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MODERN DRAMA:
THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

A Special Studies
Presented to
Mr. Dennis Holt
Ouachita Baptist University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for
The Honors Program

H 291

by
LeElla Theresa Ratcliff

May 1969

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OUTLINE

Thesis sentence: "Theatre of the Absurd" is a post-war phenomenon in which the dramatists show their sense of the senselessness of the human condition in a world in which man is deprived of certainties.

- I. Approach
 - A. Dramatists
 - B. "Nothingness"
- II. Definitions
 - A. Albee
 - B. Camus
 - C. Ionesco
 - D. Esslin
- III. Playwrights
 - A. Attitudes
 - B. European
 - C. American
- IV. Theatre
 - A. Endgame
 - B. Jack, or The Submission
 - C. The Blacks
 - D. Foolish
 - E. Fun
- V. Albee
 - A. Controversial
 - B. Questions
 - C. Structure
 - D. Viewpoint
 - E. Satirist
 - F. Ability
- VI. Tragedy
 - A. Hero
 - B. Antihero
- VII. Spectator
 - A. Comedy
 - B. Relationship
 - C. Recommendation

"Theatre of the Absurd" is a post-war phenomenon in which the dramatists, in anxiety and despair, show their sense of the senselessness of the human condition in a world in which man is deprived of certainties.¹

Expressing their convictions concerning the impossibility of communication among men and the inadequacy of a rational approach to life, absurd dramatists discuss in their distinctive fashion the nothingness which is their approach to reality.²

According to Martin Esslin, the man responsible for the accepted title Theatre of the Absurd, as he quoted Democritus, "Nothing is more real than nothing." Abandoning conceptual thinking and logical language, the absurd dramatist deals in illogical behavior, paradoxes, and absurd situations, while attempting to create meaningful insights into the human condition.³

Several definitions of the term "Theatre of the Absurd" have emerged, and it has been found that this was a somewhat less than fortunate catch-all phrase to describe the philosophical attitudes and theatre methods of a number of Europe's finest and most adventurous playwrights and their followers.⁴ Edward Albee defines it in this way:

¹Walter J. Meserve, An Outline History of American Drama (Totowa, New Jersey: Littlefield, Adams and Company, 1965), p. 356.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., p. 357

⁴Edward Albee, "Which Theatre Is the Absurd One?," American Playwrights on Drama, Horst Frenz, editor (New York: Hill and Wang, 1965), p. 169.

The Theatre of the Absurd is an absorption-in-art of certain existentialist and post-existentialist philosophical concepts having to do, in the main, with man's attempts to make sense because the moral, religious, political, and social structures man has erected to "illusion" himself have collapsed.⁵

Albert Camus, another well-known playwright, puts it this way:

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is a familiar world. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and light, man feels a stranger. His is an irremediable exile, because he is deprived of memories of a lost homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.⁶

And Eugene Ionesco says this:

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.⁷

To sum up the movement, Martin Esslin writes in his book The Theatre of the Absurd:

Ultimately, a phenomenon like The Theatre of the Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man's endeavor to come to terms with the world in which he lives. It attempts to make him face up to the human condition as it really is, to free him from illusions that are bound to cause constant maladjustment and disappointment...For the dignity of man lies in his ability to face reality in all its senselessness; to accept it freely, without fear, without illusions — and to laugh at it.⁸

The extreme to which cynicism, alienation and despair could drive the dramatists of the imaginative tradition is demonstrated by

⁵Ibid., p. 170

⁶Ibid., pp. 170-171.

⁷Ibid., p. 171.

⁸Ibid.

the contemporary "absurd" playwrights. It has often been said that these men are not so much signs of future theatrical trends, but are the last gasp of a dying attitude toward the theatre and human experience as a whole. They mirror the feeling of many people that life has no meaning, pattern, or ultimate significance and that no single activity is of more or less value than another. They feel that their particular art must reflect the attitude that the individual is hopelessly alienated from society.⁹

The playwrights' intention is to suggest to the audience that it find within itself the complement to the life and suffering of the actors on stage. Mere external action is not enough; each one present must live within the limited, horrifying world of the absurd and must acknowledge the absurdities of his own existence. Naturalism has been banished because the real and the unreal, the true and the imaginative worlds are too confused for men to sort them out in neat philosophical systems. In abandoning the traditional structure of the play for characterization, the avant-garde playwrights tend to become amoral and antihuman, rejecting all those qualities that specifically mark human beings at work in the world. Their message is therefore diluted, because the audience is ordinarily repelled and confused by an image of man which he is not able to confirm in his own experience. However, the techniques and structural experiments of such men will inevitably influence the theatre of the future, even though they themselves represent a philosophical and aesthetic dead end.¹⁰

Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco stimulated the writing of absurd drama in Europe, and they are still the outstanding dramatists in the movement, while Edward Albee heads the list of theatrical absurdists in America. Some of the followers of Beckett and Ionesco

⁹Elizabeth C. Phillips and David Rogers, Modern American Drama (New York: Thor Publications, Inc., 1966), p. 123.

¹⁰Ibid.

in America, however, have so abused their dramatic innovations as to produce contrived pieces of showmanship that have absolutely no meaningful relationship with life, absurd or not. Generally, the so-called new American playwrights lack the sophistication and finesse of their European contemporaries and seem more willing to emasculate and condemn man than to provide insight into the human condition, frequently suggesting a degenerate society and a depraved mankind.¹¹

So much for an attempt to define terms and distinguish playwrights. Now, what of this absurd theatre? What of this theatre in which a legless old couple live their entire lives in twin ashcans, surfacing only occasionally for food or conversation (Samuel Beckett's Endgame); in which a man is seduced rather easily by a girl with three well-formed and functioning noses (Eugene Ionesco's Jack, or The Submission); in which, on the same stage, one group of Negro actors is playing at pretending to be Negro (Jean Genet's The Blacks)? Yes, what of this theatre? Is it, as it has been accused of being, obscure, destructive, sordid, anti-theatre, perverse, and absurd in the sense of being foolish? Or is it merely that this avant-garde theatre is fun, bold, free-swinging, and often wildly, wildly funny?¹²

In order to formulate any personal opinion as to one way or the other, an example such as the "Theatre of Edward Albee" should

¹¹Meserve, op. cit., p. 357.

Albee, op. cit., pp. 171, 174.

be carefully examined. According to most critics Albee's theatre continues to be controversial.¹³

The discussion centers around two questions: one has to do with truth, and the other with dramatic structure. The first runs as follows: is the image of human relations in America which Albee presents justifiable because it is in some sense realistic, or is his an essentially flawed and perverted point of view? The second is: are there valid grounds for [such innovations as] the invented child in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf and the confused events which lead to Julian's death in Tiny Alice, or is Albee artistically callow and unable to structure a play properly?¹⁴

Exactly what is the structure of Albee's theatre? First, his characters are definitely interrelated and cohesive from play to play, the heart of his technique being an archetypal family unit in which the defeats, dilemmas, hopes, and values of our society are tangibly compressed. Generally, this family undergoes anxiety and terrible barrenness as it staggers into decay. A few fugitives occasionally detach themselves and seek solutions in aesthetics. They more often than not watch an historical dream wither and die. And what is the core of Albee's viewpoint? It is simply that generations move away from practicality toward emasculation; away from the energetic but amoral use of power toward an amoral but usually inoperative use of power.¹⁵

In spite of wide-spread criticism toward this viewpoint and

¹³Lee Baxandall, "The Theatre of Edward Albee," The Modern American Theatre, Alvin B. Kernan, editor (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), p. 80.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., pp. 80-81, 85.

the message of many of his plays in particular, Albee the satirist is without peer among American playwrights as he crisply negates destructive values through the medium of "his family."¹⁶

His ability to affirm values, however, is limited by unconscious acceptance of some attitudes of that very consensus he scorns in other respects, and by the family structure he uses so well for scorn. He also is too close to his heroes, so that when he goes beyond satire his language thickens into solemn rhetoric. At the crucial moments Albee is neither untruthful nor unskillful. But taking the plays in their entirety, what Albee despises provides yeast for his drama; what he hopes is too often chaff.¹⁷

Getting back to the absurd theatre itself, it is easily discovered that it is not altogether tragic in the traditional sense of the word. For in traditional tragedy, the hero represented the best of the spectator, engaging all his sympathies or at least his sense of a shared humanity. The fate of such a hero was deemed tragic because the spectator saw reflected in it his own condition and that of all men. In the "absurd" dramas, however, the "hero" or "antihero" is something less of a person. This causes the spectator to feel somewhat superior to him and on occasion to even feel contempt for him.¹⁸

The spectator is aware of a dimension of life beyond the limited scope of the antihero, and the latter's posturings and predicaments thus become ludicrous or comic instead of tragic. The spectator, in short, does not see anything of himself or of universal man in the pitiful antihero, who therefore tends to make him laugh rather than cry.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., p. 96.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Phillips and Rogers, op. cit., p. 124.

¹⁹Ibid.

For these and other reasons, the gloomy plays of the absurd theatre have held a comic aspect and an air of sophisticated "wit" that have proved highly attractive to discriminating theatre-goers.²⁰ For as Albee himself described the role of the spectator and his relationship to the "Theatre of the Absurd":

If you will approach it with childlike innocence — putting your standard responses aside, for they do not apply — if you will approach it on its own terms, I think you will be in for a liberating surprise. I think you may no longer be content with plays that you can't remember halfway down the block. You will not only be doing yourself some good, but you will be having a great time, to boot. And even though it occurs to me that such a fine combination must be sinful, I still recommend it.²¹

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Albee, op. cit., p. 174.

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