

Theatre of the Absurd: Few points

Absurdist theatre responded to the destruction and anxieties of the 20th century by questioning the nature of reality and illusion. Andrew Dickson introduces some of the most important figures in the Theatre of the Absurd, including Eugène Ionesco, Martin Esslin and Samuel Beckett.

You could say there's something inherently absurd about theatre. Thousands of years old though it is, the practice of one set of people impersonating another set of people, performing for a watching audience, offers plenty of opportunity to explore the boundary between illusion and reality – still more so when that performance is conducted behind an invisible 'fourth wall'. From William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* to Tim Crouch's *The Author* (2009), countless plays have explored the metatheatrical tensions that surround live drama, its dizzying potential for collapse, and the possibilities it offers to tease and beguile an audience.

But in theatre the word 'absurdism' is often used more specifically, to refer to primarily European drama written in the 1950s and 1960s by writers including Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter, often grouped together as 'the theatre of the absurd', a phrase coined by the critic Martin Esslin. Characterised by a fascination with absurdity in all its forms – philosophical, dramaturgical, existential, emotional – this is a drama form that pushes theatre to extremes, and which asks probing questions about what reality (and unreality) really looks like. Often interpreted as a response to the challenges of living in a 20th-century world that seems devoid of meaning, it is frequently far more nightmarish than funny.

Albert Camus: Strange beginnings

Though the concept of something being 'absurd' goes back centuries, most critics date the literary concept to the French writer Albert Camus, most famous for his 1942 novel *L'Étranger* (*The Stranger*). That same year, Camus composed an essay, 'The Myth of Sisyphus', which draws on the Greek fable of a man condemned to roll a rock up a mountain only to have it roll back down under its own weight, a quandary that lasts for eternity. Camus argues that this image symbolises the human condition

in a world where we can no longer make sense of events; but instead of committing suicide (the 'only really serious philosophical problem'), we should reconcile ourselves to this 'elusive feeling of absurdity' and bear it as best we can. In this sense, Sisyphus is the ideal hero, Camus continues, citing with admiration the novels of Franz Kafka, which dramatize the struggle to exist in conditions that seem painfully futile.

Although Camus's speculations were published prior to the use of the atom bomb on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, and before the horrendous realities of the Nazi death camps became widely known, they tapped into a feeling of anxious uncertainty that gripped Western countries in the post-war period, as colonialism came to an end and global nuclear annihilation seemed only too possible. Combined with renewed questions about whether religious belief could ever be enough (in the stringent words of the critic Arnold P Hinchliffe, 'I have taken it as axiomatic for Absurdity to exist, God must be dead'), many artists felt that the only question worth grappling with was whether any of it was worthwhile – and, if none of it really was, how should that be represented on stage?

Enter Esslin

First published in 1961 and revised several times owing to its enormous success, Martin Esslin's book-length survey *The Theatre of the Absurd* attempted to identify and classify this new trend in drama, lassoing a range of writers who emerged in the 1950s, chiefly Beckett, Ionesco, Adamov and Genet. Though different in style, many of these figures were exiles living in Paris – Beckett hailed originally from Ireland, Ionesco from Romania, Adamov from Russia – while Esslin himself was born in Hungary and grew up in Vienna before fleeing Nazi persecution to England. A sense of estrangement colours their work, Esslin argues, but instead of responding to this with cool rationality (as existentialist writers did), or poetic complexity (as earlier modernist writers did), absurdist dramatists focussed on the practice of theatre itself:

The Theatre of the Absurd ... tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important part in his conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the words spoken by the characters.^[1]

In addition to this, Esslin continued, absurdist writers drew on a tradition that went back to mime, clowning and nonsense verse, and moreover had

contemporary parallels with abstract painting and the French *nouveau roman* (new novel) by experimental writers such as Alain Robbe-Grillet (1922–2008), who sought to get rid of conventions such as naturalistic plot and character.

Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs*

If you're looking for the origins of the Theatre of the Absurd, you could do worse than begin with the first play written by a man who claimed to hate the theatre. Eugène Ionesco's *La Cantatrice Chauve* (usually translated as *The Bald Soprano/Prima Donna*) went on stage in 1950, and features six characters and a succession of small scenes that unravel almost as soon as they appear, partly inspired by the playwright's attempts to learn English from an old-fashioned textbook. In one, a couple discuss events that have become increasingly implausible (one character might or might not be dead; their children might or might not have the same names). Later on in the play another couple share an escalating series of apparently extraordinary coincidences:

Mr Martin I have a flat on the fifth floor, flat Number 8, dear lady.

Mrs Martin How very extraordinary! Oh goodness gracious, how very amazing and what a strange coincidence! I too live on the fifth floor, Sir in flat Number 8!

....

Mr Martin Goodness, how strange, how amazing, how extraordinary!
Then, Madam, we must live in the same room and sleep in the same bed, dear Madam. Perhaps that is where we met before!

The joke is, of course, that despite Mr and Mrs Martin appearing not to know each other they are in fact a married couple. Despite being hugely funny, a sense of wild-eyed panic is never far from this one-act 'antiplay', especially for the actors who must try and make sense of this deliberately nonsensical exchange.

Later Ionesco works experiment with absurdist motifs, often using them to probe serious themes such as social estrangement and the essential impossibility of communication. *The Chairs* (1952) is a genuine masterpiece, labelled a 'tragic farce' by the author and focussed on an elderly couple aged 94 and 95 respectively, who pass the time telling each other stories. As they drone on, an audience assembles and begins to swamp the stage, but it is entirely composed of chairs – perhaps this is an indication of the emptiness of narrative, perhaps it is a satire on the nature of the theatrical act. In the words of Esslin, it 'contains the theme of the

incommunicability of a lifetime's experience'.^[2] It might, too, point to theatrical conventions that were starting to seem creakily outmoded in the light of this experimental new theatre.

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: 'Worse than the pantomime'

The Chairs was lambasted by the critics when it first went on stage in Paris, and that was also the fate of Samuel Beckett's *En Attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), which debuted in the city the following year. Such is the play's fame and reputation now, that it is hard to understand quite why it was so shocking, particularly given that many critics have pointed out its debts to traditions such as vaudeville and *commedia dell'arte* (not to mention some striking resemblances to *The Chairs*).

Pared back to the very barest dramatic essentials, *Waiting for Godot* presents two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon – both tramps, both standing on a road next to a tree, both (as the title indicates) waiting for something to happen:

Vladimir	Charming evening we're having.
Estragon	Unforgettable.
Vladimir	And it's not over.
Estragon	Apparently not.
Vladimir	It's only the beginning.
Estragon	It's awful.
Vladimir	Worse than the pantomime.

Laced with bitter humour that only highlights its gathering sense of despair, *Godot* was described by one early critic as 'the play where nothing happens, twice', and is all the finer for it. Deliberately confronting the reality of a godless (or Godot-less) universe, it is a brilliant improvisation on the absurdity of theatre, in which actors stand around waiting to be told what to do. But the play has also proved itself hugely adaptable and reinterpretable – as its extensive stage history suggests.

Some have seen it as a moral fable on the universal questions that concern us all; others have used it to point up the grim specifics of tragedies such as the siege of Sarajevo, with a production directed by Susan Sontag inside the city itself in 1993, and the devastation on New Orleans wrought by Hurricane Katrina, the site for an outdoor staging by the Classical Theatre of Harlem in 2007. Absurdity is everywhere, *Godot* seems to say; we only need look.

Beckett's later theatre writings are harder to categorise, but absurdism is never distant, as is the shadow of Camus's Sisyphus, doomed never to escape. Hints of it are there in the mindless prattle of the married couple Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days* (1961) – Winnie is buried up to her waist in the ground, while Willie is kept largely out of sight – and also in miniatures such as the one-act *Play* (1963), in which a man, his wife and his mistress, buried in three identical grey urns, exchange a series of banal recriminations. 1957's *Endgame* offers yet another variation on the theme, with four characters trapped in the same bleak concrete room and in relationships that seem impossible to escape. The play's very first words are 'Finished, it's finished', while its last word is 'remain'. As one recent reviewer put it, 'At the end of the play one character is a corpse, another has left the room – and yet nothing has tangibly changed.'

Jean Genet: Halls of mirrors

Although Jean Genet was French, unlike the other émigré playwrights in Esslin's list of absurdists, his life was equally complicated: a childhood runaway who ended up in the Foreign Legion, Genet lived most of the 1930s as a petty criminal and male prostitute who travelled across Europe. While other absurdists made references to the prison of existence, Genet actually did jail time, where (ironically enough) he first found the freedom to write. After coming to prominence as a novelist – he was championed by Sartre and the film director Jean Cocteau – Genet began to try his hand at theatre. His first play, *Haute Surveillance* (*Deathwatch*, 1947), draws heavily on the criminal half-world he knew, is set in a prison cell, but has a strangely unreal quality, as described by its stage directions: 'The entire play unfolds as if in a dream ... The movements of the actors should be either heavy or else extremely and incomprehensibly rapid'.

Les Bonnes (*The Maids*), which dates from the same year, steps much deeper into what Esslin calls 'this hall of mirrors'. It opens in what might be the bedroom of an elegant 18th-century French chateau, where a lady is being dressed by her servant – except that the whole thing seems to be some kind of murderous fantasy enacted by two maids, who continually swap roles. As Esslin expresses it, 'each apparent reality is revealed as an appearance, an illusion, which in turn is revealed as again part of a dream or an illusion, and so on, *ad infinitum*'.^[3]

The game could go on for ever – and to an extent does, given that elements of its scenario (sadistic power relationships, a real-life setting

which is revealed to be anything but, fantasy upon fantasy) feed into Genet's later drama *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*, 1956). More hard-edged than other absurdist works, this laid the groundwork for what would later be called 'Theatre of Cruelty', developed by a younger French dramatist, Antonin Artaud.

To absurdity and beyond...

If absurdism is difficult to delineate, that is partly because its insights draw from many different dramatic traditions, and have inspired many more. The early plays of Harold Pinter are often called absurdist, notably his first full-length work, *The Birthday Party* (1957), which is set in a dingy seaside boarding house that offers as little escape for Meg and Stanley, the landlady and her lodger, as anything by Beckett.

Though a much less known figure, the brilliant British surrealist N F Simpson (1919–2011) was arguably much closer to his Continental counterparts, yet he produced absurdist dramas that were as irreducibly English as *The Goon Show* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus* – most obviously his first play, *A Resounding Tinkle* (1957), in which a couple discover an elephant in their garden, but are mainly alarmed to find that it's different to the one they've ordered.

Similarly, the American playwright Edward Albee has been claimed as an absurdist, as has the Czech-born Englishman Tom Stoppard. Both are plausible candidates: Albee's *The American Dream* (1961) has characters called Daddy, Mommy and Grandma exchanging dull housebound platitudes in a satire on all-American consumerism; while Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* (1966) examines the dizzying possibilities of what might happen if two minor characters from *Hamlet* are released from the prison of the play, only to find that they are trapped. That two dramas so wildly different can both qualify as 'absurdist' demonstrates how elastic – perhaps even absurd – the term is.

Footnotes

[1] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 7.

[2] Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 118.

[3] Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 171

