

La Cantatrice chauve (The Bald Soprano, 1950)

As its title indicates, “The Bald Soprano” is an “absurdist” comedy. However, if the lines seem illogical, indeed often nonsensical, the play is certainly not devoid of meaning. Though it is set in the vicinity of London, it is a scathing satire, not of the English in particular, but of modern man in general, of all of us. Ionesco mocks our conformism, our prejudices, our hypocrisy, our lack of individuality.

The action takes place in the living-room of two of the leading characters, or rather leading robots, Mr. and Mrs. Smith as colourless as their name implies. After a long monologue in which Mrs. Smith describes in detail the dinner they have just finished, Mr. Smith finally puts down his newspaper to take part in an aimless conversation. As the Smiths are about to retire for bed, the maid, Mary, comes in to announce the arrival of their guests, the Martins, who have been invited to dinner. While they wait for their hosts, we learn that the Martins have somehow forgotten they are husband and wife. After discovering they live in the same house, sleep in the same bed and have a daughter who has one red eye and one white eye, they conclude they must be married.

When the Smiths return in their night clothes, the four have nothing to say to one another.

The doorbell rings three times, but Mrs. Smith finds no one waiting. There is a fourth ring and this time Mr. Smith ushers in the Fire-chief who is desperately looking for a fire to extinguish. To pass the time, which is fast flying away—as the repeated gongs of the clock remind us—the four start telling stories (monologues again!) with the Fire-chief more voluble than anyone else. Mary comes in, also wanting to tell a story, much to the annoyance of the present. Suddenly, she and the Fire-chief recognize each other: she apparently was the one “who put out his first fire”, fire being an erotic theme throughout the play. Mary recites a poem in honour of her first flame.

Left to themselves, the Smiths and the Martins take off their social masks. They begin to utter unconnected sentences: no one answers anyone else. Finally, they hurl violent insults at one another in a cacophony of sounds chosen for their erotic or scatological associations. The lights go out and the first scene is repeated, this time with the Martins in the role of the Smiths. One robot is like another.

What of the bald soprano? She is mentioned only once, to the discomfiture of all present. Sopranos should, after all, be elegant and well-coiffed. We the conformists, cannot bear the idea of a prima donna with no hair!