

Rhinoceros (1959) by Eugène Ionesco

ACT TWO, Scene One

BOTARD: I never believe journalists. They're all liars. I don't need them to tell me what to think; I believe what I see with my own eyes. Speaking as a former teacher, I like things to be precise, scientifically valid; I've got a methodical mind.

BOTARD: I don't mean to be offensive. But I don't believe a word of it. No rhinoceros has ever been seen in this country!

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BOTARD: [*to DUDARD*] An example of collective psychosis, Mr. Dudard. Just like religion—the opiate of the people!

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DUDARD: What's all a hoax?

BOTARD: Your rhinoceros business, of course. You've been making all this propaganda to get these rumours started!

PAPILLON: [*on the landing*] There it is! Down there! It is one!

BOTARD: I can't see a thing. It's an illusion.

DUDARD: It seems to be looking for someone. [*To BOTARD:*]

Can you see it now?

BOTARD: [*vexed*] Yes, yes, I can see it.

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BOTARD: How can it be possible in a civilized country . . . ?

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MRS. BOEUF: My God! It can't be true!

BERENGER: [*to* MRS. BOEUF] What's the matter?

MRS. BOEUF: It's my husband. Oh Boeuf, my poor Boeuf, what's happened to you?

DAISY: [*to* MRS. BOEUF] Are you positive?

MRS. BOEUF: I recognize him, I recognize him!

[The rhinoceros replies with a violent but tender trumpeting.]

PAPILLON: Well! That's the last straw. This time he's fired for good!

MRS. BOEUF: No! Poor thing! This is not the moment for that.

I won't abandon my husband in such a state.

BOTARD: You're a good woman.

DUDARD: [*to MRS. BOEUF*] But what are you going to do?

[She runs left towards the landing.]

BERENGER: Watch out!

MRS. BOEUF: I can't leave him, I can't leave him now!

DUDARD: Hold her back!

MRS. BOEUF: I'm taking him home!

PAPILLON: What's she trying to do?

MRS. BOEUF: [*preparing to jump; on the edge of the landing*] I'm coming my darling, I'm coming!

BERENGER: She's going to jump.

BOTARD: It's no more than her duty.

DAISY: No, there aren't any fires, the firemen have been called out for other rhinoceroses.

BERENGER: For other rhinoceroses?

DAISY: Yes, other rhinoceroses. They've been reported all over the town. This morning there were seven, now there are seventeen.

BOTARD: What did I tell you?

DAISY: As many as thirty-two have been reported. They're not official yet, but they're bound to be confirmed soon.

BOTARD: [*less certain*] Pff!! They always exaggerate.

ACT TWO, Scene Two

BERENGER: You're breathing very hard.

JEAN: One breathes as best one can. You don't like the way I breathe, and I don't like the way you breathe. Your breathing's too feeble, you can't even hear it; it's as if you were going to drop dead any moment.

BERENGER: I know I'm not as strong as you.

JEAN: I don't keep trying to get you to the doctor, do I? Leave people to do as they please.

BERENGER: Don't get angry with me. You know very well I'm your friend.

JEAN: There's no such thing as friendship. I don't believe in your friendship.

BERENGER: But whatever's the matter with your skin?

JEAN: Can't you leave my skin alone? I certainly wouldn't want to change it for yours.

BERENGER: It's gone like leather.

JEAN: That makes it more solid. It's weatherproof.

BERENGER: You're getting greener and greener.

JEAN: You've got colour mania today. You're seeing things, you've been drinking again.

JEAN: [*off*] So old Boeuf turned into a rhinoceros, did he? Ah, ah, ah . . . ! He was just having you on, he'd disguised himself.

BERENGER: [*walking about the room, without seeing JEAN*] He looked very serious about it, I assure you.

JEAN: Oh well, that's his business.

BERENGER: [*turning to JEAN who disappears again into the bathroom*] I'm sure he didn't do it on purpose. He didn't want to change.

JEAN: [*off*] How do you know?

BERENGER: Well, everything led one to suppose so.

JEAN: And what if he did do it on purpose? Eh? What if he did it on purpose?

BERENGER: There's nothing extraordinary in it, but I doubt if it gave him much pleasure.

JEAN: And why not, pray?

BERENGER: It's hard to say exactly why; it's just something you feel.

JEAN: I tell you it's not as bad as all that. After all, rhinoceroses are living creatures the same as us; they've got as much right to life as we have!

BERENGER: As long as they don't destroy ours in the process.

You must admit the difference in mentality.

JEAN: [*pacing up and down the room, and in and out of the bathroom*] Are you under the impression that our way of life is superior?

BERENGER: Well at any rate, we have our own moral standards which I consider incompatible with the standards of these animals.

JEAN: Moral standards! I'm sick of moral standards! We need to go beyond moral standards!

BERENGER: What would you put in their place?

JEAN: [*still pacing*] Nature!

BERENGER: Nature?

JEAN: Nature has its own laws. Morality's against Nature.

BERENGER: Are you suggesting we replace our moral laws by the law of the jungle?

JEAN: It would suit me, suit me fine.

JEAN: [*interrupting him*] Don't talk to me about mankind!

BERENGER: I mean the human individual, humanism . . .

JEAN: Humanism is all washed up! You're a ridiculous old sentimentalist. [*He goes into the bathroom.*]

BERENGER: But you must admit that the mind . . .

JEAN: [*from the bathroom*] Just clichés! You're talking rubbish!

BERENGER: Rubbish!

BERENGER: I'm amazed to hear you say that, Jean, really! You must be out of your mind. You wouldn't like to be a rhinoceros yourself, now would you?

JEAN: Why not? I'm not a victim of prejudice like you.

ACT THREE

DUDARD: You think everything revolves round you, you think that everything that happens concerns you personally; you're not the centre of the universe, you know.

BERENGER: Perhaps you're right. I must try to re-adjust myself, but the phenomenon in itself is so disturbing. To tell the truth, it absolutely shatters me. What can be the explanation?

DUDARD: For the moment I haven't found a satisfactory explanation. I observe the facts, and I take them in. They exist, so they must have an explanation. A freak of Nature, perhaps, some bizarre caprice, an extravagant joke, a game—who knows?

DUDARD: Oh, why can't you leave them alone!

[BERENGER *closes the window again.*]

They're not doing you any harm. Really, you're obsessed by them! It's not good for you. You're wearing yourself out. You've had one shock, why look for more? You just concentrate on getting back to normal.

BERENGER: Go out? I suppose I'll have to. I'm dreading the moment. I'll be bound to meet some of them . . .

DUDARD: What if you do? You only have to keep out of their way. And there aren't as many as all that.

BERENGER: I see them all over the place. You'll probably say that's being morbid, too.

DUDARD: They don't attack you. If you leave them alone, they just ignore you. You can't say they're spiteful. They've even got a certain natural innocence, a sort of frankness. Besides I walked right along the avenue to get to you today. I got here safe and sound, didn't I? No trouble at all.

DUDARD: I think you're right to a certain extent to have some reaction. But you go too far. You've no sense of humour, that's your trouble, none at all. You must learn to be more detached, and try and see the funny side of things.

BERENGER: I feel responsible for everything that happens. I feel involved, I just can't be indifferent.

DUDARD: Judge not lest ye be judged. If you start worrying about everything that happens you'd never be able to go on living.

BERENGER: If only it had happened somewhere else, in some other country, and we'd just read about it in the papers, one could discuss it quietly, examine the question from all points of view and come to an objective conclusion. We could organize debates with professors and writers and lawyers, and blue-stockings and artists and people. And the ordinary man in the street, as well—it would be very interesting and instructive. But when you're involved yourself, when you suddenly find yourself up against the brutal facts you can't help feeling directly concerned—the shock is too violent for you to stay cool and detached. I'm frankly surprised, I'm very very surprised. I can't get over it.

DUDARD: That's what comes of taking things too seriously. You get a kick out of torturing yourself—admit it!

BERENGER: I'm no masochist, I assure you.

DUDARD: Then face the facts and get over it. This is the situation and there's nothing you can do about it.

BERENGER: That's fatalism.

DUDARD: It's common sense. When a thing like this happens there's bound to be a reason for it. That's what we must find out.

DUDARD: You leave the authorities to act as they think best! I'm not sure if morally you have the right to butt in. In any case, I still think it's not all that serious. I consider it's silly to get worked up because a few people decide to change their skins. They just didn't feel happy in the ones they had. They're free to do as they like.

BERENGER: We must attack the evil at the roots.

DUDARD: The evil! That's just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It's just a question of personal preferences. You're worried about your own skin—that's the truth of the matter. But you'll never become a rhinoceros, really you won't . . . you haven't got the vocation!

BERENGER: I believe in international solidarity . . .

DUDARD: You're a Don Quixote. Oh, I don't mean that nastily, don't be offended! I'm only saying it for your own good, because you really need to calm down.

BERENGER: A rhinoceros!!!! Mr. Papillon a rhinoceros! I can't believe it! I don't think it's funny at all! Why didn't you tell me before?

DUDARD: Well you know you've no sense of humour. I didn't want to tell you . . . I didn't want to tell you because I knew very well you wouldn't see the funny side, and it would upset you. You know how impressionable you are!

BERENGER: [*raising his arms to heaven*] Oh that's awful . . . Mr. Papillon! And he had such a good job.

DUDARD: That proves his metamorphosis was sincere.

DUDARD: My dear Berenger, one must always make an effort to understand. And in order to understand a phenomenon and its effects you need to work back to the initial causes, by honest intellectual effort. We must try to do this because, after all, we are thinking beings. I haven't yet succeeded, as I told you, and I don't know if I shall succeed. But in any case one has to start out favourably disposed—or at least, impartial; one has to keep an open mind—that's essential to a scientific mentality. Everything is logical. To understand is to justify. p. 83

BERENGER: You'll be siding with the rhinoceroses before long.

DUDARD: No, no, not at all. I wouldn't go that far. I'm simply trying to look the facts unemotionally in the face. I'm trying to be realistic. I also contend that there is no real evil in what occurs naturally. I don't believe in seeing evil in everything.

BERENGER: [*distracted*] You think I'm getting all het up, do you? I might be Jean. Oh no, no, I don't want to become like him. I mustn't be like him. [*He calms down.*] I'm not very well up in philosophy. I've never studied; you've got all sorts of diplomas. That's why you're so at ease in discussion, whereas I never know what to answer—I'm so clumsy. [*Louder rhinoceros noises passing first under the up-stage window and then the down-stage.*] But I do feel you're in the wrong . . . I feel it instinctively—no, that's not what I mean, it's the rhinoceros which has instinct—I feel it intuitively, yes, that's the word, intuitively.

DAISY: [*to* BERENGER] What do you expect me to think? [*To both:*] I've got some news for you: Botard's a rhinoceros!

DUDARD: Well, well!

BERENGER: I don't believe it. He was against it. You must be mistaken. He protested. Dudard has just been telling me. Isn't that so, Dudard?

DUDARD: That is so.

DAISY: I know he was against it. But it didn't stop him turning, twenty-four hours after Mr. Papillon.

DUDARD: Well, he must have changed his mind! Everybody has the right to do that.

BERENGER: Then obviously anything can happen!

BERENGER: Did he give any reasons?

DAISY: What he said was: we must move with the times! Those were his last human words.

DUDARD: There aren't enough of us left any more.

BERENGER: How many with one horn, and how many with two?

DUDARD: The statisticians are bound to be compiling statistics now. There'll be plenty of erudite controversy you can be sure!

BERENGER: They can only calculate approximately. It's all happening so fast. It leaves them no time. No time to calculate.

DAISY: [*to DUDARD*] Of course if you really don't want to stay, we can't force you . . .

DUDARD: I didn't mean to offend you.

BERENGER: [*to DAISY*] Don't let him go, he mustn't go.

DAISY: I'd like him to stay . . . but people must do as they please.

BERENGER: [*to DUDARD*] Man is superior to the rhinoceros.

DUDARD: I didn't say he wasn't. But I'm not with you absolutely either. I don't know; only experience can tell.

BERENGER: [*to DUDARD*] You're weakening too, Dudard. It's just a passing phase which you'll regret.

DAISY: [*softly*] We shall miss you a lot, Dudard, but we can't do anything about it.

DUDARD: It's my duty to stick by them; I have to do my duty.

BERENGER: No you're wrong, your duty is to . . . you don't see where your real duty lies . . . your duty is to oppose them, with a firm, clear mind.

DUDARD: I shall keep my mind clear. [*He starts to move round the stage in circles.*] As clear as ever it was. But if you're going to criticize, it's better to do so from the inside. I'm not going to abandon them. I won't abandon them.