Whatever happened to Eugène Ionesco? Nothing, really—he’s still one of the most important and influential playwrights of the postwar era—but his plays are now rarely seen on the New York stage. Only two of them have been done on Broadway in the past quarter-century, neither successfully, and the 2009 production of “Exit the King” only got there in the first place because of the presence in the cast of Susan Sarandon (who, like most movie stars who take belated shots at Broadway, ended up not being much good). Hence it is thrilling news that the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey has opened an impressive production of “Exit the King,” and that “Rhinoceros” will be mounted off Broadway by the Pearl Theatre Company later this season. Two stagings do not a revival make, but if the Pearl’s “Rhinoceros” is anywhere near as fine as Bonnie Monte’s staging of “Exit the King,” it’ll bode well for Ionesco’s American prospects.

Ionesco, who died in 1994, was one of the European writers whose work inspired the expression “theater of the absurd,” and “Exit the King,” first performed in 1962, displays his method at its most potent. It shows us the last 90 minutes of the life of King Berenger the First (Brent Harris), a 400-plus-year-old monarch who lives in a crumbling castle. He knows the hour of his death—he’s probably always known it—but has chosen to pretend that it’ll never come, preferring to frolic with his nubile young mistress (Jesmille Darbouze) instead of facing the inevitable with suitably regal dignity. “Why was I born,” he asks, “if it wasn’t forever?” Then Queen Marguerite (Marion Adler) and his doctor (Greg Watanabe) inform him that he will die “in an hour and a half...at the end of the show.” All at once his hair turns white and his body starts to disintegrate, and after trying for a little while longer to keep on pretending that nothing is wrong, King Berenger gives in and accepts Marguerite’s offer to help prepare him for the dark rendezvous: “I’ll help him. I’ll cut him loose. I’ll untie every knot and ravel out the tangled skein.”
If that sounds like grim stuff, that’s because it is. Ionesco’s purpose in writing “Exit the King” was to provide the viewer with (in his words) “an apprenticeship in dying. . . . This seems to me to be the most important thing we can do, since we’re all of us dying men who refuse to die.” But he chose to couch his memento mori in the form of a black comedy set in a tumbledown kingdom not unlike the Marx Brothers’ Freedonia, salting the shenanigans with bluntly poetic words of warning (“We haven’t the time to take our time”) aimed both at the king and at the audience. All the way up to the wrenching last scene, when the clock runs out on Berenger, it’s as if Dante’s “Purgatorio” had been rewritten as a farce.

It isn’t hard to find contemporary relevance in “Exit the King,” and the 2009 Broadway revival, directed by Neil Armfield and starring Geoffrey Rush, underlined it to excess by using a new translation by Messrs. Armfield and Rush that was modernized, vulgarized and generally dumbed down. Ms. Monte, by contrast, has chosen to let Ionesco’s masterpiece speak for itself, returning to Donald Watson’s now-standard 1963 English-language version and setting the action in a straightforwardly rendered Gothic throneroom. (The only modern touch is the boom box from which the “derisive rendering of regal music” that sets the play in motion blares forth.) She has also judiciously trimmed the script in order to bring the running time down to the 90 minutes specified by Marguerite, a shrewd decision that improves its dramatic flow. Otherwise, Ms. Monte gives us “Exit the King” as is, trusting in Ionesco and her marvelous cast to get the job done without gratuitously “clever” directorial intrusions—and that they do. I can’t imagine a more effective production, or a more poignant one.

The performances of Mr. Harris and Ms. Adler are, of course, the heart of the matter. He’s a zany pseudo-monarch, she’s flinty and tough, and they strike sparks off each other like an old married couple who’ve played and replayed their favorite domestic scenes so many times that they know them backwards. Mr. Rush’s performance was spectacular, but Mr. Harris owes no apologies, and Ms. Monte’s staging is superior in virtually every other way to the Broadway revival. If you’ve never seen a Ionesco play—or a production by the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, whose consistent excellence has become a byword—then now’s the time.