

Theater of the Absurd

Introduction

Theater of the Absurd came about as a reaction to World War II. It took the basis of existential philosophy and combined it with dramatic elements to create a style of theatre which presented a world which can not be logically explained, life is in one word, ABSURD!

Needless to say, this genre of theatre took quite some time to catch on because it used techniques that seemed to be illogical to the theatre world. The plots often deviated from the more traditional episodic structure, and seem to move in a circle, ending the same way it began. The scenery was often unrecognizable, and to make matters worse, the dialogue never seemed to make any sense.

As a term :

The “Theatre of the Absurd” is a term coined by Hungarian-born critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. The term refers to a particular type of play which first became popular during the 1950s and 1960s and which presented on stage the philosophy articulated by French philosopher Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he defines the human condition as basically meaningless. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd.

Esslin regarded the term “Theatre of the Absurd” merely as a "device" by which he meant to bring attention to certain fundamental traits discernible in the works of a range of playwrights. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe. According to Esslin, the five defining playwrights of the movement are Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter, although these writers were not always comfortable with the label and sometimes preferred to use terms such as "Anti-Theater" or "New Theater". Other playwrights associated with this type of theatre include Tom Stoppard, Arthur Kopit, Friedrich

Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, N.F. Simpson, Boris Vian, Peter Weiss, Vaclav Havel, and Jean Tardieu.

Although the Theatre of the Absurd is often traced back to avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, its roots, in actuality, date back much further. Absurd elements first made their appearance shortly after the rise of Greek drama, in the wild humor and buffoonery of Old Comedy and the plays of Aristophanes in particular. They were further developed in the late classical period by Lucian, Petronius and Apuleius, in Menippean satire, a tradition of carnivalistic literature, depicting “a world upside down.” The morality plays of the Middle Ages may be considered a precursor to the Theatre of the Absurd, depicting everyman-type characters dealing with allegorical and sometimes existential problems. This tradition would carry over into the Baroque allegorical drama of Elizabethan times, when dramatists such as John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Jakob Biederman and Calderon would depict the world in mythological archetypes. During the nineteenth century, absurd elements may be noted in certain plays by Ibsen and, more obviously, Strindberg, but the acknowledged predecessor of what would come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd is Alfred Jarry's "monstrous puppet-play" Ubu Roi (1896) which presents a mythical, grotesque figure, set amidst a world of archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. In the 1920s and 1930s, the surrealists expanded on Jarry's experiments, basing much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious mind which they acknowledged as a great, positive healing force. Their intention was to do away with art as a mere imitation of surface reality, instead demanding that it should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. The Theatre of the Absurd was also anticipated in the dream novels of James Joyce and Franz Kafka who created archetypes by delving into their own subconscious and exploring the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. Silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in the early sound films of Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, and the Marx Brothers would also contribute to the development of the Theatre of the Absurd, as did the verbal "nonsense" of François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Christian Morgenstern. But it would take a catastrophic world event to actually bring about the birth of the new movement.

World War II was the catalyst that finally brought the Theatre of the Absurd to life. The global nature of this conflict and the resulting trauma of living under threat of nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life. Suddenly, one did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part of the average person's daily existence. During this period, a “prophet” of the absurd appeared. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) rejected realism in the theatre, calling for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes and create a modern mythology. It was no longer possible, he insisted, to keep using traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. Although he would not live to see its development, The Theatre of the Absurd is precisely the new theatre that Artaud was dreaming of. It openly rebelled against conventional theatre. It was, as Ionesco called it “anti-theatre”. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue often seemed to be complete gibberish. And, not surprisingly, the public’s first reaction to this new theatre was incomprehension and rejection.

The most famous, and most controversial, absurdist play is probably Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. The characters of the play are strange caricatures who have difficulty communicating the simplest of concepts to one another as they bide their time awaiting the arrival of Godot. The language they use is often ludicrous, and following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in precisely the same condition it began, with no real change having occurred. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as “the play where nothing happens.” Its detractors count this a fatal flaw and often turn red in the face fomenting on its inadequacies. It is mere gibberish, they cry, eyes nearly bulging out of their head--a prank on the audience disguised as a play. The play's supporters, on the other hand, describe it as an accurate parable on the human condition in which “the more things change, the more they are the same.” Change, they argue, is only an illusion. In 1955, the famous character actor Robert Morley predicted that the success of Waiting for Godot meant “the end of theatre as we know it.” His generation may have gloomily accepted this prediction, but the younger generation embraced it. They were ready for something new—something that would move beyond the old stereotypes and reflect their increasingly complex understanding of existence.

Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. Ionesco defined the absurdist everyman as "Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots ... lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless." The Theatre of the Absurd, in a sense, attempts to reestablish man's communion with the universe. Dr. Jan Culik writes, "Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition."

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language, it seems to say, has become nothing but a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Dr. Culik explains, "Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically."

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. As Dr. Culik points out, "Rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite."

What, then, has become of this wonderful new theatre—this movement that produced some of the most exciting and original dramatic works of the twentieth century? Conventional wisdom, perhaps, suggests that the Theatre of the Absurd was a product of a very specific point in time and, because that time has passed, it has gone the way of the dinosaur. In a revised edition of his seminal work, Martin Esslin disagrees: “Every artistic movement or style has at one time or another been the prevailing fashion. If it was no more than that, it disappeared without a trace. If it had a genuine content, if it contributed to an enlargement of human perception, if it created new modes of human expression, if it opened up new areas of experience, however, it was bound to be absorbed into the main stream of development. And this is what happened with the Theatre of the Absurd which, apart from having been in fashion, undoubtedly was a genuine contribution to the permanent vocabulary of dramatic expression.... [it] is being absorbed into the mainstream of the tradition from which ... it had never been entirely absent ... The playwrights of the post-Absurdist era have at their disposal, then, a uniquely enriched vocabulary of dramatic technique. They can use these devices freely, separately and in infinite variety of combinations with those bequeathed to them by other dramatic conventions of the past.” In a New York Times piece entitled “Which Theatre is the Absurd One?”, Edward Albee agrees with Esslin’s final analysis, writing, “For just as it is true that our response to color and form was forever altered once the impressionist painters put their minds to canvas, it is just as true that the playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd have forever altered our response to the theatre.”

ABSURDIST PLAYWRIGHTS

SAMUEL BECKETT:

Samuel Beckett is probably the most well known of the absurdist playwrights because of his work *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett's plays seem to focus on the themes of the uselessness of human action, and the failure of the human race to communicate. He was born on April 13, 1906, which was both Friday the 13th and Good Friday. He had quite a normal upbringing in an upper-middle-class Irish family, and excelled in both school and the sport of cricket. He

attended the University of Dublin Ireland where he received his M.A. in modern languages, he then taught for a short time, explored parts of Europe and eventually settled in Paris. It was in Paris that he met writer James Joyce. It was this literary exposure that encouraged Beckett to seek publication. It is interesting to note that many of the conversations between Beckett and Joyce were conducted in silence. In the 1930's and 40's Beckett published many works in the form of essays, short stories, poetry, and novels, but very few people noticed his work. In fact he only sold ninety-five copies of the French translation of his novel *Murphy*, in four years. His postwar era fame only came about in the 1950's when he published three novels and his famous play, *Waiting for Godot*. *Waiting for Godot* is probably the most famous absurd play to date. The characters of the play, are absurd caricatures who of course have problems communicating with one another, and the language they use is often times ludicrous. And, following the cyclical pattern, the play seems to end in the same state it began in, with nothing really changed.

Follow this link for more information on [Samuel Beckett](#).

EUGENE IONESCO:

"The universe seems to me infinitely strange and foreign. At such a moment I gaze upon it with a mixture of anguish and euphoria; separate from the universe, as though placed at a certain distance outside it; I look and see pictures, creatures that move in a kind of timeless time and spaceless space emitting sounds that are a kind of language I no longer understand or ever register."

Along side Beckett in the theatre genre of absurdity, is playwright Eugene Ionesco. Ionesco's main focus is on the futility of communication, so the language of his plays often reflects this by being almost completely nonsensical. He approaches the absurdity of life by making his characters comical and unable to control their own existence. Ionesco was born in Romania, but grew up in Paris with his mother. After thirteen years in Paris, he returned to Romania where he had to learn his native language. He attended the University of Bucharest, then taught high school French, then in 1936 got married. It was completely by accident that

Ionesco became a playwright, while learning to speak the English language, he took the illogical phrases he found in the primer he was using and these phrases became the dialogue for *The Bald Soprano*, his first play. It is a little strange to think that Ionesco found his calling in playwrighting because at the time, he was known to dislike theatre because of the contradiction presented by the reality of the performers and the fiction of the stage. After *The Bald Soprano*, Ionesco went on to write other absurd works such as *Rhinoceros* in 1959, and *Journeys to the Home of the Dead* in 1981.

Find [Eugen Ionesco](#) interesting? Just follow this link.

HAROLD PINTER:

Although Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco are two of the most famous absurdist playwrights, Harold Pinter is now the leading English language playwright in the genre. In his plays, Pinter never finds it necessary to explain why things occur or who anyone is, the existence within the play itself is justification enough. In general, lack of explanation is what characterizes Pinter's work, that and the interruption of outside forces upon a stable environment. What seems to set him apart though is that unlike Beckett and Ionesco, Pinter's world within the drama seems to be at least somewhat realistic. Pinter started out in the theatre world as an actor, he attended both the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art and the Central School of Speech and Drama, then found a professional acting career under the stage name David Baron. He remained an actor until he mentioned an idea he had for a play to a friend at Bristol University. His friend became interested in the idea and requested a script within a week. Pinter laughed at the idea, but within the week presented his friend with the script for *The Room*, which was then performed in May 1957. Pinter's career as a playwright continued on with such works as *The Dumbwaiter* in 1957, and *Mountain Language* in 1988. Pinter is still going strong in English theatre where he continues to write, direct and act.

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

THE WEST AND THE EAST

I. The West

'The Theatre of the Absurd' is a term coined by the critic Martin Esslin for the work of a number of playwrights, mostly written in the 1950s and 1960s. The term is derived from an essay by the French philosopher Albert Camus. In his 'Myth of Sisyphus', written in 1942, he first defined the human situation as basically meaningless and absurd. The 'absurd' plays by Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter and others all share the view that man is inhabiting a universe with which he is out of key. Its meaning is indecipherable and his place within it is without purpose. He is bewildered, troubled and obscurely threatened.

The origins of the Theatre of the Absurd are rooted in the avant-garde experiments in art of the 1920s and 1930s. At the same time, it was undoubtedly strongly influenced by the traumatic experience of the horrors of the Second World War, which showed the total impermanence of any values, shook the validity of any conventions and highlighted the precariousness of human life and its fundamental meaninglessness and arbitrariness. The trauma of living from 1945 under threat of nuclear annihilation also seems to have been an important factor in the rise of the new theatre.

At the same time, the Theatre of the Absurd also seems to have been a reaction to the disappearance of the religious dimension from contemporary life. The Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.

As a result, absurd plays assumed a highly unusual, innovative form, directly aiming to startle the viewer, shaking him out of this comfortable, conventional life of everyday concerns. In the meaningless and Godless post-Second-World-War world, it was no longer possible to keep using such traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. The Theatre of the Absurd openly rebelled against conventional theatre. Indeed, it was anti-theatre. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue seemed total

gobbledygook. Not unexpectedly, the Theatre of the Absurd first met with incomprehension and rejection.

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama was its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language had become a vehicle of conventionalised, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which is distorted, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically. Conventionalised speech acts as a barrier between ourselves and what the world is really about: in order to come into direct contact with natural reality, it is necessary to discredit and discard the false crutches of conventionalised language. Objects are much more important than language in absurd theatre: what happens transcends what is being said about it. It is the hidden, implied meaning of words that assume primary importance in absurd theatre, over and above what is being actually said. The Theatre of the Absurd strove to communicate an undissolved totality of perception - hence it had to go beyond language.

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language the absurd theatre is trying to shatter the enclosing walls of the human condition itself. Our individual identity is defined by language, having a name is the source of our separateness - the loss of logical language brings us towards a unity with living things. In being illogical, the absurd theatre is anti-rationalist: it negates rationalism because it feels that rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite. It offers intoxicating freedom, brings one into contact with the essence of life and is a source of marvellous comedy.

There is no dramatic conflict in the absurd plays. Dramatic conflicts, clashes of personalities and powers belong to a world where a rigid, accepted hierarchy of values forms a permanent establishment. Such conflicts, however, lose their meaning in a situation where the establishment and outward reality have become meaningless. However frantically characters perform, this only underlines the fact that nothing happens to change their existence. Absurd dramas are lyrical statements, very much like music: they communicate an atmosphere, an experience of archetypal human situations. The Absurd Theatre is a theatre of situation, as against the more conventional theatre of sequential events. It presents a pattern of poetic images. In doing this, it uses visual elements, movement, light. Unlike conventional theatre, where language rules supreme, in the Absurd Theatre language is only one of many components of its multidimensional poetic imagery.

The Theatre of the Absurd is totally lyrical theatre which uses abstract scenic effects, many of which have been taken over and modified from the popular theatre arts: mime, ballet, acrobatics, conjuring, music-hall clowning. Much of its inspiration comes from silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in early sound film (Laurel and Hardy, W C Fields, the Marx Brothers). It emphasises the importance of objects and visual experience: the role of language is relatively secondary. It owes a debt to European pre-war surrealism: its literary influences include the work of Franz Kafka. The Theatre of the Absurd is aiming to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams.

Some of the predecessors of absurd drama:

- In the realm of verbal nonsense: François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear. Many serious poets occasionally wrote nonsense poetry (Johnson, Charles Lamb, Keats, Hugo, Byron, Thomas Hood). One of the greatest masters of nonsense poetry was the German poet Christian Morgenstern (1871-1914). Ionesco found the work of S J Perelman (i.e. the dialogues of the Marx Brothers' films) a great inspiration for his work.
- The world of allegory, myth and dream: The tradition of the world as a stage and life as a dream goes back to Elizabethan times. Baroque allegorical drama shows the world in terms of mythological archetypes: John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Calderon, Jakob

Biederman. With the decline of allegory, the element of fantasy prevails (Swift, Hugh Walpole).

- In some 18th and 19th Century works of literature we find sudden transformation of characters and nightmarish shifts of time and place (E T A Hoffman, Nerval, Aurevilly). Dreams are featured in many theatrical pieces, but it had to wait for Strindberg to produce the masterly transcriptions of dreams and obsessions that have become a direct source of the Absurd Theatre. Strindberg, Dostoyevsky, Joyce and Kafka created archetypes: by delving into their own subconscious, they discovered the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. In the view of Mircea Eliade, myth has never completely disappeared on the level of individual experience. The Absurd Theatre sought to express the individual's longing for a single myth of general validity. The above-mentioned authors anticipated this.

Alfred Jarry is an important predecessor of the Absurd Theatre. His *UBU ROI* (1896) is a mythical figure, set amidst a world of grotesque archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. (Ubu Roi makes himself King of Poland and kills and tortures all and sundry. The work is a puppet play and its décor of childish naivety underlines the horror.) Jarry expressed man's psychological states by objectifying them on the stage. Similarly, Franz Kafka's short stories and novels are meticulously exact descriptions of archetypal nightmares and obsessions in a world of convention and routine.

- 20th Century European avant-garde: For the French avant-garde, myth and dream was of utmost importance: the surrealists based much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious. The aim of the avant-garde was to do away with art as a mere imitation of appearances. Apollinaire demanded that art should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. One of the more extreme manifestations of the avant-garde was the Dadaist movement, which took the desire to do away with obsolete artistic conventions to the extreme. Some Dadaist plays were written, but these were mostly nonsense poems in dialogue form, the aim of which was primarily to 'shock the bourgeois audience'. After the First World War,

German Expressionism attempted to project inner realities and to objectify thought and feeling. Some of Brecht's plays are close to Absurd Drama, both in their clowning and their music-hall humour and the preoccupation with the problem of identity of the self and its fluidity. French surrealism acknowledged the subconscious mind as a great, positive healing force. However, its contribution to the sphere of drama was meagre: indeed it can be said that the Absurd Theatre of the 1950s and 1960s was a belated practical realisation of the principles formulated by the Surrealists as early as the 1930s. In this connection, of particular importance were the theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud. Artaud fully rejected realism in the theatre, cherishing a vision of a stage of magical beauty and mythical power. He called for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes, thus creating a new mythology. In his view, theatre should pursue the aspects of the internal world. Man should be considered metaphorically in a wordless language of shapes, light, movement and gesture. Theatre should aim at expressing what language is incapable of putting into words. Artaud forms a bridge between the inter-war avant-garde and the post-Second-World-War Theatre of the Absurd.

THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

THE WEST AND THE EAST

II. THE EAST

At the time when the first absurd plays were being written and staged in Western Europe in the late 1940s and early 1950s, people in the East European countries suddenly found themselves thrown into a world where absurdity was an integral part of everyday living. Suddenly, you did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part and parcel of everybody's existence.

Hitler's attempt to conquer Russia during the Second World War gave Russia a unique opportunity to extend its sphere of influence and at the same time to 'further the cause of [the

Soviet brand of] socialism'. In the final years of the war, Stalin turned the war of the defeat of Nazism into the war of conquest of Central Europe and the war of the division of Europe. In pursuing Hitler's retreating troops, the Russian Army managed to enter the territory of the Central European countries and to remain there, with very few exceptions, until now. The might of the Russian Army made it possible for Stalin to establish rigidly ideological pro-Soviet regimes, hermetically sealed from the rest of Europe. The Central European countries, whose pre-war political systems ranged from feudal monarchies (Rumania), semi-authoritarian states (Poland) through to a parliamentary Western-type democracy (Czechoslovakia) were now subjected to a militant Sovietisation. The countries were forced to undergo a major traumatic political and economic transformation.

The Western Theatre of the Absurd highlighted man's fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that man has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. East European Soviet-type socialism proudly proclaimed that it had answers to all these questions and, moreover, that it was capable of eliminating suffering and setting all injustices right. To doubt this was subversive. Officially, it was sufficient to implement a grossly simplified formula of Marxism to all spheres of life and Paradise on Earth would ensue. It became clear very soon that this simplified formula offered even fewer real answers than various esoteric and complex Western philosophical systems and that its implementation by force brought enormous suffering.

From the beginning it was clear that the simplified idea was absurd: yet it was made to dominate all spheres of life. People were expected to shape their lives according to its dictates and to enjoy it. It was, and still is, an offence to be sceptical about Soviet-type socialism if you are a citizen of an East-European country. The sheer fact that the arbitrary formula of simplified Marxism was made to dominate the lives of millions of people, forcing them to behave against their own nature, brought the absurdity of the formula into sharp focus for these millions. Thus the Soviet-type system managed to bring the experience of what was initially a matter of concern for only a small number of sensitive individuals in the West to whole nations in the East.

This is not to say that the absurdity of life as experienced in the East differs in any way from the absurdity of life as it is experienced in the West. In both parts of the world it stems from the

ambiguity of man's position in the universe, from his fear of death and from his instinctive yearning for the Absolute. It is just that official East-European practices, based on a contempt for the fundamental existential questions and on a primitive and arrogant faith in the power of a simplified idea, have created a reality which makes absurdity a primary and deeply-felt, intrinsic experience for anybody who comes in contact with that reality.

To put it another way: the western Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as the expression of frustration and anger of a handful of intellectuals over the fact that people seem to lead uninspired, second-rate and stereotyped existences, either by deliberate choice or because they do not know any better and have no idea how or ability by which to help themselves. Although such anger may sound smug and condescending, it is really mixed with despair. And when we look at Eastern Europe, we realise that these intellectuals are justified in condemning lives of mediocrity, even though many people in the West seem to lead such lives quite happily and without any awareness of the absurdity. In Eastern Europe, second-rateness has been elevated to a single, sacred, governing principle. There, mediocrity rules with a rod of iron. Thus it can be seen clearly what it can achieve. As a result, unlike in the West, many people in the East seem to have discovered that it is very uncomfortable to live under the command of second-rateness.

(The fact that mediocrity is harmful to life comes across so clearly in Eastern Europe either because East-European second-rateness is much harsher than the mild, West-European, consumerist mediocrity, or simply because it is a single, totalitarian second-rateness, obligatory for all. A single version of a simple creed cannot suit all, its insufficiencies immediately show. This is not the case if everybody is allowed to choose their own simplified models and prejudices which suit their individual needs, the way it is in the West - thus their insufficiencies are not immediately noticeable.)

The rise of the Theatre of the Absurd in the East is connected with the period of relative relaxation of the East European regimes after Stalin's death. In the first decade after the communist take-over of power, it would have been impossible for anyone to write anything even distantly based on his experiences of life after the take-over without endangering his personal safety. The arts, as indeed all other spheres of life, were subject to rigid political control and reduced to serving blatant ideological and propagandistic aims. This was the period when feature

films were made about happy workers in a steelworks, or about a village tractor driver who after falling in love with his tractor becomes a member of the communist party, etc. All the arts assumed rigidly conservative, 19th-Century realist forms, to which a strong political bias was added. 20th -Century developments, in particular the inter-war experiments with structure and form in painting and poetry were outlawed as bourgeois decadence.

In the years after Stalin's death in 1953, the situation slowly improved. The year 1956 saw two major attempts at liberalisation within the Soviet Bloc: the Hungarian revolution was defeated, while the Polish autumn managed to introduce a measure of normalcy into the country which lasted for several years. Czechoslovakia did not see the first thaw until towards the end of the 1950s: genuine liberalisation did not start gaining momentum until 1962-63. Hence it was only in the 1960s that the first absurdist plays could be written and staged in Eastern Europe. Even so, the Theatre of the Absurd remained limited to only two East European countries, those that were the most liberal at the time: Poland and Czechoslovakia.

The East European Absurd Theatre was undoubtedly inspired by Western absurd drama, yet it differed from it considerably in form, meaning and impact. Although East European authors and theatre producers were quite well acquainted with many West-European absurd plays from the mid to late 1950s onwards, nevertheless (with very few exceptions) these plays were not performed or even translated in Eastern Europe until the mid-1960s. The reasons for this were several. First, West-European absurd drama was regarded by East-European officialdom as the epitome of West-European bourgeois capitalist decadence and, as a result, East European theatrical producers would be wary of trying to stage a condemned play - such an act would blight their career once and for all, ensuring that they would never work in theatre again. The western absurdist plays were regarded as nihilistic and anti-realistic, especially after Kenneth Tynan had attacked Ionesco as the apostle of anti-realism: this attack was frequently used by the East European officialdom for condemning Western absurd plays.

Secondly, after a decade or more of staple conservative realistic bias, there were fears among theatrical producers that the West European absurd plays might be regarded as far too avantgarde and esoteric by the general public. Thirdly, there was an atmosphere of relative optimism in Eastern Europe in the late 1950s and the 1960s. It was felt that although life under Stalin's

domination had been terrible, the bad times were now past after the dictator's death and full liberalisation was only a matter of time. The injustices and deficiencies of the East European systems were seen as due to human frailty rather than being a perennial metaphysical condition: it was felt that sincere and concerted human effort was in the long run going to be able to put all wrongs right. In a way, this was a continuation of the simplistic Stalinist faith in man's total power over his predicament. From this point of view, it was felt that most Western absurdist plays were too pessimistic, negative and destructive. It was argued (perhaps partially for official consumption) that the East European absurdist plays, unlike their Western counterparts, constituted constructive criticism.

The line of argument of reformist, pro-liberalisation Marxists in Czechoslovakia in the early 1960s ran as follows: The Western Theatre of the Absurd recorded the absurdity of human existence as an immutable condition. It was a by-product of the continuing disintegration of capitalism. Western absurd plays were irrelevant in Eastern Europe, since socialist society had already found all answers concerning man's conduct and the meaning of life in general. Unlike its Western counterpart, East European absurd drama was communicating constructive criticism of the deformation of Marxism by the Stalinists. All that the East-European absurdist plays were trying to do was to remove minor blemishes on the face of the Marxist model - and that was easily done.

It was only later that some critics were able to point out that West European absurd drama was not in fact nihilistic and destructive and that it played the same constructive roles as East European drama attempted to play. At this stage, it was realised that the liberal Marxist analysis of East European absurd drama was incorrect: just as with its Western counterpart, the East European absurdist theatre could be seen as a comment on the human condition in general - hence its relevance also for the West.

On the few occasions that Western absurdist plays were actually staged in Eastern Europe, the East European audiences found the plays highly relevant. A production of *Waiting for Godot* in Poland in 1956 and in Slovakia in 1969, for instance, both became something nearing a political demonstration. Both the Polish and Slovak audiences stressed that for them, this was a play about hope - hope against hope.

The tremendous impact of these productions in Eastern Europe can be perhaps compared with the impact of *Waiting for Godot* on the inmates of a Californian penitentiary, when it was staged there in 1957. Like the inmates of a gaol, people in Eastern Europe are possibly also freer of the numbing concerns of everyday living than the average Western man in the street. Since they live under pressure, this somehow brings them closer to the bare essentials of life and they are therefore more receptive to the works that deal with archetypal existential situations than is the case with an ordinary West-European citizen.

On the whole, East European absurd drama has been far less abstract and esoteric than its West European counterpart. Moreover, while the West European drama is usually considered as having spent itself by the end of the 1960s, several East European authors have been writing highly original plays in the absurdity mould, well into the 1970s.

The main difference between the West European and the East European plays is that while the West European plays deal with a predicament of an individual or a group of individuals in a situation stripped to the bare, and often fairly abstract and metaphysical essentials, the East European plays mostly show an individual trapped within the cogwheels of a social system. The social context of the West European absurd plays is usually subdued and theoretical: in the East European plays it is concrete, menacing and fairly realistic: it is usually covered by very transparent metaphors. The social context is shown as a kind of *Catch-22* system - it is a set of circumstances whose joint impact crushes the individual. The absurdity of the social system is highlighted and frequently shown as the result of the actions of stupid, misguided or evil people - this condemnation is of course merely implicit. Although the fundamental absurdity of the life feature in these plays is not intended to be metaphysically conditioned - these are primarily pieces of social satire - on reflection, the viewer will realise that there is fundamentally no difference between the 'messages' of the West European and the East European plays - except that the East European plays may be able to communicate these ideas more pressingly and more vividly to their audiences, because of their first-hand everyday experience of the absurdity that surrounds them.

At the end of the 1960s, the situation in Eastern Europe changed for the worse. After the invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, it became apparent that Russia would not tolerate a fuller

liberalisation of the East European countries. Czechoslovakia was thrown into a harsh, neo-Stalinist mould, entering the time capsule of stagnating immobility, in which it has remained ever since. Since it had been primarily artists and intellectuals that were spearheading the liberalising reforms of the 1960s, the arts were now subjected to a vicious purge. Many well-known artists and intellectuals were turned into non-persons practically overnight: some left or were later forced to leave the country.

All the Czechoslovak absurdist playwrights fell into the non-person category. It is perhaps quite convincing evidence of the social relevance of their plays that the establishment feared them so much it felt the need to outlaw them. Several of the banned authors have continued writing, regardless of the fact that their plays cannot be staged in Czechoslovakia at present. They have been published and produced in the West.

As in the 1960s, these authors are still deeply socially conscious: for instance, Václav Havel, in the words of Martin Esslin, 'one of the most promising European playwrights of today', is a courageous defender of basic human values and one of the most important (and most thoughtful) spokespersons of the non-establishment groupings in Czechoslovakia.

By contrast, the Polish absurdist playwrights have been able to continue working in Poland undisturbed since the early 1960s, their plays having been normally published and produced within the country even throughout the 1970s.

It is perhaps quite interesting that even the Western absurd dramatists have gradually developed a need to defend basic human values. They have been showing solidarity with their East European colleagues. Ionesco was always deeply distrustful of politics and the clichéd language of the political establishment. Harold Pinter, who took part in a radio production of one of Václav Havel's plays from the 1970s several years ago, has frequently spoken in support of the East European writers and playwrights. Samuel Beckett has written a short play dedicated to Havel, which was staged in France in 1984 during a ceremony at the University of Toulouse, which awarded Havel an honorary doctorate.

Tom Stoppard, David Lindsay-Abaire, John Guare, Caryl Churchill, and Gao Xingjian.

The Theatre of the Absurd, or Theater of the Absurd (French: "Le Théâtre de l'Absurde") is a designation for particular plays written by a number of primarily European playwrights in the late 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, as well as to the style of theatre which has evolved from their work.

The term was coined by the critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of a 1962 book on the subject. Esslin saw the work of these playwrights as giving artistic articulation to Albert Camus' philosophy that life is inherently without meaning as illustrated in his work The Myth of Sisyphus. Though the term is applied to a wide range of plays, some characteristics coincide in many of the plays: broad comedy, often similar to Vaudeville, mixed with horrific or tragic images; characters caught in hopeless situations forced to do repetitive or meaningless actions; dialogue full of clichés, wordplay, and nonsense; plots that are cyclical or absurdly expansive; either a parody or dismissal of realism and the concept of the "well-made play". According to Esslin, the four defining playwrights of the movement are Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, and Arthur Adamov, although each of these writers has unique preoccupations and techniques that go beyond the term "absurd". Other writers often associated with this group include Tom Stoppard, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Harold Pinter, Edward Albee and Jean Tardieu.^[1]

Tragicomedy

The mode of most Absurdist plays is tragicomedy. Besides his multifaceted influence in other areas, William Shakespeare, as the first great playwright to use tragicomedy, is frequently cited as an influence on the Absurdist. This influence is evidenced by Absurdist plays such as Ionesco's Macbett and Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead. Though layered with a significant amount of tragedy, other great forms of comedic performance are echoed heavily in the Theatre of the Absurd, from Commedia dell'arte to Vaudeville. Likewise, early film comedians such as Charlie Chaplin, Laurel and Hardy, The Marx Brothers, and Buster Keaton have been cited as direct influences (Keaton even starred in Beckett's Film in 1965).

[edit] Formal experimentation

As an experimental form of theatre, Theatre of the Absurd employs techniques borrowed from earlier innovators. Writers and techniques frequently mentioned in relation to the Absurdists include the following: 19th century nonsense poets like Lewis Carrol or Edward Lear; the Russian Absurdists, Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, Daniil Kharms, Nikolai Erdman and so on; Bertholt Brecht's distancing techniques in his "Epic Theatre"; and the "dream plays" of August Strindberg.^[2]

One commonly cited precursor is Luigi Pirandello, especially Six Characters in Search of an Author. Pirandello was a highly regarded theatrical experimentalist who wanted to bring down the fourth wall utilized by Realism and playwrights like Henrik Ibsen.^[3] According to W. B. Worthen, Six Characters, and other Pirandello plays, use "Metatheater—roleplaying, plays-within-plays, and a flexible sense of the limits of stage and illusion—to examine a highly theatricalized vision of identity."^[4]

Another influential playwright was Guillaume Apollinaire whose Les Mamelles de Tirésias was the first work to be called "surreal."

[edit] 'Pataphysics, Dadaism, and Surrealism

One of the most significant common precursors is Alfred Jarry whose wild, irreverent, and lascivious Ubu plays scandalized Paris in the 1890's. Likewise, the concept of 'Pataphysics -- "the science of imaginary solutions" -- first presented in Jarry's Gestes et opinions du docteur Faustroll, pataphysicien (Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician) was inspirational to many later Absurdists, some of whom joined the Collège de 'pataphysique founded in honor of Jarry in 1948 (both Ionesco and Arrabal were given the title Transcendent Satrape of the Collège de 'pataphysique). The Alfred Jarry Theatre, founded by Antonin Artaud and Roger Vitrac, housed several Absurdist plays, including ones by Ionesco and Adamov.^[5]

Artaud's "The Theatre of Cruelty" (presented in The Theatre and Its Double) was a particularly important philosophical treatise. Artaud claimed theatre's reliance on literature was inadequate and that the true power of theatre was in its visceral impact.^[6] Artaud was a Surrealist, and many other members of the Surrealist group were significant influences on the Absurdists. Absurdism is also frequently compared to Surrealism's predecessor, Dadaism (for example, the Dadaist

plays by Tristan Tzara performed at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich). Many of the Absurdists had direct connections with the Dadaists and Surrealists. Ionesco, Beckett, Adamov, and Arrabal for example, were friends with Surrealists still living in Paris at the time including Andre Breton, the founder of Surrealism. Also, Beckett translated many Surrealist poems by Breton and others.^{[7][8]}
[\[9\]](#)

[edit] Relationship with Existentialism

The Theatre of the Absurd is commonly associated with Existentialism, and Existentialism was an influential philosophy in Paris during the rise of the Theatre of the Absurd; however, to call it Existentialist theatre is problematic for many reasons. It gained this association partly because it was named (by Esslin) after the concept of "absurdism" advocated by Albert Camus, a philosopher commonly called Existentialist though he frequently resisted that label. Absurdism is most accurately called Existentialist in the way Franz Kafka's work is labeled Existentialist: it embodies an aspect of the philosophy though the writer may not be a committed follower. Many of the Absurdists were contemporaries with Jean-Paul Sartre, the figurehead of Existentialism in Paris, but few Absurdists actually committed to the philosophy, and many of the Absurdists had a complicated relationship with Sartre. Genet's plays were praised by Sartre -- for Genet "Good is only an illusion. Evil is a Nothingness which arises upon the ruins of Good" according to Sartre^[10] -- but Sartre and Ionesco were at times bitter enemies. Ionesco accused Sartre of supporting Communism but ignoring the atrocities committed by Communists; he wrote Rhinoceros as a criticism of blind conformity, whether it be to Nazism or Communism; at the end of the play, one man remains on Earth resisting transformation into a rhinoceros.^[11] Sartre criticized Rhinoceros by saying, "Why is there one man who resists? At least we could learn why, but no, we learn not even that. He resists because he is there."^[12] This highlights a primary difference between the Theatre of the Absurd and Existentialism: The Theatre of the Absurd shows the failure of man without recommending a solution. With Samuel Beckett, for example -- whose relationship with Sartre was complicated by a mistake made in the publication of one of his stories in Sartre's journal Les Temps Modernes -- his primary focus was on the failure of man to overcome the absurdity. As James Knowlson says in his biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame*, "his work [focuses] on poverty, failure, exile and loss -- as he put it, on man as a 'non-knower' and as a 'non-can-er.'"^[13]

[edit] History

The "Absurd" or "New Theater" movement was originally a Paris-based (and Rive Gauche) avant-garde phenomenon tied to extremely small theaters in the Quartier Latin. Some of the Absurdists were born in France such as Jean Genet, Jean Tardieu, Boris Vian, and Romain Weingarten. Many other Absurdists were born elsewhere but lived in France, writing often in French: Samuel Beckett from Ireland; Eugene Ionesco from Romania; Arthur Adamov from Russia; Fernando Arrabal from Spain, and so on. As the influence of the Absurdists grew, the style spread to other countries -- with playwrights either directly influenced by Absurdists in Paris or playwrights labeled Absurdist by critics. In England there was Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, N. F. Simpson, James Saunders, and David Campton. In the U.S. there was Edward Albee, Sam Shepard, Jack Gelber, and later John Guare. In Poland there was Tadeusz Różewicz, Sławomir Mrożek, and Tadeusz Kantor. In Italy there was Dino Buzzati and Ezio d'Errico. In Germany, Peter Weiss, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, and Günter Grass have written Absurdist plays. In India, both Mohit Chattopadhyay and Mahesh Elkunchwar were labeled Absurdists. Other international Absurdists include Tawfiq el-Hakim from Egypt, Miguel Mihura from Spain, José de Almada Negreiros from Portugal, Yordan Radichkov from Bulgaria, and the list goes on. Future Czech president Václav Havel is also considered an Absurdist playwright.

[edit] Major productions

Jean Genet's The Maids (Les Bonnes) premiered in 1947. Eugene Ionesco's The Bald Soprano (La Cantatrice Chauve) was first performed on May 11, 1950 at the Théâtre des Noctambules. Ionesco followed this with "The Lesson" ("La Leçon") 1951 and The Chairs (Les Chaises) in 1952. Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot was first performed on the 5th of January 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone in Paris. In 1956 Genet's The Balcony (Le Balcon) was produced in London at the Arts Theatre. The following year, Beckett's Endgame was first performed, and that may Harold Pinter's The Room was presented at The Drama Studio at the University of Bristol. Pinter's The Birthday Party premiered in the West End and Edward Albee's The Zoo Story premiered in West Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt – both in 1958. On the October 28th of that year, Krapp's Last Tape by Beckett was first performed at the Royal Court Theatre in London. Fernando Arrabal's Pique-nique en campagne (Picnic on the Battlefield) also came out

in 1958. Genet's The Blacks (Les Nègres) was published that year but was first performed at the Théâtre de Lutèce in Paris on the 28th October, 1959. 1959 also saw the completion of Ionesco's Rhinocéros. Beckett's Happy Days was first performed at the Cherry Lane Theatre in New York on the 17th of September 1961. Albee's Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? also premiered in New York the following year, on October 13th. Pinter's The Homecoming premiered in London in 1964. Peter Weiss's Marat/Sade (The Persecution and Assassination of Jean-Paul Marat as Performed by the Inmates of the Asylum of Charenton Under the Direction of the Marquis de Sade) was first performed in West Berlin in 1964 and in New York City a year later. Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 1966. Arrabal's Le Cimetière des voitures (Automobile Graveyard) was also first performed in 1966. Beckett's Catastrophe -- which was dedicated to incarcerated Absurdist playwright and Czech political figure Václav Havel – was first performed at the Avignon Festival on July 21st, 1982.

[edit] Legacy

Echoes of the Theatre of the Absurd can be seen in many later playwrights, from more experimental playwrights like Susan-Lori Parks (in The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World and The America Play for example) to relatively realistic playwrights like David Mamet (who dedicated Glengarry Glen Ross to Harold Pinter).

[edit] Essential traits

Most of the bewilderment absurdist drama initially created was because critics and reviewers were used to more conventional drama: realism. In practice, The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Time, place and identity are ambiguous and fluid, and even basic causality frequently breaks down. Meaningless plots, repetitive or nonsensical dialogue and dramatic non-sequiturs are often used to create dream-like, or even nightmare-like moods. There is a fine line, however, between the careful and artful use of chaos and non-realistic elements and true, meaningless chaos. While many of the plays described by this title seem to be quite random and meaningless on the surface, an underlying structure and meaning is usually found in the midst of the chaos.

According to Martin Esslin, Absurdism is “the inevitable devaluation of ideals, purity, and purpose”.^[14] Absurdist Drama asks its audience to “draw his own conclusions, make his own errors”.^[15] Though Theatre of the Absurd may be seen as nonsense, they have something to say and can be understood”.^[16] Esslin makes a distinction between the dictionary definition of absurd (“out of harmony” in the musical sense) and Drama’s understanding of the Absurd: “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose.... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless”.^[17]

[edit] Characters

The characters in Absurdist drama are lost and floating in an incomprehensible universe and they abandon rational devices and discursive thought because these approaches are inadequate.^[18] Many characters appear as automatons stuck in routines speaking only in cliché (Ionesco called the Old Man and Old Woman in The Chairs “uber-marrionettes”). Characters are frequently stereotypical, archetypal, or flat character types as in Commedia dell'arte.

The more complex characters are in crisis because the world around them is incomprehensible. Many of Pinter’s plays, for example, feature characters trapped in an enclosed space manaced by some force the character can’t understand. Pinter’s first play was The Room – in which the main character, Rose, is menaced by Riley who invades her safe space though the actual source of menace remains a mystery – and this theme of characters in a safe space manaced by an outside force is repeated in many of his later works (perhaps most famously in The Birthday Party). Characters in Absurdist drama may also face the chaos of a world that science and logic have abandoned. Ionesco’s reoccurring character Berenger, for example, faces a killer without motivation in The Killer, and Berenger’s logical arguments fail to convince the killer that killing is wrong. In Rhinocéros , Berenger remains the only human on Earth who hasn’t turned into a rhinoceros and must decide whether or not to conform. Characters may find themselves trapped in a routine or, in a metafictional conceit, trapped in a story; the titular characters in Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead, for example, find themselves in a story (Hamlet) in which the outcome has already been written.

The plots of many Absurdist plays feature characters in interdependent pairs, commonly either two males or a male and a female. The two characters may be roughly equal or have a begrudging interdependence (like Vladimir and Estragon in Waiting for Godot or the two main characters in Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead); one character may be clearly dominant and may torture the passive character (like Pozzo and Lucky in Waiting for Godot or Hamm and Clov in Endgame); the relationship of the characters may shift dramatically throughout the play (as in Ionesco's The Lesson or in many of Albee's plays, The Zoo Story for example).

[edit] Language

Despite its reputation for nonsense language, much of the dialogue in Absurdist plays is naturalistic. The moments when characters resort to nonsense language or clichés -- when words appear to have lost their denotative function, thus creating misunderstanding among the characters^[19] -- make Theatre of the Absurd distinctive. Language frequently gains a certain phonetic, rhythmical, almost musical quality, opening up a wide range of often comedic playfulness. Distinctively Absurdist language will range from meaningless clichés to Vaudeville-style word play to meaningless nonsense. The Bald Soprano, for example, was inspired by a language book in which characters would exchange empty clichés that never ultimately amounted to true communication or true connection. Likewise, the characters in The Bald Soprano -- like many other Absurdist characters -- go through routine dialogue full of clichés without actually communicating anything substantive or making a human connection. In other cases, the dialogue is purposefully elliptical; the language of Absurdist Theater becomes secondary to the poetry of the concrete and objectified images of the stage. Many of Beckett's plays devalue language for the sake of the striking tableau. Harold Pinter -- famous for his "Pinter pause" -- presents more subtly elliptical dialogue; often the primary things characters should address is replaced by ellipsis or dashes. This exchange between Aston and Davies in The Caretaker is typical of Pinter:

Aston. More or less exactly what you...

Davies. That's it ... that's what I'm getting at is ... I mean, what sort of jobs ... (Pause.)

Aston. Well, there's things like the stairs ... and the ... the bells ...

Davies. But it'd be a matter ... wouldn't it ... it'd be a matter of a broom ... isn't it?

Much of the dialogue in Absurdist drama (especially in Beckett's and Albee's plays, for example) reflects this kind of evasiveness and inability to make a connection. When language that is apparently nonsensical appears, it also demonstrates this disconnection. It can be used for comic effect, as in Lucky's long speech in *Godot* when Pozzo says Lucky is demonstrating a talent for "thinking" as other characters comically attempt to stop him:

Lucky: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaquaqu outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment...

Nonsense may also be used abusively, as in Pinter's *The Birthday Party* when Goldberg and McCann torture Stanley with nonsensical questions:

Goldberg: What do you use for pyjamas?

Stanley: Nothing.

Goldberg: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

McCann: What about the Albigensienist heresy?

Goldberg: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

McCann: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

Goldberg: Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

As in the above examples, nonsense in Absurdist theatre may be also used to demonstrate the limits of language while questioning or parodying the determinism of science and the

knowability of truth. In Ionesco's *The Lesson*, a professor tries to force a pupil to understand his nonsensical philology lesson:

Professor: ... In Spanish: the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who is Asiatic; in Latin: the roses of my grandmother are as yellow as my grandfather who is Asiatic. Do you detect the difference? Translate this into ... Romanian

Pupil: The ... how do you say "roses" in Romanian?

Professor: But "roses," what else? ... "roses" is a translation in Oriental of the French word "roses," in Spanish "roses," do you get it? In Sardanapali, "roses"...

[edit] Plot

Traditional plot structures are rarely a consideration in *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Plots can consist of the absurd repetition of cliché and routine, as in *Godot* or *The Bald Soprano*. Often there is a menacing outside force that remains a mystery; in *The Birthday Party*, for example, Goldberg and McCann confront Stanley, torture him with absurd questions, and drag him off at the end, but it is never revealed why. Absence, emptiness, nothingness, and unresolved mysteries are central features in many Absurdist plots: for example, in *The Chairs* an old couple welcomes a large number of guests to their home, but these guests are invisible so all we see is empty chairs, a representation of their absence. Likewise, the action of *Godot* is centered around the absence of a man named Godot, for whom the characters perpetually wait. In many of Beckett's later plays, most features are stripped away and what's left is a minimalistic tableau: a woman walking slowly back and forth in *Footfalls*, for example, or in *Breath* only a junk heap on stage and the sounds of breathing.

The plot may also revolve around an unexplained metamorphosis, a supernatural change, or a shift in the laws of physics. For example, in Ionesco's *Amédée, or How to Get Rid of It*, a couple must deal with a corpse that is steadily growing larger and larger; Ionesco never fully reveals the identity of the corpse, how this person died, or why it's continually growing, but the corpse ultimately – and, again, without explanation – floats away.

Like Pirandello, many Absurdist use meta-theatrical techniques to explore role fulfillment, fate, and the theatricality of theatre. This is true for many of Genet's plays: for example, in *The Maids*, two maids pretend to be their masters; in *The Balcony* brothel patrons take on elevated positions in role-playing games, but the line between theatre and reality starts to blur. Another complex example of this is *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*: it's a play about two minor characters in *Hamlet*; these characters, in turn, have various encounters with the players who perform *The Mousetrap*, the play-with-in-the-play in *Hamlet*.

The "Theatre of the Absurd" is a term coined by Hungarian-born critic Martin Esslin, who made it the title of his 1962 book on the subject. The term refers to a particular type of play which first became popular during the 1950s and 1960s and which presented on stage the philosophy articulated by French philosopher Albert Camus in his 1942 essay, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in which he defines the human condition as basically meaningless. Camus argued that humanity had to resign itself to recognizing that a fully satisfying rational explanation of the universe was beyond its reach; in that sense, the world must ultimately be seen as absurd.

Esslin regarded the term "Theatre of the Absurd" merely as a "device" by which he meant to bring attention to certain fundamental traits discernible in the works of a range of playwrights. The playwrights loosely grouped under the label of the absurd attempt to convey their sense of bewilderment, anxiety, and wonder in the face of an inexplicable universe. According to Esslin, the five defining playwrights of the movement are Eugène Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter, although these writers were not always comfortable with the label and sometimes preferred to use terms such as "Anti-Theater" or "New Theater". Other playwrights associated with this type of theatre include Tom Stoppard, Arthur Kopit, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Fernando Arrabal, Edward Albee, N.F. Simpson, Boris Vian, Peter Weiss, Vaclav Havel, and Jean Tardieu.

Although the Theatre of the Absurd is often traced back to avant-garde experiments of the 1920s and 1930s, its roots, in actuality, date back much further. Absurd elements first made their appearance shortly after the rise of Greek drama, in the wild humor and buffoonery of Old Comedy and the plays of Aristophanes in particular. They were further developed in the late classical period by Lucian, Petronius and Apuleius, in Menippean satire, a tradition of

carnivalistic literature, depicting “a world upside down.” The morality plays of the Middle Ages may be considered a precursor to the Theatre of the Absurd, depicting everyman-type characters dealing with allegorical and sometimes existential problems. This tradition would carry over into the Baroque allegorical drama of Elizabethan times, when dramatists such as John Webster, Cyril Tourneur, Jakob Biederman and Calderon would depict the world in mythological archetypes. During the nineteenth century, absurd elements may be noted in certain plays by Ibsen and, more obviously, Strindberg, but the acknowledged predecessor of what would come to be called the Theatre of the Absurd is Alfred Jarry's "monstrous puppet-play" Ubu Roi (1896) which presents a mythical, grotesque figure, set amidst a world of archetypal images. Ubu Roi is a caricature, a terrifying image of the animal nature of man and his cruelty. In the 1920s and 1930s, the surrealists expanded on Jarry's experiments, basing much of their artistic theory on the teachings of Freud and his emphasis on the role of the subconscious mind which they acknowledged as a great, positive healing force. Their intention was to do away with art as a mere imitation of surface reality, instead demanding that it should be more real than reality and deal with essences rather than appearances. The Theatre of the Absurd was also anticipated in the dream novels of James Joyce and Franz Kafka who created archetypes by delving into their own subconscious and exploring the universal, collective significance of their own private obsessions. Silent film and comedy, as well as the tradition of verbal nonsense in the early sound films of Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, and the Marx Brothers would also contribute to the development of the Theatre of the Absurd, as did the verbal "nonsense" of François Rabelais, Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and Christian Morgenstern. But it would take a catastrophic world event to actually bring about the birth of the new movement.

World War II was the catalyst that finally brought the Theatre of the Absurd to life. The global nature of this conflict and the resulting trauma of living under threat of nuclear annihilation put into stark perspective the essential precariousness of human life. Suddenly, one did not need to be an abstract thinker in order to be able to reflect upon absurdity: the experience of absurdity became part of the average person's daily existence. During this period, a “prophet” of the absurd appeared. Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) rejected realism in the theatre, calling for a return to myth and magic and to the exposure of the deepest conflicts within the human mind. He demanded a theatre that would produce collective archetypes and create a modern mythology. It

was no longer possible, he insisted, to keep using traditional art forms and standards that had ceased being convincing and lost their validity. Although he would not live to see its development, The Theatre of the Absurd is precisely the new theatre that Artaud was dreaming of. It openly rebelled against conventional theatre. It was, as Ionesco called it “anti-theatre”. It was surreal, illogical, conflictless and plotless. The dialogue often seemed to be complete gibberish. And, not surprisingly, the public’s first reaction to this new theatre was incomprehension and rejection.

The most famous, and most controversial, absurdist play is probably Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot. The characters of the play are strange caricatures who have difficulty communicating the simplest of concepts to one another as they bide their time awaiting the arrival of Godot. The language they use is often ludicrous, and following the cyclical patten, the play seems to end in precisely the same condition it began, with no real change having occurred. In fact, it is sometimes referred to as “the play where nothing happens.” Its detractors count this a fatal flaw and often turn red in the face fomenting on its inadequacies. It is mere gibberish, they cry, eyes nearly bulging out of their head--a prank on the audience disguised as a play. The plays supporters, on the other hand, describe it is an accurate parable on the human condition in which “the more things change, the more they are the same.” Change, they argue, is only an illusion. In 1955, the famous character actor Robert Morley predicted that the success of Waiting for Godot meant “the end of theatre as we know it.” His generation may have gloomily accepted this prediction, but the younger generation embraced it. They were ready for something new—something that would move beyond the old stereotypes and reflect their increasingly complex understanding of existence.

Whereas traditional theatre attempts to create a photographic representation of life as we see it, the Theatre of the Absurd aims to create a ritual-like, mythological, archetypal, allegorical vision, closely related to the world of dreams. The focal point of these dreams is often man’s fundamental bewilderment and confusion, stemming from the fact that he has no answers to the basic existential questions: why we are alive, why we have to die, why there is injustice and suffering. Ionesco defined the absurdist everyman as “Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots ... lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.” The Theatre of the Absurd, in a sense, attempts to reestablish man’s communion with the universe. Dr. Jan

Culik writes, “Absurd Theatre can be seen as an attempt to restore the importance of myth and ritual to our age, by making man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, by instilling in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish. The Absurd Theatre hopes to achieve this by shocking man out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical and complacent. It is felt that there is mystical experience in confronting the limits of human condition.”

One of the most important aspects of absurd drama is its distrust of language as a means of communication. Language, it seems to say, has become nothing but a vehicle for conventionalized, stereotyped, meaningless exchanges. Dr. Culik explains, “Words failed to express the essence of human experience, not being able to penetrate beyond its surface. The Theatre of the Absurd constituted first and foremost an onslaught on language, showing it as a very unreliable and insufficient tool of communication. Absurd drama uses conventionalised speech, clichés, slogans and technical jargon, which it distorts, parodies and breaks down. By ridiculing conventionalised and stereotyped speech patterns, the Theatre of the Absurd tries to make people aware of the possibility of going beyond everyday speech conventions and communicating more authentically.”

Absurd drama subverts logic. It relishes the unexpected and the logically impossible. According to Sigmund Freud, there is a feeling of freedom we can enjoy when we are able to abandon the straitjacket of logic. As Dr. Culik points out, “Rationalist thought, like language, only deals with the superficial aspects of things. Nonsense, on the other hand, opens up a glimpse of the infinite.”

What, then, has become of this wonderful new theatre—this movement that produced some of the most exciting and original dramatic works of the twentieth century? Conventional wisdom, perhaps, suggests that the Theatre of the Absurd was a product of a very specific point in time and, because that time has passed, it has gone the way of the dinosaur. In a revised edition of his seminal work, Martin Esslin disagrees: “Every artistic movement or style has at one time or another been the prevailing fashion. If it was no more than that, it disappeared without a trace. If it had a genuine content, if it contributed to an enlargement of human perception, if it created new modes of human expression, if it opened up new areas of experience, however, it was bound

to be absorbed into the main stream of development. And this is what happened with the Theatre of the Absurd which, apart from having been in fashion, undoubtedly was a genuine contribution to the permanent vocabulary of dramatic expression.... [it] is being absorbed into the mainstream of the tradition from which ... it had never been entirely absent ... The playwrights of the post-Absurdist era have at their disposal, then, a uniquely enriched vocabulary of dramatic technique. They can use these devices freely, separately and in infinite variety of combinations with those bequeathed to them by other dramatic conventions of the past.” In a New York Times piece entitled “Which Theatre is the Absurd One?”, Edward Albee agrees with Esslin’s final analysis, writing, “For just as it is true that our response to color and form was forever altered once the impressionist painters put their minds to canvas, it is just as true that the playwrights of The Theatre of the Absurd have forever altered our response to the theatre.”

- The Theatre of the Absurd - The book by Martin Esslin that coined the term "Theatre of the Absurd." Primarily deals with the five defining playwrights of the movement: Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Jean Genet, Arthur Adamov, and Harold Pinter.
- Waiting for Godot - Samuel Beckett's classic tragicomedy is known for its lack of plot--"Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" Two old tramps beneath a single tree make jokes to pass the time and reflect on the state of human existence while they wait for Godot--who never comes. A classic play of the absurd.
- Endgame - Beckett's second play. Whereas Waiting for Godot was concerned with the theme of waiting, Endgame is on the subject of leaving, on the necessity of reaching the door. We have the impression of watching the end of something, the end possibly of the human race.
- Rhinoceros - Demonstrates Ionesco's anxiety about the spread of inhuman totalitarian tendencies in society as the entire population of a small, provincial French town turn into savage pachyderms.
- The Bald Soprano and Other Plays - A collection of short plays by Ionesco that contains such gems as The Bald Soprano, The Chairs and Jack or the Submission.
- The Balcony - Influenced by the Theater of Cruelty, this play by Jean Genet is set inside the Grand Balcony bordello, a brothel and repository of illusion in a contemporary

European city aflame with revolution. After the city's royal palace and rulers are destroyed, the bordello's costumed patrons impersonate the leaders of the city. As the masqueraders warm to their roles, they convince even the revolutionaries that the illusion created in the bordello is preferable to reality.

Tango - In this play by Slawomir Mrozek, a young man who has grown up in a world without values stages a revolution to restore order, only to discover that order cannot be

- imposed by force.
- Three Plays of the Absurd - In this collection of plays, Walter Wykes creates a series of modern myths, tapping into something in the strata of the subconscious, through ritualism and rich, poetic language. The worlds he creates are brand new and hilarious, yet each contains an ancient horror we all know and cannot escape and have never been able to hang one definitive word on.
- Le Ping-Pong - One of the few plays by absurdist playwright Arthur Adamov available in English, Le Ping-Pong is a parable on the futility of human endeavour. It tells the story of two young men who waste their lives away in the futile attempt to build the perfect pinball machine.
- The Dumb Waiter - Reminiscent of Waiting for Godot, this play by Harold Pinter concerns two hired killers waiting around for their next assignment.
- The Birthday Party - Another play by Pinter, this one follows a young man seeking shelter from a hostile world. Although he, at first, finds a sort of safe house, two visitors from his old life soon track him down.
- Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead - Tom Stoppard weaves this fabulously absurd tale of Hamlet as told from the worm's-eye view of the bewildered Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, two minor characters in Shakespeare's play.
- Fuddy Meers - This play by David Lindsay-Abaire, who the New York Observer calls "some kind of comic genius," revolves around an amnesiac, Claire, who wakes up every morning as a blank slate, on which her family must imprint the facts of her life.
- The Homecoming - Pinter's tale of a man who takes his wife on a visit to his childhood home where she becomes entangled in the family's dysfunctional past.

- The Marriage - This play by Witold Gombrowicz is both a profound expression of the shattered consciousness of postwar European culture and a highly innovative, avant-garde treatment of the nature of personal identity in a world where grimaces have replaced faces and reality itself is accessible only in infinitely reflexive, theatrical posturing.
- The Other Shore - This collection of plays by Nobel Prize-winning Chinese playwright Gao Xingjian illuminates the realities of life, death, sex, loneliness, and exile with original imagery and beautiful language.

Reading the Apocalypse in Bed - Six astonishingly radical plays and ten short pieces from Tadeusz Rozewicz, one of the most important playwrights of the Theatre of the Absurd to emerge from the aftermath of World War II.

1. Theater of the Absurd always has intense moments.
2. Theater of the Absurd can't look like conventional theater.
3. Theater of the Absurd has no start, no middle and no end.
4. Theater of the Absurd does not have a beginning, middle or end.
5. Theatre of the Absurd purpose is to provoke thought with laughter.
6. Constant reminders of reality in the weirdness.
7. Weird but have reality of it.

"In the end, it can't look like acting."