

# *The Bérenger Plays*

*Eugène Ionesco*

Translated by Donald Watson  
and Derek Prouse



CALDER

CALDER PUBLICATIONS  
an imprint of

ALMA BOOKS LTD  
3 Castle Yard  
Richmond  
Surrey TW10 6TF  
United Kingdom  
[www.calderpublications.com](http://www.calderpublications.com)

'The Killer' first published in French as '*Tueur sans gages*' in 1958; 'Rhinoceros' first published in French as '*Rhinocéros. Pièce en trois actes et quatre tableaux*' in 1959; 'Exit the King' first published in French as '*Le Roi se muert*' in 1963; and 'A Stroll in the Air' first published in French as '*Le Piéton de l'air*' in 1963.

'The Killer' (1960), 'Rhinoceros' (1960), 'Exit the King' (1963) and 'A Stroll in the Air' (1965) first published in these translations by John Calder (Publishers) Ltd.

This edition first published by Calder Publications in 2019

'*Tueur sans gages*' © Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1958

'*Rhinocéros. Pièce en trois actes et quatre tableaux*' © Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1959

'*Le Roi se muert*' © Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1963

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Translation of 'The Killer', 'Exit the King' and 'A Stroll in the Air'

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Cover design by Will Dady

Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

ISBN: 978-0-7145-4848-7

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# *The Bérenger Plays*



# THE KILLER\*

*First produced in Paris by José Quaglio at the  
Théâtre Récamier on 27th February 1959*

## Characters, Voices, Silhouettes

BÉRENGER, an average, middle-aged citizen  
THE ARCHITECT, of ageless, bureaucratic age  
ÉDOUARD, thirty-five, thin, nervous, darkly dressed, in mourning  
THE KILLER  
DANY, young typist, conventional pin-up  
MOTHER PEEP  
THE CLOCHARD, drunk  
THE OWNER OF THE BISTRO (THE PATRON), middle-aged, fat,  
dark and hairy  
THE CONCIERGE (preceded by THE VOICE OF THE CONCIERGE),  
typical concierge  
THE DRUNK IN TOP HAT AND TAILS  
THE OLD GENTLEMAN WITH THE LITTLE WHITE BEARD  
FIRST POLICEMAN (1ST POL.)  
SECOND POLICEMAN (2ND POL.)  
THE ECHO  
FIRST OLD MAN (1ST O.M.)  
SECOND OLD MAN (2ND O.M.)  
THE GROCER  
VOICE OF THE CONCIERGE'S DOG  
A MAN'S VOICE  
SECOND MAN'S VOICE  
TRUCK DRIVER'S VOICE  
CAR DRIVER'S VOICE  
SCHOOLMASTER'S VOICE  
FIRST VOICE FROM THE STREET  
SECOND VOICE (GRUFF) FROM THE STREET  
THIRD VOICE (PIPING) FROM THE STREET  
FOURTH VOICE FROM THE STREET  
FIRST VOICE FROM BELOW  
SECOND VOICE FROM BELOW

VOICE FROM THE RIGHT  
VOICE FROM ABOVE  
VOICE FROM THE LEFT  
SECOND VOICE FROM THE LEFT  
WOMAN'S VOICE FROM THE ENTRANCE  
SILHOUETTE OF A MOTORCYCLIST ON HIS BICYCLE  
POSTMAN'S VOICE (preceding the POSTMAN himself, if desired)  
VOICES OF THE CROWD

## Stage Directions

*Several of these parts may be played by the same actors. Moreover, it is probable that all the voices in the second act will not be heard. Any cuts required may be made in the first half of Act II: it will all depend on the effectiveness of these voices and their absurd remarks. The director can choose those he likes. He should, however, try, if possible, to obtain stereophonic sound effects. In the second act it is also better to have the greatest possible number of figures appearing in silhouette on the other side of the window, as on a stage behind the stage. In any case, after the curtain has risen on the second act, some voices and sounds around the empty stage are indispensable – at least for a few minutes – in order to continue and, in a way, intensify the visual and aural atmosphere of street and city; this is first created at the end of Act I; it fades after the arrival of Bérenger and returns again in force at the start of Act III, to die right away at the end.*

*A few cuts could also be made in Act I, according to the power of the actor playing the part and his natural capacity to “put it over”.*

*Bérenger's speech to the Killer at the end of the play (pp. 98–112) is one short act in itself. The text should be interpreted in such a way as to bring out the gradual breaking-down of Bérenger, his falling apart and the vacuity of his own rather commonplace morality, which collapses like a leaking balloon. In fact, Bérenger finds within himself, in spite of himself and against his own will, arguments in favour of the Killer.*



## Act One

*No decor. An empty stage when the curtain rises. Later there will be, on the left of the stage, two garden chairs and a table, which the ARCHITECT will bring on himself. They should be near at hand in the wings.*

*The atmosphere for Act I will be created by the lighting only. At first, while the stage is still empty, the light is grey, like a dull November day or an afternoon in February. The faint sound of wind; perhaps you can see a dead leaf fluttering across the stage. In the distance the noise of a tram, vague outlines of houses; then, suddenly, the stage is brilliantly lit; a very bright, very white light; just this whiteness, and also the dense vivid blue of the sky. And so, after the grisaille, the lighting effects should simply be made up of white and blue, the only elements in the decor. The noise of the tram, the wind and the rain will have stopped at the very moment the light changes. The blue, the white, the silence and the empty stage should give a strange impression of peace. The audience must be given time to become aware of this. Not until a full minute has passed should the characters appear on the scene.*

*BÉRENGER comes on first, from the left, moving quickly. He stops in the centre of the stage and turns round briskly to face the ARCHITECT, who has followed him more slowly. BÉRENGER is wearing a grey overcoat, hat and scarf. The ARCHITECT is in a summer-weight jacket, light trousers, open-necked shirt and without a hat; under his arm he is carrying a briefcase, rather thick and heavy, like the one ÉDOUARD has in Act II.*

**BÉRENGER:** Amazing! Amazing! It's extraordinary! As far as I can see, it's a miracle... (*Vague gesture of protest from the ARCHITECT.*) A miracle, or, as I don't suppose you're a religious man, you'd rather I called it a marvel! I congratulate you

most warmly: it's a marvel, really quite marvellous – you're a marvellous architect!...

ARCHITECT: Oh... you're very kind...

BÉRENGER: No, no. I *want* to congratulate you. It's absolutely incredible: you've achieved the incredible! The real thing is quite beyond imagination.

ARCHITECT: It's the work I'm commissioned to do – part of my normal duties – what I specialize in.

BÉRENGER: Why, yes, of course, to be sure – you're an architect – a technician and a conscientious civil servant at one and the same time... Still, that doesn't explain everything. (*Looking round and staring at several fixed points on the stage:*) Beautiful – what a magnificent lawn – that flower-bed!... Oh, what flowers, appetizing as vegetables, and what vegetables, fragrant as flowers... and what a blue sky – what an amazingly blue sky. How wonderful it is! (*To the ARCHITECT:*) In all the cities of the world, all cities of a certain size, I'm sure there are civil servants, municipal architects like you, with the same duties as you, earning the same salary. But they're nowhere near achieving the same results. (*Gesture of the hand.*) Are you well paid? I'm sorry – perhaps I'm being indiscreet...

ARCHITECT: Please don't apologize... I'm fairly well paid – the scale is laid down. It's reasonable... It's all right.

BÉRENGER: But ingenuity like yours is worth its weight in gold. And what's more, I mean the price gold fetched before 1914... the real thing.

ARCHITECT (*with a modestly disclaiming gesture*): Oh—

BÉRENGER: Oh yes it is... You're the town architect, aren't you?...

*Real* gold... After all, today gold has been devalued, like so many other things – it's paper gold...

ARCHITECT: Your surprise, your—

BÉRENGER: Call it my admiration; my enthusiasm!

ARCHITECT: Very well, your enthusiasm, then, touches me very deeply. I feel I must thank you, dear Monsieur... Bérenger. (*The ARCHITECT bows in thanks, after first searching one of his pockets for a card that doubtless bears the name of BÉRENGER, and as he bows he reads the name off the card.*)

THE KILLER

BÉRENGER: Genuinely enthusiastic, quite genuinely. I'm not the flattering kind, I can tell you.

ARCHITECT (*ceremoniously, but unimpressed*): I am very highly honoured.

BÉRENGER: It's magnificent! (*He looks about him.*) I'd been told all about it, you see, but I didn't believe it... or rather, I wasn't told a thing about it, but I *knew*, I knew that somewhere in our dark and dismal city, in all its mournful, dusty, dirty districts, there was one that was bright and beautiful, this neighbourhood beyond compare, with its sunny streets and avenues bathed in light... this radiant city within a city which you've built...

ARCHITECT: It's a nucleus which is, or rather, was, in theory meant to be extended. I planned it all, by order of the City Council. I don't allow myself any personal initiative...

BÉRENGER (*continuing his monologue*): I believed in it, without believing; I knew without knowing! I was afraid to hope... hope – that's not a French word any more, or Turkish, or Polish... Belgian perhaps... and even then...

ARCHITECT: I see, I understand.

BÉRENGER: And yet, *here* I am. Your radiant city is *real*. No doubt of that. You can touch it with your fingers. The blue brilliance of it looks absolutely natural... blue and green... oh, that grass, those rose-pink flowers...

ARCHITECT: Yes, those pink flowers really are roses.

BÉRENGER: Real roses? (*He walks about the stage, pointing, smelling the flowers, etc.*) More blue and more green things, too... the colours of joy. And what peace, what peace!

ARCHITECT: That's the rule here, Monsieur... (*He reads off the card:*) Bérenger. It's all calculated, all intentional. Nothing was to be left to chance in this district; the weather here is always fine... And so the building plots always fetch... or rather, always used to fetch, a high price... the villas are built of the best materials... built to last, built with care.

BÉRENGER: I don't suppose it ever rains in these houses?

ARCHITECT: Definitely not! That's the least you can expect. Does it rain in yours?

THE BÉRENGER PLAYS

BÉRENGER: Yes, I'm afraid it does.

ARCHITECT: It oughtn't to, even in your district. I'll send a man round.

BÉRENGER: Well, I suppose it doesn't really rain *inside*. Only in a manner of speaking. It's so damp, it's as if it *was* raining.

ARCHITECT: I see. Morally speaking. In any case, here in this district it never rains at all. And yet all the walls and all the roofs of the buildings you can see are damp-proof. It's a habit, a matter of form. Quite unnecessary, but it keeps up an old tradition.

BÉRENGER: You say it *never* rains? And all these things growing? This grass? And not a dead leaf on the trees, not a faded flower in the garden!

ARCHITECT: They're watered from below.

BÉRENGER: A technical marvel! Forgive me for being so astonished, a layman like me... (*With his handkerchief he is mopping the sweat from his brow.*)

ARCHITECT: Why don't you take your overcoat off? Carry it on your arm – you're too hot.

BÉRENGER: Why yes... I'm not at all cold any more... Thank you, thanks for the suggestion. (*He takes off his overcoat and puts it over his arm; he keeps his hat on his head. He looks up, with a gesture.*) The leaves on the trees are small enough for the light to filter through – but not too big, so as not to darken the front of the houses. I must say, it's amazing to think that in all the rest of the town the sky's as grey as the hair on an old woman's head, that there's dirty snow at the pavement's edge, and the wind blowing there. When I woke up this morning I was very cold. I was frozen. The radiators work so badly in my block of flats, especially on the ground floor. They work even worse when they don't make up the fire... So I mean to say...

(*A telephone bell rings, coming from the ARCHITECT's pocket; the ARCHITECT takes a receiver from it and listens; the telephone wire ends in his pocket.*)

THE KILLER

ARCHITECT: Hullo?

BÉRENGER: Forgive me, Monsieur; I'm keeping you from your work...

ARCHITECT (*to the telephone*): Hullo? (*To BÉRENGER*:) Not a bit...

I've kept an hour free to show you the district. No trouble at all.

(*To the telephone*:) Hullo? Yes. I know about that. Let the assistant manager know. Right. Let him hold an investigation if he insists. *He* can make the official arrangements. I'm with Monsieur Bérenger, for the visit to the radiant city. (*He puts the machine back in his pocket. To BÉRENGER, who has taken a few steps away, lost in admiration*:) You were saying? Hey, where are you?

BÉRENGER: Here. I'm sorry. What was I saying? Oh yes... Oh, it doesn't really matter now.

ARCHITECT: Go ahead. Say it anyway.

BÉRENGER: I was saying... oh yes... in my district, especially where I live, everything is damp: the coal, the bread, the wind, the wine, the walls, the air, and even the fire. What a job I had this morning, getting up. I had to make a big effort. It was really painful. I'd never have made up my mind if the sheets hadn't been damp too. I never imagined that, suddenly, as if by magic, I should find myself in the midst of spring, in the middle of April – the April of my dreams... my earliest dreams...

ARCHITECT: Dreams! (*Shrugging his shoulders*.) Anyhow, it would have been better if you'd come sooner, come before—

BÉRENGER (*interrupting him*): Ah yes, I've lost a lot of time, that's true...

(*BÉRENGER and the ARCHITECT go on walking about the stage. BÉRENGER should give the impression he is walking through tree-lined avenues and parks. The ARCHITECT follows him, more slowly. At times BÉRENGER will have to turn round to speak to the ARCHITECT in a louder voice. He should appear to be waiting for the ARCHITECT to come closer. Pointing to empty space*:)

BÉRENGER: *There's* an attractive house! The façade is delightful – such a wonderfully pure style. Eighteenth century? No, fifteenth or

the end of the nineteenth? It's classical, anyway, and then it's so neat, so smart... Ah yes, I've lost a lot of time – is it too late?...

No... Yes... No, it may not be too late – what do you think?

ARCHITECT: I haven't given the matter much thought.

BÉRENGER: I'm thirty-five years old, Monsieur, thirty-five...

Actually, to tell the truth, I'm forty... forty-five... perhaps a little more.

ARCHITECT (*consulting the card*): We know. Your age is on the card. We have files on everyone.

BÉRENGER: Really? Oh!

ARCHITECT: It's quite usual – we have to have them for the record – but don't worry: the code provides no penalties for that kind of prevarication, not for vanity.

BÉRENGER: Thank goodness for that! Anyway, if I only admit to thirty-five, it's certainly not to deceive my fellow citizens – what's it matter to them? It's to deceive myself. In this way I act on myself by suggestion – I believe myself to be younger, I cheer myself up...

ARCHITECT: It's only human, only natural. (*The pocket telephone rings; the ARCHITECT takes it out again.*)

BÉRENGER: Oh, what nice little stones on the paths!

ARCHITECT (*to the telephone*): Hullo?... A woman? Take a description of her. Write it down. Send it to the statistics department...

BÉRENGER (*pointing to the corner of the stage on the left*): What's that over there?

ARCHITECT (*to the telephone*): No, no, no, nothing else to report. All the time I'm here, nothing else *can* happen. (*He puts the receiver back in his pocket. To BÉRENGER:*) I'm sorry – I'm listening now.

BÉRENGER (*as before*): What's that over there?

ARCHITECT: Oh, that... It's a greenhouse.

BÉRENGER: A greenhouse?

ARCHITECT: Yes. For the flowers that can't get used to a temperate climate – the flowers that like the cold. We've created a wintry climate for them. Now and again we have a little storm...

BÉRENGER: Ah, everything's been thought of... yes, Monsieur, I could be sixty years old, seventy, eighty, a hundred and twenty – how do I know?

ARCHITECT: Morally speaking!

BÉRENGER: It can be interpreted physically too. It's psychosomatic... Am I talking nonsense?

ARCHITECT: Not particularly. Like everyone else.

BÉRENGER: I feel old. Time is, above all, subjective. Or rather I *used* to feel old. Since this morning I'm a new man. I'm sure I'm becoming myself again. The world's becoming itself again; it's all thanks to *your* power. Your magic light...

ARCHITECT: My electric light!

BÉRENGER: ...Your radiant city. (*He points quite nearby.*) It's the power of those immaculate walls covered with roses, your masterpiece! Ah, yes, yes, yes!... Nothing's really lost – I'm sure of that now... Now, in fact, I *do* remember, two or three people did tell me about the smiling city; some said it was quite nearby, others that it was far away, that it was easy to get to, hard to find, that it was a district specially reserved—

ARCHITECT: Not true!

BÉRENGER: —That there was no means of transport—

ARCHITECT: Nonsense. There's a tram stop over there, at the end of the main thoroughfare.

BÉRENGER: Yes, of course, of course! I know *now*. For a long time, I tell you, I tried consciously or unconsciously to find the way. I would walk right to the end of a street, and then realize it was a dead end. I'd follow a wall or a fence until I reached the river far from the bridge, away beyond the market and the gates of the town. Or else I'd meet some friends on the way who hadn't seen me since our army days; I'd be forced to stop and chat to them until it was too late and I had to go home. Still, what does it matter now? I'm *here*. My worries are over.

ARCHITECT: It was really so simple. You only had to drop me a line, write an official letter to the municipal offices, and one of my departments would have sent you all the necessary information by registered post.

THE BÉRENGER PLAYS

BÉRENGER: Why yes, I only needed to think of that! Oh well, no good crying over lost years...

ARCHITECT: How did you set about finding the way today?

BÉRENGER: Pure accident. I just took the tram.

ARCHITECT: What did I tell you?

BÉRENGER: Took the wrong tram – I meant to take another – I was sure it wasn't going the right way, and yet it *was*, by mistake – a lucky mistake...

ARCHITECT: Lucky?

BÉRENGER: No? Not lucky? But it *was*. Very, very lucky.

ARCHITECT: Oh well, you'll see for yourself – later.

BÉRENGER: I've seen already. I'm firmly convinced.

ARCHITECT: Anyway, remember you must always go as far as the terminus. Whatever the circumstances. All trams lead this way: it's the depot.

BÉRENGER: I know. The tram brought me here, to this stop. Although I hadn't been here before, I recognized everything at once – the avenues and the houses all blossoming, and you, looking as if you expected me.

ARCHITECT: I'd been informed.

BÉRENGER: It's such a transformation! It's as though I was far away in the south – two or three thousand miles away. Another universe, a world transfigured! And just that very short journey to get here – a journey that isn't *really*, since you might say it takes place in the same place... (*He laughs; then, embarrassed:*) Forgive me – that wasn't very funny.

ARCHITECT: Don't look so upset. I've heard worse. I'll put it down to your state of bliss...

BÉRENGER: I've no mind for science. I suppose that's why, in spite of your very pertinent explanations, I can't explain how the weather can always be fine here! Perhaps – this may have made it easier for you – perhaps it's a more sheltered spot? And yet it's not surrounded by hills to protect it from bad weather! Besides, hills don't chase the clouds away or stop it raining – everyone knows that. Is it that there are bright, warm waves of air coming from a fifth point of the compass or some third stratum of the

upper air? No, I suppose there aren't. Everyone would know about it. I'm really stupid. There's no breeze, although the air smells good. I must say it's odd, Monsieur – it's very odd!

ARCHITECT (*giving the authoritative information*): I tell you, there's nothing unusual about it: it's a technical matter! So try and understand. You ought to have taken an Adult Education course. It's just that this is a little island... with concealed ventilators I copied from the ones in those oases that crop up all over the place in the desert, where suddenly out of the dry sand you see amazing cities rising up, smothered with dewy roses, girdled with springs and rivers and lakes...

BÉRENGER: Oh yes... That's true. You mean those cities which are also called mirages. I've read explorers' tales about them. You see, I'm not completely uneducated. Mirages... there's nothing more real than a mirage. Flowers on fire, trees in flame, pools of light – that's all there really is that matters. I'm sure of it. And over there? What's that?

ARCHITECT: Over where? Where? Oh, over there?

BÉRENGER: Looks like an ornamental pool.

*(By means of the lighting, the vague outline of an ornamental pool appears at the back of the stage just as he says these words.)*

ARCHITECT: Er... yes, it *is* a pool. You recognized it. It's a pool, all right. (*He consults his watch.*) I think I still have a few minutes.

BÉRENGER: Can we go and see?

ARCHITECT: You want to have a closer look? (*He appears to hesitate.*) Very well. If you insist, I'll have to show it you.

BÉRENGER: Or instead... I don't know what to choose... It's all so beautiful... I like ornamental pools, but I rather like the look of that flowering hawthorn too. If you don't mind, we can look at the pool later...

ARCHITECT: As you like.

BÉRENGER: I love hawthorn bushes.

ARCHITECT: You've only to make up your mind.

BÉRENGER: Yes, yes, let's go over to the hawthorn.

THE BÉRENGER PLAYS

ARCHITECT: I'm completely at your service.

BÉRENGER: One can't see everything at once.

ARCHITECT: True enough.

*(The pool disappears. They walk a few steps.)*

BÉRENGER: What a sweet smell! You know, Monsieur, I... forgive me for talking about myself... one can say anything to an architect; he understands everything.

ARCHITECT: Do please carry on. Don't be shy.

BÉRENGER: Thank you! You know, I do so need another life, a new life. Different surroundings, a different setting. A different setting – you'd think that's not much to ask, and that... with money, for example.

ARCHITECT: No, not at all...

BÉRENGER: Yes, yes, you're too polite... A setting, *that's* just superficial, an artistic consideration, unless it's – how shall I say – a setting, a background that would answer some profound need inside, which would be somehow...

ARCHITECT: I see, I see...

BÉRENGER: ...the projection, the continuation of the universe inside you. Only, to project this universe within, some outside help is needed: some kind of material, physical light, a world that is objectively new. Gardens, blue sky or the spring, which corresponds to the universe inside and offers a chance of recognition, which is like a translation or an anticipation of that universe, or a mirror in which its own smile could be reflected... in which it can find itself again and say: that's what I am in reality and I'd forgotten – a smiling being in a smiling world... Come to think of it, it's quite wrong to talk of a world within and a world without, separate worlds; there's an initial impulse, of course, which starts from us, and when it can't project itself, when it can't fulfil itself objectively, when there's not total agreement between myself inside and myself outside, then it's a catastrophe, a universal contradiction, a schism.

ARCHITECT (*scratching his head*): What a vocabulary you have. We don't talk the same language.

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