

# Theatre of the Absurd

The Theatre of the Absurd began as a protest against man's existence and developed into a significant style and form of theatre. As an effort to make man aware of his ultimate conditions and realities of life, dramatists have reflected their anguished vision of the universe. By expressing life as meaningless, unrealistic and illogical, absurdists hope to shock man out of an existence that has become trite. Therefore, the Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious position in the universe by forcing the observer to make sense out of what appears to be senseless. The poet's vision of the world then, is to communicate a total sense of being and present a truer picture of reality itself, through dialogue and action. Through the influences of Samuel Beckett and others Theatre of the Absurd has developed as a style throughout Europe and has successfully continued in America with the help of Edward Albee and others. Theatre of the Absurd was influential in developing an avant-garde style in American Theatre.

Theatre of the Absurd is an expression, which lends itself to interpretation. Although commonly used to mean ridiculous, the word absurd is not used in this connotation when referring to it as a style of theatre. Rather "out of harmony", its original meaning, more correctly identifies Theatre of the Absurd; "incongruous, unreasonable, illogical." Ionesco defines the term absurd as being "...devoid of purpose...Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless" (Esslin 5). Albert Camus, on the other hand, felt that this theatrical style was a form of revolt. He called it a "metaphysical rebellion... the movement by which man protests against his conditions and against the whole creation" (Brustein 30). Robert Brustein furthers this idea of revolt, calling it an existential revolt. Brustein explains that dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd examine the metaphysical life of man through protest and teaches man to find comfort and happiness or if nothing more, strength and courage (417). The drama of existential revolt, Theatre of the Absurd, is ultimately the cry of anguish over the insufferable state of being human. Existence itself becomes the source of man's rebellion, explains Brustein (26). Regardless of the different interpretation of the word 'absurd', it has lend itself to become a style all of its own which examines human existence.

Through action, dialogue and complex characters, dramatists are able to communicate a feeling of deadness and senselessness, which represents the Theatre of the Absurd. These themes form a pattern of poetic images throughout the action. For example, when two characters wait for Godot in Beckett's Waiting for Godot, they are not necessarily waiting for Godot, but for something to happen. This idea then that nothing happens, represents the image of man's life. Therefore, nothing happens in man's existence (Esslin 354). The action is not usually dramatic, nor is it telling a story, communicating a moral or presenting a debate of issues. It is rather, a presentation of a character's situation than events. It is to present a sense of being. The dialogue is based solely on images, not speech (Esslin 353). Through the dialogue's images, anguish is heightened by timeless infinity as in Waiting for Godot or in the Bald Soprano by Eugene Ionesco. The dialogue becomes repetitive and a circular structure is formed, as the play concludes as it began (Matlaw). Martin Esslin explains it best in his book, The Theatre Of The Absurd.

The reality with which the Theatre of the Absurd is concerned is a psychological reality expressed in images that are the outward projection of states of mind, fears, dreams, nightmares and conflicts within the personality of the author, the dramatic tension produced by this kind of play differs fundamentally from the suspense created in a theatre concerned mainly with the revelation of objective characters through the unfolding of a narrative plot (364-365). The exposition, conflict and final solution mirrors the themes found in the Theatre of the Absurd and are developed

throughout the action and dialogue. The characters represented throughout the Theatre of the Absurd are those with intangible qualities. The nature of the character remains somewhat a mystery to the audience, in that they are unusual. The more mysterious the character, the less human the character becomes, making it more difficult for the audience to understand the world from their view. Therefore, the characters do not receive empathy from the audience, but only laughter (Esslin 361).

The Theatre of the Absurd presents an audience with the challenge making sense out of a world which appears to have lost its unifying purpose. To do so, the audience must formulate questions, which will stimulate their thought process and bring them closer to reality. What is happening? What does the action of the play represent? What is going to happen next (Esslin 361)? These questions and more must be answered before reaching the end of the play. As the audience's suspense builds, the action builds creating poetic images. It will be these images and the audience's questions that will enable them to explore the play's structure, texture and impact. It will be then, at the end of the play, that the audience will understand the anxiety of the human condition and can understand the character's despair through the reality of the situations which have occurred.

The Theatre of the Absurd which was an outstanding success in Europe was not in America and ventured towards the United States slowly. Following the postwar of World War II, Europeans felt a sense of disillusionment and seemed unable to find any purpose in life. This sense of abandonment made a significant impact upon the writers of France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Switzerland and Great Britain. Not only were they looking for a way of expressing themselves but they wanted to rebel against the total idea of man's existence and life itself. Dramatists found their outlet through play writing and developed the Theatre of the Absurd (Esslin 267). At the same time, the United States was not feeling a loss of meaning or purpose. Rather, the US was experiencing the American dream of good life and this did not reflect absurdist views. Yet there was a time that United States patriotism, self-confidence and optimism dropped to a severe low. Specifically, the assassination of President Kennedy, the rise of racial tension in the United States and the Vietnam War caused Americans to look at the world differently as well as themselves (Esslin 267). It was at this time that Theatre of the Absurd began to make itself known in America as avant-garde theatre.

American avant-garde playwrights derived from the European dramatists of the Absurd. Their plays were written in an absurdist view point and expressed the feeling of those felt in the Theatre of the Absurd. Megan Terry (Esslin 267) was an important avant-garde playwright of off-off Broadway in the 1960's. Her most important play, *Viet Rock* was recognized as the first protest play and first rock musical of America (Banham). Rochelle Owens (Esslin 267) rose as an avant-garde playwright with her play *Futz!* in 1967. This play explored violence, sexuality and perversity in a self-righteous society (Banham). Other American playwrights prospered in the area of avant-garde, such as Jean-Claude Van Itallie with his play *America Hurrah*, Israel Horowitz and *This Indian Wants the Bronx* (Esslin 267). Arthur Kopit and Edward Albee are perhaps two playwrights which stand out among the rest in avant-garde theatre. Kopit wrote many experimental plays which question the portrayal of humans in society as in *The Day The Whores Came Out to Play Tennis*, or which questions nuclear proliferation, as in *The End of the World*. Edward Albee is perhaps the most representational of the avant-garde and absurd styles of theatre. His works actually attacks the foundation of America's spirit and optimism. Using wit and sensibility, Albee writes about human outcast as in *The Zoo Story*, and scorns national pride and patriotism in *The American Dream*. His most important play, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* presents characters who are afraid to face reality, their fears and their secrets. Other plays like *Tiny Alice* deal with a man's search for truth in a world, which is forever changing. Edward Albee and other playwrights

represent avant-garde theatre which was influenced by the European dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd.

Theatre of the Absurd is an expression of emptiness and searching which flourished in Europe and influenced avant-garde styles in American. Themes reflect man confronting a universe deprived of its purpose in a world lost of explanation. These themes are expressed in Theatre of the Absurd and carry over into American avant-garde theatre. Playwrights such as Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Jean Genet and Harold Pinter of the European Theatre of the Absurd, influenced such playwrights as Arthur Kopit, Megan Terry and Edward Albee of the American avant-garde theatre style. Their prolific, risk-taking style of play writing was a significant contribution to the development of style in American Theatre.

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