



(l-r) Julie David, Marc Buret and Jo Rittey in Melbourne French Theatre's *Exit the King*. Photo by Jean-Philippe Héon.

## EXIT THE KING (LE ROI SE MEURT)

by Eugène Ionesco

Melbourne French Theatre

Directed by Marco Romero Rodriguez

Reviewed by David Small – September 5, 2015

This reduced, 70-minute version was advertised as “Part Marx Brothers, part Existentialism, this production is a re-imagining of Ionesco’s most accessible and linear absurdist play”. As such, it does not disappoint and it seems that it has emerged as one of Ionesco’s most popular. The relatively recent translation by Geoffrey Rush and Neil Armfield may have helped to revive its appeal.

In 1962, at the age of 53, playwright Eugène Ionesco thought he may be dying and in an attempt to come to terms with these feelings of mortality, he crafted the play *Exit the King*. Ironically, Ionesco was far from dying. He recovered and lived until 1994.

This was my first visit to MFT’s theatre in Carlton but hopefully not the last. Warmly greeted with drinks and cheeses in the foyer, patrons were then escorted into the intimate theatre: 50 seats at the most. As expected, the language was French with surtitles clearly and expertly screened on the cycloramic white wall. A wide ‘fence’ separated the players from the audience, allowing the actors to disappear simply by squatting or kneeling. The extremely shallow acting space was used wisely and without impediment throughout.

The play follows the 400-year-old King Bérenger the First who, within his decaying kingdom and on the final day of his life, is surrounded by his last remaining acolytes and refusing to acknowledge death.

In his vigorous youth, he lorded over millions of people, successfully battled thousands of enemies and single-handedly did everything one can ever imagine. He could even control the weather; it would

not rain unless he said so. Now, as he is dying, his kingdom is literally vanishing. The people are all gone. His achievements are forgotten, and the land itself is shrinking; his castle in ruin.

The cast presented as a talented, well rehearsed ensemble. Much of the humour comes from The Guard (*Le Garde*), a cross between a Shakespearian ‘Fool’ and Robert Bolt’s ‘Common Man’, adding cheeky asides to his very loud imperial pronouncements. Thomas Villeni was a great choice for this role.

The fun begins before a word is spoken. All but *Le Garde* present themselves to the audience then disappear (to the floor). *Le Garde* enters stage left and, in order to reach his solitary post at stage right, gingerly steps over the unseen others. There follows his loud introduction of the royal household who rise to the occasion. They are King Bérenger, his two wives, Marguerite and Marie, his servant/nurse, Juliette and the Doctor.

Bérenger’s first wife, Queen Marguerite, along with the Doctor, try to make Bérenger face the reality of his impending death. Jo Rittey and Fabrice Chatain, respectively, take this hard line with all the characteristics of seasoned and successful players.

Bérenger’s second (trophy) wife, Queen Marie, and his servant/nurse, Juliette, sympathetically attempt to keep Bérenger from the pain of knowing his death is imminent. Again, the respective players, Julie David and Catherine Blanchy equally deserved the ultimate audience acclaim.

While Marie attempts to conceal the bad news, Marguerite announces to the King that he will die by the end of the performance and, despite the evidence, he refuses to believe he is ill and accuses everyone of being against him.

Marie tries to maintain his faith in his own power, but Marguerite demonstrates its limitations. *Le Garde* recalls the King’s major

achievements, everything from forging steel and inventing air travel to writing the Iliad and splitting the atom. The King contemplates a future without him. He prays to the sun to save him, or to destroy the whole world if he is to die. He appeals to the dead for advice on how to die.

Eventually, the Guard does not react to his commands. Neither do the elements. Despite his efforts to make lightning to strike or make trees grow. As the sun refuses to rise and a huge crack has appeared in the palace walls, the King lapses into Bérenger's normal sentimentality and eventually accepts that he is going to die, making the role a tricky one for any actor, but skillfully played by Marc Buret.

The characters disappear one by one, eventually leaving the King, now speechless, alone with Marguerite who prepares him for the end. Marguerite and then the King disappear into darkness as the play ends.

There were some nice touches that enhanced the humour, the most memorable being when the royal breakfast was served: according to the surtitles it included Nescafé Gold.