – one must also forge enough interest to gather a group of collaborators with whom one can develop the idea and bring it to fruition. I have found that it is not essential to form a group that is comprised entirely of people with a theatre background. I have acted and collaborated with poets and other writers, musicians, political activists, visual artists, dancers, anyone really, as long as they are available, cooperatively-minded, and buy into the idea.

In *Man with Bags*, my intent was to give the audience the role of fellow travelers, citizens in the present day world confronting the new rules brought about by a climate of fear and perpetrated by authorities over which the average citizen has no control. Unlike my prior experiments, this time I asked the audience to get up and follow the action from one setting to another.

In the background of the play, war is a constant presence. Actors in uniform appear with guns, patrolling, questioning and inspecting throughout the journey. It was my goal that the audience experience many emotional changes, along with a growing uneasiness, and that the journey should always be exciting, going from real to surreal.

To achieve a successful environmental staging of *Man with Bags*, I needed to establish an ensemble of actors and theatre technicians who would be willing to participate in the creative process. For me, “environmental” refers not only to the outcome but also to the process of theatrical creativity. I felt it was very important to establish a production environment that encouraged creative thinking. While the play
itself dealt with the absurdity and horrors of authoritarian societies, I wanted our production team to work as direct contributors, not as hired hands controlled from the top. I had a broad vision of what the production could be, but within the concept were many problems that would be solved in the rehearsal process. I did not want to come to rehearsal with every detail decided in advance. Although I had numerous ideas for staging the play, I was careful not to become too attached to any idea. The rehearsals were a laboratory to test a variety of solutions to the problems encountered along the way. I encouraged the cast to focus on what is working, rather than whose idea is best.

Due to the organic nature of the rehearsal process, many of the technical aspects of the production could not be decided in advance. In order to help the reader follow the process of creating an environmental staging of *Man with Bags*, I will first discuss my approach to directing *Man with Bags* and our rehearsal process before examining the design and technical elements of the production. I will then reflect upon the performances, and include responses from the actors, the production team, and audiences.
CHAPTER IV

PREPARATIONS FOR DIRECTING MAN WITH BAGS

Another kind of drama is still possible. More powerful and far richer. Drama that is not symbolist, but symbolic; not allegorical, but mythical; that springs from our everlasting anguish; drama where the invisible become visible, where ideas are translated into concrete images, into reality, where the problem is expressed in flesh and blood; where anguish is a living presence, an impressive witness; drama that might puzzle the sociologists but could stimulate and quicken all that is unscientific in the scientist; and reaching beyond his ignorance, the common man. (Ionesco Notes 229)

Non-Traditional Directing

Over the years, my directing process has evolved from the conventional traditions that I learned as a student in the 1960s and early 1970s to a more open and collaborative way of working. As an undergraduate student, I followed the prescription of pre-blocking the actions, so that initial rehearsals involved actors moving around stage with scripts and pencils in hand, writing down the director’s instructions in the universal blocking code (‘X’ means “cross”, for example). This invariably produced rehearsals that staggered to a halt every time each actor wrote down his or her movements. It also tilted the creative control heavily toward the director. Eventually, actors would learn their lines and moves, perhaps contributing some creative amendments to what had been
given out by the director originally, depending upon the director’s willingness to give up some control.

After earning my undergraduate degree in theatre, I set off in search of new ways of doing theatre. I became intensely interested in creating new performance material in collaboration with others. I was familiar with the work of Viola Spolin, having taken a course at the University based upon her seminal work, *Improvisation for the Theatre*. It seemed to me that one could create new material by utilizing improvisation techniques. General ideas could be explored, characters and situations developed, and experimentation with style and format applied allowing a group to make creative choices from the very beginning of the process. Rather than starting with a finished script, a group would begin with an idea or concept. A script could evolve out of this process or not, depending upon the goals and needs of the group.

Some early efforts to develop this technique were not successful. What I quickly learned was that creating material from group collaboration takes much more time than working from a pre-written script, and that the quality of the work is directly related to the talents, skills, and experience of the people involved in the collaboration. One project, created at the Civic Theatre in Akron, Ohio, provided a particularly hard lesson. Led by a blindly ambitious director, and involving a group of young and inexperienced actors, the performance went up; but it was unfinished, disconnected; and, most importantly, it was not interesting for the audience.

These early efforts taught me valuable lessons. I learned how much I didn’t know about the theatre process. I realized how frightening theatre deadlines can be. I knew I never wanted to be in a position of unpreparedness for a theatre opening ever again, and
so began to focus on how to organize and schedule projects efficiently, whether experimental or conventional. Finally, I learned first hand that one must balance confidence with humility. One can enter an experimental project not having all the answers at hand. But there must be a clear process in place to develop the material. If the process itself is the experiment, one is best advised not to be working under a firm deadline; but instead, work until the ensemble feels that the material is ready for an audience.

I moved to Washington, D.C. in 1976 and had the good fortune to be hired as company manager for Earth Onion Women’s Theatre, a small experimental company directed by Jane LeGrand. Jane’s training was in physical theatre and she had worked with someone who had worked with Grotowski. My three years with this company gave me precisely what I most wanted to learn – how to grow a performance from the raw materials of sounds and movements. I also experienced working collaboratively along non-hierarchical lines.

When I returned to Akron in the mid 1980s, I began to experiment with the directing process, exploring forms of collaboration that veered away from hierarchy. I wanted to moved toward collaboration built upon consensus; and came to prefer the term “to instigate” rather than “to direct” a production.

Instigating a production does not mean abdicating responsibility. In this model, the role of a director includes being the responding eyes and ears for each actor. In rehearsal, there is a time for actor exploration, a time of freedom to explore and respond to characters and situations. In such an atmosphere, a spirit of ensemble can develop. Unfettered creativity brings a wealth of solutions to problems, leading to the task
becomes selecting what works best. I strive to reach those conclusions collectively with the cast, but sometimes hard choices must be made. The work grows out of our combined reactions to the material and to the space in which we work.

**Pre-Production and Auditions**

To carry out a production of the scale of *Man with Bags*, I knew that I needed help finding people to work on this production as actors and as technicians. It was essential to seek out people with connections with The University of Akron theatre students as well as the greater Akron theatre community. Fortunately, New Fangled Productions--a group comprised of University of Akron theatre students past and present--agreed to co-sponsor *Man with Bags* along with The University of Akron’s School of Dance, Theatre and Arts Administration. The University would pay the royalties and supply the performance space, grant use of props and scenic units, and supply some technical support. Newfangled Productions provided a small budget for materials, props and costumes we could not find in storage, use of their mailing list for publicity and promotion, and most importantly, a number of people to work on the production as actors and technicians.

Audition notices were posted on campus and sent out to the Newfangled Productions email list as well as to the Northeast Ohio Performing Arts List. I was looking for a group of between fifteen to twenty actors to play over seventy-five roles. Rather than have actors read from a script or prepare a monologue, I set up improvisations based upon characters and situations within the play in order to get a clear
idea of improvisation skills as well as see the actors play multiple types physically and vocally. The auditions were videotaped so that I could make final decisions later. Nineteen actors auditioned and I cast them all. Four of the initial group eventually dropped out. Two of those four were replaced by new actors. Other roles were assumed by other cast members. The final group of seventeen actors (nine men and eight women) included me playing two small roles. Cast members came from local high schools, Kent State University, The University of Akron, and from the local theatre community. I was especially pleased to have a wide range of ages, as well as four minority actors in the company, as I wanted the production to speak to a contemporary and diverse audience.

The range of acting experience was varied. On the audition form, I asked applicants to check off their experience and training in acting, mime, dance, and improvisation. Everybody had some acting training and/or experience. Nine of the cast had a background in improvisation. Three cast members had dance training and six had some mime background. I wanted to have a clear idea of individual cast members’ strengths and experiences, as I planned to use a lot of improvisation in the rehearsals. I also knew that physical expressiveness would be key to achieve convincing portrayals of multiple characters as well as all the dream-like transformations required by the script. Five of the actors were former drama students of mine, and I could expect that they were familiar with my rehearsal process.

The greatest challenge was sorting out which actors would play each part. I did this by setting up a chart listing each actor across the top and the eighteen scenes running along the left side. I then filled in the name of the character to be played by each actor in each scene. It was rather like putting together a giant puzzle, figuring out who was
available to play roles in each scene. This graph gave me an instant view of possible technical difficulties – how much time available for costume changes, or to patrol as a soldier. It also allowed me to assign parts in an equitable manner.
CHAPTER V

THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

First Cast Meeting

We are creating a dreamscape. The First Man is the dreamer and the rest of us are his neurons, randomly firing during REM sleep mode. We must always serve his dreaming. The dream cannot be halted – the feeling should be that of continual unfolding. The characters and images that populate his dreams cannot be self-conscious about their absurd nature. The scenes must be played as if they were heightened reality. While the First Man may confide in the audience and include them, those that he dreams about generally do not – EXCEPT when the audience is included in the action. Along the journey, the actors will relate to the audience as if they were a part of the dream. (rehearsal manifesto)

As director, I usually begin my work as a visual thinker, in Multiple Intelligences terminology. Upon reading a script, visual images immediately begin to spring into my mind. Man with Bags was particularly inspiring of visual images. As I began to prepare the scene breakdown chart for our first cast meeting, I realized that it would be helpful to me and to the actors to annotate these visual images, along with lighting and sound effects, for each scene along with the list of characters. I also included a column to note which space we were in for each part of the journey. This chart proved to be a very useful tool at rehearsals. As ideas began to flow, I could add notes for all the technical elements and keep them in one handy place to turn over eventually to the designers and
technicians. It became an itinerary of the journey, with essential details provided for each stop along the way.

If the scene breakdown was the itinerary, the character graph became the road map for each actor. Listing each actor’s appearances in each scene, the graph could be easily amended throughout the rehearsal process as additional appearances and responsibilities were added as ensemble work progressed. For example, at certain points in scenes, we added patrolling soldiers on the gallery level. Some actors were employed to handle specific lighting effects. At other times, the entire ensemble was required to create a special effect. This tool also proved very useful when two cast members dropped out and roles had to be divvied up among other cast members. At a glance, I could see who was already involved in a scene and who was available to take over another role.

Although auditions took place at the beginning of April, rehearsals were set to begin May 9. Upon finishing the cast list, I called everyone together for an initial meeting. I began by going over the concept of staging of *Man With Bags* as an environmental and participatory production. After discussing the broad outline of how we would move the audience from space to space, creating a constantly changing dreamscape. Scripts and packets of vital information including a biographical timeline for the life of Eugene Ionesco, information about dreams, the character chart, the scene breakdown guide, a timeline for the project and a rehearsal manifesto were distributed. In the month between the first meeting and the beginning of rehearsals, the cast was asked to study the script, and to use the scene breakdown chart to jot notes about their individual roles within the scenes. They were to write down any questions they might have about the play and their characters. Additionally, I asked that they start to pay
attention to their own dreams and recommended they keep a dream diary throughout the course of the production.

I stressed the goal of cast members being very familiar with their lines by the start of rehearsals. I then talked briefly about my directing process, which would be familiar to some cast members and completely alien to others. I wanted them to know that they were to be active participants in the creative process, hence the suggestions they keep dream diaries and make note of their responses to the text as they worked on their lines.

Rehearsal Schedule and Organization

One of the biggest challenges facing a director is availability of the actors. Although they are excited to audition and eagerly accept roles, they invariably come with a number of conflicts that add to the difficulty of devising a rehearsal schedule. The best way to deal with conflicts is to be flexible with the scheduling and try to assemble as many people per scene as possible. In an ensemble production such as this one, other actors stepped up to cover the roles of those who were missing. James Smith III (Tourist, Husband) often took over the roles of missing actors, to the delight of everybody at rehearsal. I was very encouraged by the enthusiasm and willingness to make every rehearsal work displayed by cast members so early in the process. Their positive work ethic made it possible to make the necessary adjustments so that missing actors could be brought up to speed at their next rehearsal.

While a couple of the actors eventually dropped out because of lack of time to commit to the project, the over-all rehearsal attitude was responsible and professional. A
number of the cast members took it upon themselves to arrange for extra rehearsal time with Ray Luttner, who had taken on the enormous role of First Man. Being on stage for the entire play, Ray found himself running lines and working out actions with anyone who was available.

I set up a six week rehearsal schedule, six rehearsals a week for three hours per rehearsal. The first half hour of rehearsal was for physical group warm-ups and games. The remaining two and a half hours would be dedicated to working on the scenes scheduled for that night. I tried to schedule clusters of scenes that had many of the same actors in them, but this was not always practical.

The first two weeks of rehearsals would be dedicated to exploring each scene through improvisation, discussion and analysis. Rehearsal time was used for character investigation and to experiment with the dream imagery within the space, while the actors worked on learning the words on their own time. By the third and fourth weeks of rehearsals, the actors would be working their ways through the scenes with text and actions and lots of prompting. Each successive week was a matter of making clearer choices, refining the actions, and building momentum toward running sections of the play at a time. By tech week, the goal was to be running the show act at a time, and once light and sound cues were set, run the entire journey and prepare for the audiences to enter the dreamscape.
Warm-Ups and Theatre Games

At our first rehearsal, I wanted the actors to explore the journey of the play by moving through all the spaces and identifying what would be taking place as well as discussing ways to move the audience along with the action. With character charts and the scene break down form in hand, we walked through First Man’s journey, making notes along the way. This also gave the actors an immediate idea of how much energy would be needed to negotiate all the twists and turns of this production. Our warm-ups were essential to prepare bodies and minds as well as to build up stamina for the rehearsals and eventual run-throughs and performances.

The first half hour of every rehearsal was dedicated to physical preparation for each actor. Many of the cast were coming to rehearsal from full time jobs, and needed to release the tensions of the day before they could focus on creative work. Items such as a large inflated ball, a four foot long foam roll, and hand weights were introduced to encourage physical stretching. The actors were encouraged to develop unique warm-ups, and to listen to the needs of their own bodies.

From individual warm-ups we moved into group stretches and movement exercises. I encouraged the actors to take turns leading group warm-ups, always a useful way of discovering new ways to move and stretch, as well as giving each actor the opportunity to contribute and set the tone for the rehearsal. Ray Luttner realized from the start how important creating a high functioning ensemble would be – all the other actors would be responsible for creating First Man’s dream world. He brought a number of games to the warm-ups and often took the lead in getting things going at rehearsal. For
instance, at one rehearsal, he introduced the company to an exercise that involved tossing a stick to each other while they moved in the space, eventually adding the difficult task of a group count to twenty while continuing to move and tossing the stick without dropping it. This exercise is excellent for heightening actor awareness to the space and to each actor within the space.

Another exercise involved improvisation movement to music, playing with movement and rhythm, group freezes, and character development. I had some specific tracks of music written and performed by a jazz band called Third Plane. I felt that the music would heighten the sense of being in a dream. Through these exercises, we found places within the script where the music would be used. One piece of music in particular, “Another Jazz Casualty,” became the soundtrack for the final wheelchair ballet that ends the play.

As noted in the rehearsal manifesto, one of my earliest visual images was that every actor would have a bag or suitcase of some kind:

I would like each cast member to bring a suitcase or bag that you will use to keep your character pieces/changes. Suitcases with wheels are fine for actors. Shoulder bags, back packs, duffel bags – whatever fits your characters the best. In your bag, keep a small notebook and writing utensil (so you can jot down any ideas or problems), costume pieces, wigs, mustaches etc you might want to keep in your bag. Each of us will need to keep an itinerary as to which role we are playing and where we are in each subsequent scene.

I had been collecting old trunks and odd looking suitcases for this production, and one day found five very nice solid old suitcases sitting out on the curb waiting for the trash truck to come. They looked like building blocks, stacked by the side of the road. We used these in warm-up movement to music, playing with the possibility of building first
sculptures and then structures with them. It became clear that the suitcases could be used to create essential scenic units, forming desks, chairs, tables, walls, check points – just about anything that was needed could be constructed from suitcases. We attached castors to a large trunk so that it could be moved quickly into position to take on the role of a desk, table or counter.

From the beginning, Ray began carrying First Man’s bags, one in each hand. He had a hard cased suitcase that he could use as a seat at any point in the play by setting it up on the narrow end. The other bag was much older, an old leather carryall that evoked the era of the Great War. A third, missing bag, holding First Man’s manuscripts never appears. The bags not only contain what First Man carries in his unconscious, they also represent his dream travels to points in his past.

To explore the use of space, properties, and physical interaction, we made up a little game in which every time First Man planted his suitcase on the stage, the rest of the cast added their bags to create a bag sculpture. At a signal, the actors attached themselves to the sculpture, and then when someone decided to break the freeze, all grabbed a new bag and began moving again with the music.

To begin one rehearsal, masks were provided for each cast member to wear as they worked to music in the space. I suggested that First Man was dreaming and everyone in a mask had to find their way into the dreamscape. They could interact with each other, with First Man, and should always let the music guide their journey. This initial improvisation evolved into the festival dance at the end of scene sixteen in Part II. Another piece of Third Plane music was used as actors in masks played a game of keep-
away, as First Man frantically tried to move through the masked figures to recapture his bags.

**Initial Scene Work: The Preliminary Sketches**

I approached the first two weeks of *Man with Bags* rehearsals as the preliminary sketches of what would eventually be clearly delineated images, with actions sharpened into clarity during the succeeding weeks. We explored the play’s scenes section by section. The early scenes involve First Man’s family members. In scene two, First Man enters “sandwiched between” his wife and his son (13; 1.2). They are visiting the home of First Man’s mother. For some reason, First Man is not carrying his bags at this point in the dream. I asked the actors to play with the idea that the wife and the son were taking the place of First Man’s suitcases during this scene. Robert Keith and Jacqueline Wren, as son and mother, attached themselves to Ray in various ways: holding on to him, being stuck to him like glue, or maintaining constant contact as if all three were wired together electrically. As can be seen in figure 1(a), the scene maintained the connections that were formed in that first rehearsal. When First Man’s mother appears to hand over her son to the woman he married, his present family attachments prevent him from dwelling in the past with the memory of his mother. In figure 1(b) we see First Man trying to break free of his family to follow his dead mother into the burning house.

In the script, First Man does not appear in scenes three and four of Act One, which are focused on the playwright’s intense relationship with his mother. Scene three
"Fig. 1(a). First Man attached to his wife and son."

"Fig. 1(b). First man trying to break free from his wife and son."
(18-21) delves into First Man’s complex relationship with his mother and contains elements clearly based upon Ionesco’s own life. A young man (Robert Keith) wheels an elderly woman (Brett DeHaven) into what might be a nursing home. Their resentments toward each other boil up into angry words and the mother’s attempt to commit suicide by taking a bottle of pills right before her son’s eyes.

The Young Man who was his son in scene two, now plays the role of a young First Man dealing with his aged mother. To help clarify this, I asked Ray to join the audience as First Man, sitting on his suitcase and watching the scenes as if seeing his life played out before his eyes. We used improvisation to explore the dynamics of the relationship between mother and son, elder and youth, being ambulatory and confined to a wheelchair.

We were fortunate to find an antique wheelchair, and the actors were able to work with it from the first rehearsal. We noted that control of the wheelchair indicates the son’s status at the beginning of the scene, and found places where the old woman seized control of the wheelchair and the action, with status and control switching rapidly back and forth as the conflict between the two spirals out of control.

Many of our improvisations during the first two weeks dealt with situations involving First Man in confrontation with authority figures. The actors would set up inspection desks or security stations and then First Man’s task would be to gain entrance or clearance in the face of various forms of intimidation and interrogation. The authority figures practiced searching luggage, while those being inspected attempted to convince their interrogators of their innocence.
In one scene, a policeman claims that he cannot understand the language First Man is speaking. Another inspector offers to translate, even though all the characters are speaking in English. In another scene, First Man meets up with his wife, who not only doesn’t recognize him, she doesn’t understand his language as well. I had the actors play the translation game, in which one person speaking English interviews another who speaks only in gibberish. In between them is a “translator” who can interpret the gibberish word into English and the interviewer’s questions into gibberish. This game has an innately absurd quality to it. I found that it heightened the actors’ physicality as they strove to communicate with body and gesture, along with speaking words slower and louder as if talking to a person with a hearing problem. The qualities that came through in the improvisations were easily applied to the situations in Man with Bags.

During the first two weeks, I encouraged the actors to bring in objects and pieces of costumes that they felt would help define and develop their characters. Sara Cutlip chose to play the part of a customs inspector with a Canadian dialect and a male physicality. She pulled a khaki jacket with badge out of her suitcase and the character was born that night. She also played a psychotic woman in a glass phone booth for the initial scene in act two (76-89). She brought long evening gloves and a form fitting body suit which brought attention to her arms and hands working within the “glass” phone booth. The gloves seemed to pull an entirely different voice and physicality out of her. The rest of the cast was inspired by her preparations and more soon followed suit. I was delighted at the growing bursts of creativity as I felt from the beginning that this environmental interpretation could only succeed if the actors and crew bought into the concept whole heartedly. It would be the actors’ job to pull the audience into the dream
world of the play. The more the individual actors contributed, the more the ensemble pulled together in support of First Man’s journey.

At the end of the first two weeks, the entire cast met to begin work on the final scene (135-8; 2.8) which I have always called “the wheelchair ballet.” My original visualization for this scene was to play it outside in the traffic circle between Guzzetta Hall and the tall mirrored Polymer Science building on the opposite side. In this last scene of the play, mostly written in stage directions, Ionesco had created a bizarre dance of traffic at an intersection, with pedestrians carrying suitcases, people pushing other people in wheelchairs, and other people riding motorcycles—all directed by a traffic cop.

My response to the way this scene was written is that it presents a condensed view of the differing degrees of difficulty that individual humans face on their journey through life. Some manage to walk briskly through the greatest traffic jams, while others are stuck in wheelchairs, dependant upon others to steer them through life’s obstacles. Then there are the privileged few who zoom ahead of the rest on vehicles of immense power.

I wanted to replace the noise and the smell of motorcycle exhaust with the odd-looking and quietly sinister appearance of persons riding Segways, the much-heralded new transportation gadget for a new millennium. However, when the cast met outside for our initial exploration of the final scene, problems began to arise. The traffic circle was too large to be practical, and its slope made pushing wheelchairs obviously difficult. Although we tried to make it work, the outdoor space proved to thwart creating the climactic frenzied chaos I had envisioned. Eventually, we knew that the dance would
have to stay inside the large black box. We would have to do our best with sound and lighting to create a visual transformation into the dance.

Once we began to think about staging the wheelchair ballet inside, we realized that Segways would dominate the space, and would probably not be a good choice in terms of actor safety. Oliver Corrigan brought in some scooters, the type that is human propelled via one leg pushing against the ground. They fit the scale of the space and allowed actors to zoom in, around and out of the space with ease. The scooters and wheelchairs were a much more practical solution to the problem of creating a traffic jam. Chris Henderson, playing the traffic cop, brought in a loud whistle to help him direct the traffic. We soon began to play with the whistle as a cue to direct specific actions. The choreography was an ensemble effort and grew organically in response to the music.

**The Middle Weeks: Clarifying the Actions and Words**

The middle two weeks of the rehearsal schedule were dedicated to revisiting each scene of the play. We worked off book using the following process: first time through the scene: improvise using your own words, focus on your score of actions. Second time through the scene: add the lines. The assistant director will feed lines as needed. Third after sharing responses to the work, run through again, with lines fed as needed. Repeat as often as possible.

This process works smoothly – if the actors have spent enough time in preparation for the scene work. Though actors were to have lines learned by the first rehearsal that lofty goal was achieved by no one. By the third week of rehearsals some actors had their
lines down cold, the majority had their lines for the most part, and just a few of the cast were still struggling. When actors don’t have their lines in their heads, I have found it useful to have the stage manager or assistant director read the lines. We can then work the scenes while the actor listens and moves through his or her score of actions. This is a helpful technique for kinesthetic learners who associate words with movement and orientation within the space. It also lets the other actors in the scene who do have their lines continue to work without the constant stopping and starting that goes on when lines are being fed by the stage manager or director.

As the actors grew more confident with their lines, they continued to develop creative solutions to problems within the scenes. In scene six (30-6) of the family scenes in the first half of the play, Ionesco writes stage directions for the entire family to enter as a unit, suggesting the use of a castered platform or having the actors wear roller skates and roll on together. The actors worked on attaching themselves to each other and entering as one unit without resorting to a platform or wheels. Later in the scene, they created a “vvrooommobile” (35), an invisible vehicle into which they invite First Man for a ride. In the same scene, our initial improvisations lead to the family posing at strategic moments in the text as if in family portraits. Eventually we incorporated a camera flash effect that set off each pose.

Sarah Jones created a police officer who was half male and half female, at first literally split down the middle. For example, the male side of her face had half a mustache. She used this characterization for the video shoot; but in performance, she chose to dress as a male sheriff, with the female aspect of the character appearing as she delivered her final lines in the scene. This characterization became one of those absurd
moments in a dream when a person suddenly transforms into something completely unexpected. In this case, the redneck sheriff is suddenly Mae West, speaking first to the audience, “He may be a tough guy, but he’s a smart guy” (65; 1.10). Sarah delivered the next words as an intimate whispered come-on to First Man, “As far as I can see, this ‘not-the-asparagus-but-the-stalk’ business isn’t really a public disgrace and gets you right off the hook.” She then reverted to her masculine persona for the final ordered words: “You can move on out’ta’ here now. You’re free.”

Chris Henderson, who also played a policeman in this scene, developed a contrasting characterization – the good cop to Sarah’s more threatening interpretation. At the end of the scene, Chris’s character had to give directions to the Customs Office to First Man. In rehearsal we tried using an oversize map which seemed too ordinary. I suggested he try oversize gestures and mime, but we still weren’t sure that we’d found the best way for him to give the directions. We rehearsed this scene in Studio 28 where it would be performed, and discovered that drawing directions on the black painted floor of the studio opened up creative possibilities. Ultimately, the illustrations chalked on the floor grew more elaborate and surreal as he began adding sketches of images in his lines:

SECOND POLICEMAN. Passport office is just straight on down that way. The city’s laid out in a kind of a hub. You’ll be needing a passport not so much to move around in the country, but to leave…so, you might as well pick one up at the office. Go straight on that way…you’ll see a pond and swamp…you have boots? After the swamp you’ll see an old schoolhouse…full of soldiers now. That’s not it. Keep goin’ past burned-out houses and down a big hill, past where all your old friends’ houses sunk into the mud. Okay?

First Man meets up with four tourists (Robert Keith, James Smith III, Leah Magnus and Wendy Duke) and a tourist guide (Andy Watson) in the final scene of Part I.
The tourist guide is one of Ionesco’s authoritarian father figures, while the tourists represent the worst aspects of the bourgeoisie, carrying maps, straw beach hats, sunglasses, large purses and wearing safari shirts. All of the tourists expressed the need to have cameras. We then worked out a rhythm of lines and camera poses, shooting pictures of each other (Fig. 2(a)) and anything else that caught our fancy including eventually the audience. (Fig. 2(b))

"Fig. 2(a). Tourists on stage posing for a camera."
"Fig. 2(b). Photograph of audience taken during performance by the Tourists."

The larger scenes in act two began to take shape. We experimented with using wheelchairs for seating in certain scenes. The ambassador (David Magnus) and his secretary (Bret DeHaven) offered a wheelchair to First Man when he approached them to see about obtaining a new passport (90; 2.2). The scene turned into an interrogation with the two authority figures spinning First Man back and forth as they took turns questioning him. One of the wheelchairs had an unexpected propensity for tilting backwards, which Ray adapted to heighten the effect of lowering his status in the face of unreasonable authority.

In the next scene (95-106; 2.3), the ambassador transformed into a ruthless physician while his secretary became a terrifying Lady Macbeth-like nurse. This became the most horrifying and nightmarish scene in the play. First Man found himself trapped in a hospital room with four beds containing four elderly patients (Oliver Corrigan, Chris
Henderson, Cynthia Deli and Leah Magnus). The actors formed the beds by laying out the ubiquitous suitcases on the floor. After the horror of the hospital scene, the entire cast was involved with bringing some comic relief into the trial scene (107-13; 2.4). Anyone who wasn’t playing a specific part became the jury, marching in single file, carrying suitcases, and in unison sitting upon them, only to rise at the judge’s entrance.

The trial took on aspects of a military or perhaps royal court. Numerous characters begin their statements with the words “In the name of the czar, the court, and the young dauphin” calling forth images of the trial scenes in *A Tale of Two Cities*, along with *Anastasia*, with armed soldiers guarding the evidence, which happened to be First Man’s luggage. In rehearsal, we played with the idea of First Man taking on a Jimmy Stewart type demeanor, defending himself as an upright ordinary citizen in the face of corruption. Only the corruption is one of language, not politics. The scene is littered with puns and word play based upon the vegetables First Man is accused of not eating. We found that the lines had definite rhythms that matched up with the punch lines and so worked for precision in the timing of delivery.

Throughout the middle two weeks of rehearsal, we worked to develop the ideas that came out of our initial improvisations and then refined the details in each scene. I encouraged the actors to begin visualizing each character, and to start packing their individual bags with costume pieces, hats, mustaches, masks and props. Many of the cast responded by bringing in props and costumes for themselves and each other, a positive sign that the ensemble was developing a sensibility of group ownership in creating the production. By the final two weeks of rehearsal, we would be able to focus on adding the technical elements as smoothly as possible.
CHAPTER VI
DESIGNING A DREAMSCAPE

To create a dreamscape, one must have the room for startling shifts of scenery. The typical proscenium set up tends to place the spectator’s role as recipient of the actors’ beneficent gift (Sainer 41). By breaking away from the proscenium theatre and moving the audience along a journey, we were able to play with shifting status and focus among all participants.

I began to look at the structure of the play to find when and where each scene would work best in the spaces available. The journey would begin outside the theatre in Sanderfur’s lobby. Upon purchase of a ticket, playgoers were given a program designed to look like a passport. They were advised to hold on to their passports as they would need them on their journey. A television monitor in the box office displayed a video introduction with audience instructions looping over and over during the half hour before the show began. This prepared our audience for further televised instructions which would appear on monitors and rear screen projection in various places throughout the journey. Thus the audience members found themselves cast as fellow passengers and tourists and were prepared for the idea of moving from space to space.

Since my initial concept for Man with Bags was that the environment would be created by an ensemble of actors and technicians, there were no pre-designed drawings of scenery complete with floor plans and drawn to scale working drawings for each scene.

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It would be up to all of us to create the dreamscape using our own resources, making use of our stage manager, Amy Earp, to record how the suitcases were used scene by scene. She developed a labeling system to help the actors remember the complexities of transforming suitcases into scenic units. She had the ability to create order in what feels like unrelenting chaos, so I was delighted to have her on board.

**Technical and Design Problems**

Having arranged with the theatre program to commandeer two black box spaces, Sandefur’s lobby and box office, as well as Guzzetta’s hallways and service elevator for the production, we were faced with the problem of tying all these areas into one unified dreamscape.

Walking through the spaces several times, marking out the scenes, and developing the actions in each space, solutions to scenic problems began to reveal themselves. In the first half of the play, I knew I wanted to divide Sandefur into two distinct performing areas. The initial scenes were very intimate, and I wanted the audience to not get used to sitting in one place for any length of time. At first I had pictured a very literal solution – hanging a black curtain diagonally in the black box, creating two triangular spaces. But once we began working with the suitcases, I realized we didn’t need a physical room divider. The suitcases could serve as fragments of a wall, and lighting could define specific areas. The suitcases would start the show there, but just like the actors, they had different roles to play as the scenes changed and the action moved into new spaces.
We set up risers in two corners of the box. The audience sections faced each other on a diagonal line across the space. The acting space played on the opposite diagonal, with a large projection screen built into a flat on one end, and two sets of folding flats covered with black fabric at the other end. These were used as “offstage” areas for actors, suitcases and some of the props that had to appear instantly. For example, when actors entered the burning house, they simply walked toward the projection screen and exited behind it. The audience would be directed to sit in the section closest to the entrance door when they first entered the space. Black borders defined our performance space in both Sandefur and Studio 28; images appeared quickly and magically within the vast void of First Man’s dream space.

The setup in Studio 28 consisted of seats on a set of risers facing a small performance space backed by a black curtain. Suitcases became customs inspection desks and chairs. In the small black box there was no place to escape or hide. At times, it took on the aspect of an interrogation room. The audience was more visible and the actors felt more exposed. At intermission, the tourist guide and the tourists reappeared to lead the audience back to the lobby outside Sandefur.

During intermission, the cast and crew worked to change the setup in the big black box. The suitcases no longer provided a barrier; instead they were set up in front of the folding flats at the south end of the space. Second act props needed to be placed in position and the phone booth placed on a dolly and ready to be wheeled out at the top of the act.
Developing the Video Segments

Video segments were designed to bring the audience into the journey by providing them with pre-taped instructions. Television monitors were set up in the Sandefur lobby as well as along the journey. Each would play a looping video containing a long string of announcements. As First Man’s dream descends into nightmarish imagery, the video segments also transform, underscoring the progressive terror of a world gone mad—a world imposing more and more regulations upon its citizens. Examples of these rules were taken from those commonly heard in terminals of twenty-first century travel.

Eight actors participated in the creation of videos, each performing in five successive shots which became increasingly weird and threatening as the experimented with delivery, and the videographer played with perspective, angles, and lighting effects in order to create a stark and sterile look. The actors prepared for their shots by selecting costume pieces, hats, masks and or makeup changes for each interpretation of their public service announcements.

After recording their announcements, the entire group worked with the line, “All passengers are required to remove your shoes!” while the camera focused just on the feet, both shod and barefoot, as the actors slowly walked through a door and alongside a wall. This footage was used in a number of ways, speeding it up at times, sometimes running it in slow motion, and finally in reverse direction. The images of pairs of feet following one after the other underlined the idea of passively submitting to authority.
Still images of public such as “no smoking,” “no entry,” “no trespassing,” and other cautionary signs were also collected. Editing them down so that the signs were framed in close-up and removed from their backgrounds, these images were juxtaposed between snippets of the actors giving their announcements and the clips of the actors’ feet. The intent was to give familiar everyday commands a sinister aspect. The completed video clips were projected with a rear screen projector and proved to be useful during audience moves in and out of the space, as well as during transitions between scenes.

One of the greatest video challenges was creating the burning house. Neil Sapienze created a silhouette of a house and filled it with footage of fire. Rather than a house with flames shooting out of it, the image was one of flames taking the shape of an old house. Enlarged and projected through our screen, the image popped out of the darkness in Sandefur, giving the actors in the scene a dramatic image with which to work. (Fig. 3)

**Lighting and Sound**

Lighting turned out to be a challenge for designer Josh Douglas, first of all because of the number of instruments necessary to light two theatres. In this situation, every available light had to be used. Fortunately, the dreamlike qualities of this production did not call for a realistic approach.
"Fig. 3. Video of flames in silhouette of a house."

As the lighting design was created, the cast began to explore the aspects of appearing from out of the blackness. Lighting areas that could encircle dream images were established, and cues were written to enhance the sudden transformations or highlighted slow motion effects as well as helping to focus the audience’s attention on certain scenes.

Six pools of light (Fig. 4), each with its own particular color, were used in different ways during the course of the play. At first the pools provided subtle coloring for specific scenes, particularly in the first half of the play when Sandefur was divided into two performing spaces. In the second act, the pools of light grew more distinct and were used to delineate the dream’s rapid fragmentation. By the final wheelchair ballet,
the colored pools of light began to dance along with the actors, taking on the rhythm of
the music and building to an almost strobe-like effect.

One element that was not successfully resolved was controlling lighting effects
for the parts of the journey that took place in the lobby and the hallways. A number of
solutions were discussed—perhaps the use of L.E.D. lighting or even clip lights, or
creating a strange reddish glow inside the elevator, or to suggest search lights as soldiers
patrolled during the pre-show half hour and at intermission. Ultimately, the lighting in
these “real” public places was impossible to control with the resources at hand.

*Man with Bags* is filled with sound effect descriptions and cues. Using pre-
recorded sounds was not effective, particularly because of mechanical difficulties, and
partially because the number of cues began to slow the pace of the show considerably.
Fortunately, the cast had been vocalizing sound effects throughout the rehearsals.
Lines and sounds came out of the darkness, from the upper levels, and from actors sitting
in audience areas, providing disconcerting and seemingly disembodied sources of sound.
The actors were very comfortable with continuing to produce live sound effects rather
than get bogged down with the recorded sounds.

During the second half of the play, actors not in the scene; sat with the audience
or patrolled on the upper grid area. These positions gave us the opportunity to create
“surround sound” effects. In the phone booth scene, Ionesco writes lines for amplified
phone operator voices. When the operator announces that the line is busy, recorded
music plays while First Man is put on hold. One actress improvised singing “The Girl
From Ipanema,” an iconic putting-on-hold music of the twentieth century. Other sound
effects created by the cast included sounds of war, sirens, gun fire, screams and moans.
The only recorded sounds used were musical pieces by local jazz band Third Plane. One piece, “Sue Lyriano,” was used to underscore a kind of keep-away dance that became the climactic dance that ended First Man’s affair with the married woman in Act Two. “Another Jazz Casualty” was used as the music for the wheelchair ballet. “Another Jazz Casualty” was composed over a recording of local faith-healer Ernest Angley, preaching in Africa and being simultaneously translated into Swahili. It begins with a quick beat reminiscent of the rhythms of rapid transit, traffic streaming and merging. As the music builds, bits of the sermonizing can be heard underneath the layered tracks of piano, drums and guitars, adding to the chaotic and disturbing effect of the unceasing bustle and traffic of human life. The cast immediately connected to this
music. It had distinct rhythm and mood changes within its 6:23 running time that stimulated creative choreography during rehearsal. Like batteries running out of juice, the music slowed to a final halt, the cast giving into gravity and ending up in frozen positions as the music and lights faded out.

Dred Scott, Third Plane keyboard player, agreed to compose and record an additional piece of music for *Man with Bags*. I wanted something that would give the feeling of Paris in the opening scene in Sandefur’s lobby. Dred recorded the music on his accordion in his studio in Brooklyn, NY, and sent me a CD. It begins as a fairly straightforward sound of a Parisian street accordionist but soon morphs into stranger rhythms and sounds. One of the actors mingling with the audience in the lobby prior to the show carried a boom box, turning on the accordion music as First Man’s cue to begin speaking. Later at the end of Act Two, we played the track again as First Man is reunited with his wife in Kichinev Harbor. It helped to bring First Man’s dream full circle before the final fragmentation began.

**Properties and Costumes**

The properties in this production needed to pop into sight like objects in dreams. Since we were working for the most part in black box environments, color and shape would be emphasized. All the suitcases, for example, had to look as if they belonged in this particular dream. They needed to look either mid-twentieth century or very modern. A particularly successful use of one suitcase established the character of a pilot. Simply by being a small long-handled case on wheels suggested the kind of gear used by pilots.
and flight attendants. The wheeled case also gave the actor additional energy that helped him to develop his character.

As discussed in the rehearsal process section, costuming *Man with Bags* was a collaborative effort. No actor was forced to find his or her own costumes, but all were encouraged to look in their own closets for basic costume items. The costumes evolved rather than being designed, and just as the props had to be careful selections, costumes also had to ring true to the dream environment. The actors tried out various combinations in rehearsal and we gradually selected what worked and continued searching for items we still needed. An example of the way costumes were ultimately selected is clear from the way the first scenes in Act Two were conceived. To correspond with the idea of old family photographs, the costumes were generally kept within a tight sepia or tan color range to suggest the historical nature of the scene. Some very specific items such as the Roman soldier’s helmet, the Sphinx mask and the chicken mask had to be purchased.

One particular costuming challenge was the appearance of First Man’s Wife at the end of the play. Ionesco describes her appearance, “She wears a tattered skirt but no blouse or bra; she is bare-breasted. She wears a thin strand of pearls around her neck” (131; 2.7). I did not want to ignore the stage directions, because the woman’s nakedness was completely true to what happens in dreams. In this scene First Man carries on a normal conversation with this woman for several pages before noticing that she is topless: “Listen to me. You don’t look old at all! How come your skin’s all dark like that? Hey! You’re really filthy! How come? *(Backs away.*) How come you’re walkin’ around half naked in public? What gives with you, anyway?” (133; 2.7).
We considered having the actress wear a body suit with painted breasts. Realizing it would not read as real nudity on such an intimate stage, a decision was made to emphasize the surrealist aspect of the situation by painting it in a Cubist style with multiple breasts popping up on the shoulders, back, elbows and so on. A local artist, Dyan Boli, agreed to make this costume piece for us.

Dyan also took on a major prop challenge. In Act One, Scene six, we needed a large doll with an Egyptian eye painted on its face. And most importantly, the doll’s head had to pop off on cue, fall to the floor, and roll. The doll is one of the relatives First Man encounters in his dream. A large doll was acquired in a thrift store, costumed, and repainted. The head was detached and magnets were glued to the head and to a rod that was inserted inside the doll’s body. As the doll was carried, the actor could reach for the bottom of the rod hidden by the doll’s dress, and give it a tug down into the neck. That action separated the magnets and the head then fell on cue and rolled on its own accord. It proved a clever solution to a difficult challenge, and is a good example of the creative efforts the cast and crew put into this production.

The Program as Passport

From the moment the audience approached the box office, I wanted them to be prepared for the unexpected. Upon purchasing a ticket, patrons were given a “passport” which was the program for the play, but designed and folded to resemble a passport booklet. (Appendix) The cover stated bluntly, “Eugene Ionesco’s Man with Bags, Official Passport.” Inside, along with the usual artistic, acting and technical credits, was
also included a brief manifesto as to the intent of the production. I thought it would be important to prepare the audience for what they were about to experience:

*Man with Bags* was written in 1975. Ionesco drew upon recurring themes in his work: the absurdity of the human condition, the isolation of the individual within society, the difficulties of achieving genuine communication of thoughts and emotions, and the compulsion of authority toward totalitarianism. Throughout his writing career, he made use of images that came to him in his dreams. *Man with Bags* is the most overt example of Ionesco’s dreamscape writing. I contend that this play has a profound resonance with contemporary themes of homeland security vs. global access, as well as the eternal existential themes of delight in living vs. the futility of it all. The nightmare of the attack on the World Trade towers is now a part of every person’s consciousness. As citizens, we are asked to sacrifice individual freedoms in order to feel more secure. We are all “the Man” and we all carry bags filled with memories, guilt and dread.

As the box office staff gave out the passports, the audience was cautioned to hold onto their passports, as they would be checked throughout the evening. Audience members were then directed to view the video monitor set up within the box office. The looping video featured an introduction to the production by Oliver Corrigan, speaking on behalf of Newfangled Productions. It began as a typical pre-show address to an audience and, again, included the information that the production would be staged in a number of places, so the audience would need to hold on to their passports in order to gain admittance throughout the evening. Oliver began his introduction in a completely conventional manner, as was the framing of the camera. As his speech progressed, he gradually grew stranger as did the camera angles. After his speech, the video featured the most normal of our pre-taped public service announcements.
The Man with Bags Poster and Lobby Displays

We were very fortunate to have the services of professional photographer Andrew McAllister for this production. For the posters, I had in mind an image of First Man carrying his bags and standing on the platform of the abandoned train station in downtown Akron. The image ultimately chosen was of First Man standing in the middle of the tracks as if daring a train to stop for him. (Fig. 5)
To enhance the environmental experience, a display of actor head shots was mounted in the lobby. From a distance it appeared to be a typical lobby display. However, the images were set up on a page to create the look of a secret dossier containing incriminating evidence. Each actor filled out a form that gave them the opportunity to come up with creative information to appear on their dossier. Numerous references to characters and situations in the play which would give the audience additional clues about what they were to see. (Fig. 6)

"Fig. 6. Board of character dossiers in the lobby."

The hallways in Guzzetta are typically institutional, which meant we didn’t need to do much more than put up some posters along the hallways, in the stairwell and inside the elevator. These took the form of “Wanted” posters using the image of First Man from the production poster along with the words, “Have You Seen This Man? Wanted for Passport Fraud, Vagrancy, Possible Arson and Lost Luggage.” I also made some posters using still images of cast members along with written cautionary warnings. The posters
helped delineate the path of the audience’s journey from the big black box to Studio 28 as well as echoing the voices of authority that populate the script from beginning to end.
CHAPTER VII

PERFORMANCE AND SUMMARY

But nowadays, people are scared stiff both of freedom and of humor; they do not realize that life is impossible without freedom and humor. (Ionesco Notes 149-50)

Opening Night

With most theatrical productions, the cast and crew work their way through the final week of technical adjustments in preparation for an audience with expectations that the curtain will go up and the audience will respond positively or negatively; but, essentially, the show will be what was prepared in all the weeks of rehearsal. In an environmental production, the cast and crew can predict what might happen, but they cannot know for sure until the vital and active element of the audience is finally added to the mix.

As an acting ensemble, we faced a number of questions as we prepared to meet and involve our audience in Ionesco’s nightmare world. Would the audience to buy into the concept of moving from space to space? How would the audience handle the presence of authoritarian characters who tell them when to move and to show their passports at various inspection points? What would we do if an audience member participated in a negative way?
Friends were invited to attend the final dress rehearsal, to provide an opportunity to work on the points of audience contact and practice moving them from space to space. This exercise provided a good idea as to how long it would take to move the audience from one point to the next. However, making contact with friends is very different from ordering strangers about in authoritarian tones. The production concept required the audience to become active participants in the Man’s journey, at times feeling uncomfortable or at least uneasy.

The pre-show activities provided essential clues to what might happen beyond the theatre doors. The video announcements and the program as passport established the concept of a journey about to begin. As more and more cast members bearing suitcases and with typical attitudes of travelers waiting for transportation arrived in the lobby, the audience became intrigued by at being intermingled with characters. With the first lines between The Artist and the First Man, the audience was pulled toward the doors of the lobby in order to listen to the conversation. By the time the Boatman emerged from Sandefur theatre, the audience was ready to cross the Seine into the dreamscape. The care and attention we put into developing the pre-show atmosphere made all our consequential shifts from scene to scene easier to carry out. Over the course of the run, cast members continued improvising authoritarian stances and bureaucratic attitudes along with word play to heighten the uneasiness of the situation.

As it turned out, some of our environmental staging choices were problematic. For instance, during intermission, audience members were shown the way back to the atrium lobby in Sandefur theatre. In an email to the director, our props specialist Dyan Boli commented on the opening night experience:

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The entire play is tight, well rehearsed, and came off without a hitch. All of the characters keep the action moving and it was apparent that the actors really enjoyed bringing Ionesco to life. I especially enjoyed the ambassador’s speech in the toga – too funny, the set changes with luggage were very creative, every actor’s solo spot was excellent, the overhead noise and projections were effective at creating the mood of uneasiness. . . . Only two things I can think of that were worth mentioning. One is the intermission. After inviting the audience into the play, it was a bit confusing to have the actors, in character accompany the audience to intermission. Also, by that time the audience was downstairs, and needed more direction on how to get to ‘intermission.’ The other thing is that the entry into the theatre is very dark. Some footlights might have helped.

Had there been a longer run, adjustments would have been made to a more satisfactory way of handling intermission—one less confusing to the audience, and less disruptive to the carefully developed relationship between them and the production.

Perhaps odd and somewhat ominous usher characters could have taken over for the actors at intermission, making sure that the audience had no difficulty returning to the second half of the performance.

**The Actors' Perspectives**

Three years and some months after the production, I sent a brief survey to the cast as I wanted some insight from their perspectives. Five actors responded to my questions about the rehearsal process, the environmental staging, the challenges of making contact with the audience, and how well the play succeeded in conveying an atmosphere of a world where homeland security trumps individual identity.

The actors’ responses to the questions shed light on some of the complexities of our undertaking. While a number of the actors had worked with me before, the majority were new to my process. Certainly all of the company members were new to each other
in combination as an ensemble. The actors, for the most part, felt that the various
rehearsal methods were useful. While mentioning the usefulness of warm-up activities,
one actor indicated that he felt that the initial period of improvising the scenes before
lines were could have been improved. He suggested:

The problem with starting with improvising the scenes was that we didn’t
know the scenes well enough. If they were second nature we would have
the freedom to go in any direction. Exploring first before things solidify
makes more sense, but the way it happened was counter intuitive to that:
we were timid, confused, and unprepared. Without the script at that point,
I felt cut off from access to my character. (Magnus)

I believe he has a valid point. The six weeks available for the rehearsal process was
barely enough time to explore the text and to let the characters evolve.

For Ray Luttner, the rehearsal process had larger implications. He felt that he had
to help build the ensemble atmosphere from the start. His dream could not be his alone.
His outreach and good humor made everyone feel that they were not just symbols in
somebody else’s mind, but active forces that could transform him at any moment. He
describes how he allowed his ideas to be influenced by the rest of the cast in each scene:

My overall process was going in simply as a man lost. And as the
rehearsals went on and scenes were worked, discussed, analyzed, meaning
came through as it related to what I felt the man was encountering. Most
importantly I found it more rewarding to work with what the varied cast
presented. I had ideas about each scene . . . essentially I viewed each
scene as a new dream taken along evenings while taking a trip. Each day
of the trip shapes that evenings imaginings and while separate were part of
the same journey. What I thought the dream meant altered, as each of the
cast would offer their own take on the character presented to me. In the
simplest form, I approached “the man” trying to find a direction and
meaning of the dream. The actors helped shape where that direction might
go. Reaction to what they gave overall shaped my performance. I felt it
was my job to be professional and push on as frustration and confusion
might come in . . . but more importantly felt it was my task to let the cast
breathe and offer room to make their suggestion. I didn’t want this to be
only my dream, my input and everyone had to follow where I felt it should
go. I had to follow them... as we all are basically at the mercy of our dreams. We don’t dictate them... they bring to us what we need. I felt the actors in the cast completely did this. Each scene was a discovery and joy of finding our way in the unknown.

Other actors mentioned appreciating the experience of being allowed to find actions rather than having the director imposing blocking upon them. They felt the process freed them to experiment with characterization, and that creativity flowed more freely. Robert Keith put it this way:

As an actor having the opportunity to experiment freely, not only my own but during the rehearsals helped create an environment where creativity flowed more freely. Another aspect of the rehearsal process that proved very helpful was a unique balance of techniques on the director’s part. The best way I can think to describe is intensive interaction with flexible direction. There was always a constant connection with the director, but never the familiar “do this, do that” to which most actors are accustomed.

David Magnus described a heightened sense of being able to take ownership of the role. He reported:

I appreciated creating my own blocking. My characterization developed along with the blocking. With other directors, I would have delivered a line a certain way, the director would change the blocking, and everything else would stay the same. The movement would be separated from physicalization, voice and internalization. (Actors are trained to adjust to blocking, but if all actors were trained to block instead, they’d be better off.) Because of this, I felt like I created my role (more so than in other plays) rather than just fulfilled it.

Some actors faced unexpected problems working within the environmental concept. An actor, who played many roles, Robert Keith, made some insightful observations of audience responses within the production. He notes that the audience had choices to make in the roles made available to them:

There was definitely a particularly thin wall between the audience and the actors. They were separate despite all the interaction between performer and audience. I can remember very distinctly the interaction before the show actually began. The time when audience members mill and seek out
people they know. Their glances would of course drift towards the strange
performers in the area, and there was a wide range of reactions. Many
would overt their eyes, some would quietly stare, and of course the
adventurous ones would seek interaction. As a performer there was
always a quiet triumph when an audience member reached out to join the
performance.

The goal was to draw the audience into the journey without ever forcing anyone to go
beyond his or her own comfort level.

When playing the Sphinx, David Magnus found that quizzing the audience
presented him with a challenge every night:

The part I worried about every night was quizzing people by the elevator. Because the audience is in a smiling mood, it makes them think that
there's a smiling link between us that winks and says, 'I'm an actor and we
both know it.' The audience enjoys that inevitable relaxed link of
improvisation, but they shouldn't. Their influence made the humor a little
estranged from Ionesco's sense of humor.

While the humor of this scene may have been “estranged” from Ionesco’s particular
brand of humor, it was nonetheless an honest response from the audience, and therefore
would not be estranged from Ionesco’s theatrical intentions. What is particularly
interesting is that, as the director, I never knew David felt this way about the Sphinx
scene until three years later. In a sense, the missing element of this production was
ensemble reflections upon the production as related to the initial themes laid out in the
beginning.

This point was reinforced by other observations. Magnus went on to say that
actors had to be selective about which audience comments they felt they could respond to
appropriately: “The challenge of audience interaction in the lobby was that the audience
was talking about the play to each other, and we [the cast] had to remain selectively
oblivious, because we were in the play they were talking about as they pointed at us. We weren't free to confront everyone equally.”

I also found this to be true in the role of the Artist in the pre-show segment. Having set up an easel and sketch-pad directly in front of an exhibition of sketches on the wall of the lobby, I commenced sketching the sketches, a patently absurd thing to do. People were drawn to look at what I was doing. Invariably, people that I knew came over to talk and address me as “Wendy.” My challenge was to keep the focus on the drawing and only respond to any comments by asking for opinions on the drawings and refusing to bring “Wendy” into the discussion at all. Ray Luttner also brought up an interesting question. Why were all those people (the audience) following him around in his dream? He, too, had to practice selective recognition of the audience:

The greatest challenge I personally faced as an actor in this production was dealing with the proximity of the audience in this environmental staging. It was extremely hard for me to be separate and be The Man and yet be with the audience. It wasn’t so much as breaking character but maintaining the concentration while being five feet to inches from the audience. While I directly acknowledged the audience at times, it seemed odd that I would have all of these strangers traveling with me while I navigated my dreams. However, I felt that the audience felt the same confusion, fear, and anxiety the man faced. They were forced to be uncomfortable . . . to move with me. Instead of settling back and watching me navigate the dreamscape they were just as uncertain as I as to what the next dream might bring. Just as the man had no idea where this was all going to go . . . the audience was physically and mentally put into the same state.

It appeared that the audience did, indeed, connect with his character. Lutner, himself, justified the audience’s journey with him by acknowledging his character’s own emotional states of mind and finding them reflected in the faces of the audience. This form of theatre and the acting style required were completely new to Ray, and his
performance was courageous in that he committed fully to the project despite the unknown challenges along each stage of the rehearsal and production process.

Needless to say, Ray Luttner’s performance was central to the success of this production. He was “the Man” in more than one sense, taking on a huge number of lines to memorize as well as being constantly onstage, and being the object of every “absurd” circumstance. Cassie Neumann, an actor who played multiple roles, indicated that she found the use of multiple playing spaces helpful in creating the variety of characters she played. Associating a particular playing space to a specific character made her characters more distinct. She also found it to be “...a neat experience to literally travel through the show, and I know a lot of audience members I talked to also felt that it kept them more interested and involved in the action. The only way it might have been more 'environmental,' per se, would be if we had taken it totally out of a theatrical space and into a place like a train station or something more ‘real.’”

Regarding our attempt to infuse the production with the ominous tones of Homeland Security issues and warnings, Robert Keith found the experience somewhat ironic, as audience members seemed to follow his directions in herd-like fashion:

I think there is something to be said about the environmental aspect of this production that strongly correlates with an increasing tolerance for authoritarian society. Admittedly there is no risk in traveling from one performance area to the next, but the audience members provided no resistance, and herd-like allowed themselves to be at the whim of the performance, wherever it took them. In this case, the crowd consent served to have no negative effects, but I think the subtle irony of a crowd of people being herded from one place to the next served to highlight some of the authoritarian themes.
In his role of First Man, Ray found connections between the issue of identity and homeland security. Everything seemed to pivot on proving his identity:

As the character moved through this state of dreams and confusion the most important obstacle was verifying his identity. He was trapped until he could prove who he was... can you be anything other than who you say you are? What if you cannot “verify” yourself? How do we define ourselves? It seems that if you get “lost” you will have a terrible time moving about. It’s hard enough navigating the dark roads of our lives... and now are we heading to a state that can question you at an instance? In the three years since this production I think attitudes have changed slightly but certainly in the summer of ’05 the anxiety of where the Patriot act was going fully lined up with this production. I believe Duke’s intention to make these comparisons shaped the performance to deal with the fears of authoritarian rule. With the rights of everyday Americans in question, the man’s nightmare seemed all the more real. The helplessness we sometimes uncover in our dreams could make into a reality if suddenly we were indeed ‘identified’ as being an unknown. The assumption that all unknowns are threats certainly was a recurring idea presented throughout the play.

Actor Bret DeHaven indicated that the production reflected what she sees as a continuing issue in contemporary society:

I think the process you put our traveler through was a good representation of the issues everyone now goes through in order to travel. I mean we have to have a passport just to go see the neighbors to the north nowadays. I think the absurdity of some of the characters and challenges Ray faced highlighted just how ridiculous some of our rules have become. I understand the need for security but you can't even take a travel-sized bottle of shampoo in your carry-on anymore. AND now you get charged to check luggage! GAH! The world is going to hell in a handbasket.

I thought that the audience for the most part got the concept. Some people enjoyed the funhouse elements, going along for the ride wherever it might lead; while others became more engrossed in the underlying themes.
Other Responses to the Performances

Upon reflection, I think it would have been very useful to hold talk-back sessions after the performances. Such feedback would have provided immediate reaction to the experience of participating in the environmental staging. I certainly wish I had done so, and I would definitely recommend post-performance talk-back sessions for anyone pursuing a creative performance project.

I did, however, receive unsolicited emails from friends and colleagues who attended the production, and the production received a positive review from the local newspaper. Comments in the lobby after the shows as well as emailed responses indicate that audience members enjoyed the concept. My colleague at Miller South School for the Visual and Performing Arts School, Susan Yingling, stated “I enjoyed becoming a part of the performance with the random movements across the room and throughout the building.” Lisa Bennett, a fellow graduate student in the Modular Masters program at The University of Akron, emailed “I found your use of space, light, and multimedia interesting. Your cast handled the ad-libbing in the lobby well; I know that can be difficult.” And at least one audience member said that it left her party “really thinking.”

In her Akron Beacon Journal review, theatre critic Kerry Clawson declared, “Akron’s environmental staging of Eugene Ionesco’s dream play Man With Bags is meant to make audiences feel just as disoriented as the play’s main character, and it works” (A2). Clawson’s review goes on to indicate that some of our major goals for the play had been met successfully:

One confusing dream dissolves into another as the Man travels through war-torn countries in search of the land of his childhood. He’s also
looking for both his elusive third bag and his lost passport. I’ve had recurring nightmares where I’ve lost my passport and can’t get out of a foreign country. Here [Ray] Luttner creates a sense of increasing dread through the Man without a name, a country, a time and, finally, an identity. Everywhere he goes, this isolated man is detained by authorities. (A2)

Clawson also perceived a direct connection with the contemporary theme of what it means to be a foreigner in a post 9/11 world: “When characters spoke suspiciously of the Man being a foreigner, I thought about racial profiling after 9/11, in the name of national security” (A2).

**Final Thoughts**

Experimental theatre is never easy to create and convincing enough people to make it happen is the perhaps the biggest challenge. Once the elements are in place, the experiment can more forward. Sometimes it takes time and distance from the event in order to reflect objectively upon the results of the efforts.

This particular theatrical experiment revealed that designing a moveable production can work if care is taken to set up the situation from the beginning. I would be cautious in attempting to ask an audience to move suddenly in to a new space without clear justification. Beyond safety issues, the director must make decisions that enhance the experience of the play itself. Gratuitous or gimmicky staging may linger in the audience’s memory in a negative way. In this situation the idea was directly inspired by the play’s depiction of one character’s journey. The concept grew out of the script. It might be an interesting theatrical endeavor to work in the opposite direction by creating a
script or non-scripted improvisational piece that utilizes the concept of multiple performing spaces

This production of *Man With Bags* was a theatrical response to the time just after the let-down of the 2004 election year. It was important to not give into the world depicted by First Man’s dreams. In those dark days, I hoped that the audience might find something relevant in this production to the social and political spheres outside the theatre, and that the play’s nightmare environment might ignite at least a tiny spark of resistance to authority among all who participated.
NOTE

1 *Man With Bags* was originally translated by Marie Ionesco and then adapted into English by Israel Horovitz. The published work is a Grove Press paperback, but Samuel French publishes the acting copy. The Grove edition states that the acting edition “varies significantly” from the Grove press version. However, when I contacted Samuel French for a reading copy of the acting edition, they sent me a photocopy of the Grove Press paperback. If an actual acting edition exists, I’m sure it would be fascinating to read, however I was unable to locate it. I did obtain a copy of the British translation by Donald Watson. The differences are chiefly in terms of American versus British expletives and colloquialisms.
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APPENDIX: PROGRAM DESIGN

Program: Outside, vertical trifold

“Nowadays, people are scared stiff both of freedom and of humor; they do not realize that life is impossible without freedom and humor.”
— Eugene Ionesco, Notes and Counterplots

Man With Bags was written in 1975. Ionesco drew upon recurring themes in his work: the absurdity of the human condition, the isolation of the individual within society, the difficulties of achieving genuine communication of thoughts and emotions, and the compulsion of authority toward totalitarianism. Throughout his writing career, he made use of images that came to him in his dreams. Man With Bags is the moist overt example of Ionesco’s dreamscape writing. I contend that this play has a profound resonance with contemporary themes of homeland security vs. global access, as well as the eternal existential themes of delight in living vs. the futility of it all. The nightmare of the attack on the World Trade towers is now a part of every person’s consciousness. As citizens, we are asked to sacrifice individual freedoms in order to feel more “secure.” We are all “the Man” and we all carry bags filled with memories, guilt and dread.

— WBD

“Again I shall be told that I have a particular background, that I live in a certain historical context of time, that I cannot only belong to my own period... But this does not mean that I am a prisoner of my own times, that I can or should address myself only to an audience of my own times. In fact a work of art springs from a particular soil, a particular time, a particular society; it springs from them, but it does not grow in the same direction; it does not turn back to them. We must not confuse the point of departure with the point of arrival.”
— Eugene Ionesco, Notes and Counterplots

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Eugene Ionesco’s
MAN WITH BAGS
OFFICIAL PASSPORT

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Program: Inside, vertical trifold

Man With Bags
By Eugene Ionesco
Produced by special arrangement with
Samuel French, Ltd., NYC, NY

Sara Cutlip as Customs Inspector #1, Woman in Phone Booth, French Jogger, Blonde Woman
Brett DeHaven as Old Woman #1, Paula, Nurse, Secretary, Weight-training Jogger
Cynthia Delii as Old Woman #2, Peasant Woman
Wendy Duke as Artist, Female Tourist #1
Sarah L. Jones as Police Officer #1, French Woman #1
Leah Magnus as Passenger #1, Woman in Black, Female Tourist #2, Old Woman with Vegetables, French Woman #2
Cassie Neumann as Young Woman, Woman in Riding Habit, Deputy
Jacqueline Wren as 1st Woman (Wife, Mother, Woman in Trench Coat, Waitress, Topless Woman)
Oliver Corrigan as Old Uncle, Customs Inspector #2, Old Tramp, Old Man #2, Bartender
Christopher Henderson as Old Man #1, Police Officer #2, Soldier, Man With Gun
Robert Keith as Young Man, Young Soldier, Male Tourist #2, Guard #1, 1st Man at Table

James H. Smith III as the Porter, Male Tourist #1, 2nd Man at Table
Ray Lutten as First Man (with bags)
David Magnus as Clerk, Sphinx, Doctor, Ambassador, Roman Emperor, 3rd Man at Table
Jason Orr as Young Man in Uniform, Passenger #2, Phone Booth Attendant, Guard #2, Man in Window
Andy Watson as Father, Phillip, 2nd Man, Tourist Guide, Officer, 3rd Man at Table
Joseph White as Boatman, Middle-aged Man, Sheriff, Judge

Directed & Designed by Wendy S. Duke
Lighting Design by Josh Douglas
Stage Manager – Amy Earp
Costumes and Props by the Cast
Multi-Media operator – Erik Morrison
Photography by Andy McAllister

Music selections by Third Plane (Joe Brigandi, Wilbur Krebs and Dred Scott)
Original Accordion composition by Dred Scott

Visit www.dredscott.com to hear samples of more incredible beyond jazz music and to order CDs

This production of Man With Bags is in partial fulfillment of the requirements of a master's degree in theatre for Wendy Duke and Ray Lutten, graduate students in the Modular Master's program.

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Our thesis committee members: Jim Slowiak, Randy Pepe and Neil Sapienza — for all their encouragement, support and wise counsel; Newbangled Productions for their support of meaningful theatre; Department Secretary Tammy Dixon without whom nothing is possible; Jeremy Sayers, who helped solve many technical difficulties; Barbara Bellamy, for encouraging her Kenmore students past and present to enter into the weird and wonderful world of absurdist theatre; Ray and Wendy's students and fellow staff members at Brunswick High School and Miller South School for the Performing Arts for helping drill lines, lending props and costumes and generally cutting us some slack spring semester. We would also like to thank our families for their continual love and support of our work in the theatre.

Paul A. Daum
Our greatest thanks and appreciation go to Paul A. Daum who should be here with us tonight. Paul was an original member of both Ray and Wendy's thesis committees. We miss you Paul and dedicate our production to you. We hope you're laughing and hope that you would be proud of our work.