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A different “epidemic” takes the stage with School of Theatre and Dance’s Rhinoceros

By Ashleigh Feger February 18, 2022



Rhinoceros performances run February 17-20

The start of a new year and new semester means the start of a new season for the Illinois State University School of Theatre and Dance. The season will open with *Rhinoceros* by Eugène Ionesco, performed in Westhoff Theatre February 17-19 at 7:30 p.m. and February 19-20 at 2 p.m. **Note: The February 17 performance was canceled due to inclement weather.**

Written in 1959 by Romanian French playwright Eugène Ionesco, the play responds to and criticizes the sudden upsurge of fascism preceding World War II, and today, it continues to resonate with contemporary situations, including for the rise of the alt-right. A small town is besieged by one roaring citizen who becomes a rhinoceros, thundering through the town square trampling on the social order. More and more citizens become afflicted with “rhinoceritis” flooding the city. One sane man, Berenger, remains.

Second year M.F.A. directing candidate Sanhawich Meateanuwat directs this thought-provoking play. When asked what drew him to this production, Meateanuwat related it back to his culture and how he was raised. “I grew up in a country that told us what to do,” he said. “It was an extremely strict household with morals and traditions, but we did not know why we were doing these things. I was taught to conform, and most of our lives were dictated by the government and these traditions.”



Director Meateanuwat with members of *Rhinoceros* cast and crew

While the original script was written in 1959, Meateanuwat believes that there are parallels in the script regarding what we are facing in America today, explaining that our views on the global pandemic are based on influences from everything around us: “Not just from family and friends, but from social media as well and the convenience of having it at our fingertips,” Meateanuwat said. “*Rhinoceros* will be embracing these technology elements to show how our views can be molded and shaped based on what someone else tells us to think.”

Meateanuwat says he is looking forward to seeing how these new and exciting elements will come to life on stage.

Senior acting major Cameron Pride plays the titular character, Berenger. Pride gives us an inside look into the rehearsal process and what it is like playing *Rhinoceros*’ protagonist, a seemingly flawed character not willing to give in.



Acting major Cameron Pride plays Berenger in *Rhinoceros*.

*Q. What makes *Rhinoceros* relevant to current audiences?*

The seemingly bizarre story of *Rhinoceros* is not strange at all when one realizes that the play was written as an allegory for fascism. With the frightening rise in alt-right fascism in our country the past few years (but an ideology which has plagued our cultural subconscious for much longer), this play is truly relevant to our current times despite being written over 60 years ago. Surprisingly, this play also serves as a metaphor for the COVID-19 pandemic we are still suffering through almost two years later. One could genuinely replace the word “rhinoceros” with “COVID” in the script and the play would still make perfect sense. It warns of the dangers of accepting a harmful disease as a part of life rather than continuing to combat it and taking collective action against it, a message that I think many people need to hear.

Q. What has your experience been like working on the show?

COVID-19 restrictions have almost helped the rehearsal process, at least on the acting side of things. By limiting rehearsals to only three or four actors, I was able to really focus on my scene partner(s), and it helped me get into the mindset of Berenger, as he becomes more and more isolated as the play goes on. The eeriness of only having a few other people really added to the intensity of the scenes.

Sanhawich is a very cool and kind director to work with (and I promise he didn’t make me say that). He has been consistently understanding of how challenging and difficult this role is at times, and how frustrating and stressful it is trying to do theatre during a pandemic. He pushes us to find new dimensions to our characters and try new things, while respecting our limits and not overwhelming us. He also understands the meme references we make during rehearsal which makes for lots of laughs.

*Q. What are you most excited for audiences to witness while attending *Rhinoceros*?*

One thing I am really excited about is the comedic absurdity of this show. There are so many funny lines that I find myself saying randomly outside of rehearsal (a personal favorite: “I’m full of beans.”), as well as a lot of physical comedy. I love getting to embody such a schleppey character, as it means I get to move in interesting and silly ways.

Another thing I am really excited for audiences to see is our non-traditional casting for Berenger. Berenger is written as a male character, so as a non-binary person playing this character, some of the references to his masculinity and feeling out of place in the world take on a new dimension: this Berenger doesn’t conform to societal expectations of masculinity. I am grateful that I can bring my own personal experience as a gender non-conforming person to this role, and I hope that our performance might inspire a discussion about the performative nature of gender, and about non-traditional casting in theatre. Nonbinary people exist, and we can play the same roles as cisgender actors.

Rhinoceros’ exploration of societal themes and problems will have audiences questioning the impact of joining the herd.

Tickets for the production can be purchased at the [Center for the Performing Arts Box Office](#) on [online](#). Masks are required for the duration of the performance.

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